

Trinity United Reformed Church Wimbledon

Sunday 25 April 2021

Order of Service for 'Worship from Home'



Led by Trinity Elders

Gathering in God's presence

Call to worship

The Lord is my good shepherd – and yours.
The shepherd knows you – and he knows me.
Come, and walk with him beside still waters.
Come, and have your soul restored.

Prayer of approach

Father, we do not know how you will speak to us today:
out of silence or the spoken word,
through music or friendship's greeting,
by familiar words or a spontaneous turn of phrase.
This we ask: tune our ears to your voice, open our hearts to your word.
Amen

Hymn 679 – The Lord is my Shepherd (Tune 685: Wiltshire)

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want:
he makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again,
and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness,
e'en for his own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
yet will I fear no ill;
for thou art with me, and thy rod
and staff me comfort still.

My table thou hast furnishèd
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint,
and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me,
and in God's house forevermore
my dwelling-place shall be.

Psalm 23. Metrical version by William Whittingham (1524-79)

Prayers of adoration, confession and assurance of forgiveness

Lord, we adore you, our good shepherd;
always there, always watchful.
Your fold is the space you hold for us,
where we know we are loved.
Although dangers surround us,
and in foolishness we may stray,
you will protect us.
We are so many, yet you know us all;
Lord, we adore you, our good shepherd.
Amen

Lord, are we sheep – or are we wolves?
For sometimes it seems that a killer instinct
is more valued in this world,
and we become one who preys on communities
rather than living in community.
We may not be aware of it,
for the ways of the world are seductive
and we slip into wolves' clothing without thinking.
We make bad choices – how and where we spend our money –
not thinking of the exploitation that may have taken place.
Lord, Good Shepherd, forgive us these times –
when the wolf lurks beneath.
Remind us that, as Christians, we are creatures of the fold.
Bring us back to the community of love and life
as it should be lived.
Amen

Lord, how can we doubt your forgiveness?
Arms once stretched out upon a cross
now close in embrace as we return.
Enfolded by you, may we know the fullness of your love
and your forgiveness. Amen

Now let us join together in the words that our Lord taught us, each of us using the language and form of words that is most familiar to us.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on
earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive
those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive
those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Listening to God's Word

Introduction to the Bible readings

Our readings today are both written by John – the first from his Gospel and the second from his first Epistle. Mike's Call to Worship and Psalm 23 emphasise that Our Lord, God, is our Shepherd. In the Gospel reading Jesus is the Good Shepherd, while the Epistle is about Jesus's love for us and how we should love one another; effectively, we the sheep are encouraged to become shepherds to one another.

But back to the Gospel chapter 10, from which Mike is about to read, Jesus has already introduced the simile of himself as a Shepherd whose sheep, his disciples, follow him because they trust him and know his voice.

First Reading

The Gospel - John 10:11-18

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power

to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Second Reading
The Epistle - 1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Hymn - When I needed a neighbour

When I needed a neighbour
were you there, were you there?
When I needed a neighbour, were you there?
And the creed and the colour
and the name won't matter,
were you there?

I was cold, I was naked,
were you there, were you there?
I was cold, I was naked, were you there?
And the creed and the colour
and the name won't matter,
were you there?

When I needed a healer,
were you there, were you there?
When I needed a healer, were you there?
And the creed and the colour
and the name won't matter,
were you there?

Wherever you travel,
I'll be there, I'll be there.
Wherever you travel, I'll be there.
And the creed and the colour
and the name won't matter,
I'll be there.

Sydney Carter (1915-2004)

Reflection

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14).

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is known in some traditions as Good Shepherd Sunday – a Sunday when the liturgy follows a familiar pattern of hymns, prayers and readings in which Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd who so loves his sheep that he lays down his life for them in order to take it up again.

In the passage from chapter 10 of St John's Gospel which Mike so kindly read for us, Jesus twice describes himself as the good shepherd. In verse 11, Jesus said "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep". And in verses 14-15, he said "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."

The imagery used by Jesus in this passage would have been familiar to his audience. Shepherds had been established figures on the middle eastern landscape for many centuries. Not only were sheep a central feature of farming in Old Testament times – being a source of food and providing milk and wool – they were also essential to the Old Testament sacrificial system. And rather than leaving sheep to survive on their own, it was the practice to have a shepherd care for them, moving them on from pasture to pasture during the day and protecting them at night. Shepherding was a full-time job, which required the shepherd to live alongside his sheep, where he would get to know them all individually.

In a pastoral society like ancient Israel, the image of a shepherd and his sheep was often used to describe the relationship of God with his people. It was, in other words, the care that shepherds had historically shown for their flocks that led to the portrayal of God in the Old Testament as a shepherd Lord. In Genesis (49:24), for example, God is described as "the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel"; in Ezekiel (34:12, 15), God is recorded as saying that he "will be the shepherd of [His] sheep"; and in Psalm 23, on which our first hymn this morning was based, we rejoice that "The Lord is my shepherd".

Likewise, because they were understood to be doing the work of God, ancient leaders were often described in the Old Testament as shepherds. Jesus's audience would immediately have thought of good leaders such as Moses (Exodus 3:1) and David (2 Samuel 5:2), who rose from shepherding flocks to become shepherds of people. In David's case, it was his risking of his life for the sake of his sheep (1 Samuel 17:34) that led to his rise up the political and religious hierarchy in Israel to become the shepherd King.

But Jesus's audience may also have thought of bad leaders – those so-called false shepherds who were so preoccupied with feeding and clothing themselves that they neglected their sheep and allowed them to become scattered (Ezekiel 34:1-6) – and Jesus's audience may have remembered the prophetic denunciations of such false shepherds. As recorded in Jeremiah (23:1-2), the Lord said: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! ... It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings ..."

It is these false shepherds who may have come to mind when Jesus spoke of the hired hand. At verses 12-13 of today's Gospel reading, Jesus said: "The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep."

Jesus makes clear that he is no such false shepherd. He will not run away when danger comes to call. He is the good shepherd. He will stay faithful and lay down his life for his sheep. In verses 17-18, Jesus emphasises that he will lay down his life of his own accord and take it up again, echoing the practice of good shepherds, who would lie across the gate of the sheepfold at night to protect their flocks and rise again each morning to lead their sheep to pasture. In earlier verses of chapter 10 of St John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep. ...Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." But in today's passage the focus is not so much on this promise of new life, but on the price to be paid for it – on the sacrifice that is to be made for the awesome victory of God's love that we see in the resurrection.

At the simplest level, Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is to come – for his imminent death and resurrection. But at another level, Jesus was reassuring his audience then – and he reassures us still today – that we are all known and loved; that we are all part of one flock cared for by one shepherd; and that, through his sacrifice, we have been freed from sin. But there may yet be a further point of significance in the passage for us today, in terms of laying down our lives and taking them up again. Just as God loves Jesus and Jesus loves us, so too, it seems to me, we are being commanded to love one another.

That is the message which comes across clearly from the second of our readings today, which Robin kindly read for us. In chapter 3 of John's first Epistle, verse 23, it is said that God's commandment is "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another". We are not to be the wolf who preys on God's sheep. Nor are we to be the hired hand who runs away in the face of danger. We are instead to be one of the sheep who loves his neighbours who live as part of one flock, just as Jesus loves us.

Our love, moreover, is to be a generous, self-giving love – a sacrificial love – as modelled by Jesus. So, in verse 16 we read: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." The Christian vocation is to serve – to serve one another, to serve the "one flock" of which we are all a part – our community, our society – for the benefit and well-being of all. And we are to serve not just through words and prayer, but practically through action. It is said in verse 18: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

There are some over the years who have made the ultimate sacrifice, laying down their lives to protect others from danger. We may know stories of heroism in times of war or in other periods of grave danger. One example I recall from about three years ago is the story of Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud Beltrame, a 44-year-old French police officer who was killed by an Islamist terrorist after he agreed to swap places with a female hostage during a siege in a supermarket in the medieval town of Carcassonne in southern France.

But there are everyday heroes too. 'The Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice' in Postman's Park in the City of London contains 54 plaques, each dedicated to an ordinary person who gave their life attempting to save someone else. In 1878, a 31-year-old ticket inspector named Frederick Croft was run over by a train and killed whilst saving a distressed woman from committing suicide. In 1885, Alice Ayres, the daughter of a bricklayer's labourer, saved three children from a burning house at the cost of her own young life. And in 2007, a 30-year-old reprographic operator called Leigh Pitt saved a boy from drowning in the Thameside canal but was unable to save himself. All these selfless acts, and many others, reflect the courage and love that is exemplified by the cross.

Fortunately, the vast majority of us will not be called upon to lay down our lives for others. For most, the sacrifice to be made involves a much more modest commitment. Jesus's first audience lived in a world without a welfare state, so simple acts of generosity could make the difference between someone starving and surviving. Today, there are many ways in which we can make the world a better place for us all to live in. For some, service comes as part of their daily lives as parents. For others, service is extended through their daily lives at work, by serving the Church or helping to build a Christian community. We think of Ministers the Church. We think of doctors and nurses, care workers, teachers and classroom assistants,

and all the others on the frontline of the current pandemic. We think of charity workers working in all sectors of society, both at home and abroad.

Others still serve through voluntary activities. We think of our Church Secretaries and all those who contribute to this Church and others. We think of charity fundraisers, school governors, community sports coaches and so many more. All giving up their time to make a difference. All serving in their own way – in their everyday lives – not for personal gain, but for the common good, assured that the common good does not exclude their own good also.

So, how do you serve? What contribution are you offering in order to make the world a better place to live in?

The ways of the world can be seductive, and it is all too easy for us to slip into wolves' clothing without even realising it. So, ask yourselves this:

- Are you the wolf who is preying on your community, or are you living as part of a loving community serving God?
- Are you the hired hand who has run away, abandoning his sheep in their time of need, or are you a shepherd who has stayed on faithfully to care?
- Are you living for your own personal gain, or are you actively sharing a generous and self-giving love?

Those challenging questions are ones that we all need to ask of ourselves from time to time. Christ "bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness" (1 Peter 2.24); we need to be prepared to follow Jesus's example and to lead a life of service and sacrifice, out of love for one another. Are you doing your part? Are you doing with your life what God is calling you to do?

Thanks be to God, and to God alone be the glory, Amen.

Responding to God's grace

Prayers of Concern

We come now before God with our prayers for the world. Let us pray. Lord, we pray for those who know our name; family, friends, neighbours, those we work or go to school with. We think of those who are in need of special care today.

We think too of those who feel they are overlooked, unknown to others. Give them reassurance that you know each one of them by name and are caring for them.

As Jesus spoke of the shepherd looking after his flock, we pray for those who in charge of caring for or protecting others. May they know your hand

in their work and where their work is dangerous or risky, be with them in those challenges.

Work in the hearts and minds of all who govern so that they may be guided by your will, rather than their own self interests.

We pray for those involved in farming and livestock occupations. Give them the resilience to carry out their work and guide those who make decisions affecting their livelihoods.

We pray for those who need their souls or bodies restored and ask for peace or strength as needed. Be with those in the medical professions who give so much of themselves to support others, especially in the ongoing strained world of the pandemic.

We pray also for those who work in aid agencies, disaster relief and social care; those who work to feed, shelter and clothe those in need, regardless of creed or colour.

We pray for those who walk in death's dark vale, both the dying and the bereaved. May they feel your presence there with them in the lonely and barren places.

When we come before you, Lord, you often place situations, people, or places in our thoughts. We keep silence for a few moments to lay anything or anyone before you now:

[PAUSE]

Finally, Lord, we pray for ourselves. You call us to serve in many places and in many different ways. May we hear your call to us afresh this week and have courage to show your love to others.

We bring all these prayers before you, shepherding God, along with the unspoken prayers of our hearts. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

This is an opportunity to set aside your regular financial contribution to Trinity's ongoing work and witness. Call to mind your gift now as you share in this prayer.

Generous God, your gift to me
is life, and sustenance, and hope.
I bring to you my gift, and myself.
Receive, Lord, and bless:
so that both gift and giver
may bring blessing to others,
and glory to your name. Amen

Hymn R&S 559 – Christ is made the sure foundation

Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and corner-stone
chosen of the Lord and precious,
binding all the Church in one;
holy Zion's help for ever,
and her confidence alone.

All within that holy city
dearly loved of God on high,
in exultant jubilation
sing, in perfect harmony;
God the One-in-Three adoring
in glad hymns eternally.

We as living stones implore you:
Come among us, Lord, today!
with your gracious loving-kindness
hear your children as we pray;
and the fulness of your blessing
in our fellowship display.

Praise and honour to the Father,
praise and honour to the Son,
praise and honour to the Spirit,
ever Three and ever One:
one in power and one in glory
while eternal ages run.

Latin 7th cent., tr. J.M. Neale (1818-66) altd.

Closing Prayer & Blessing

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, and all those who are dear to us, whether near or far, this day and always.
Amen