

Service for Sunday 25 April, 2021

From the United Reformed Church at Morpeth, Widdrington and Gt. Bavington

Opening words

The Lord is my 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.

He leads me beside still waters.

He calls me to stop for a moment and rest.

He leads me beside still waters.

He sees the stressing out and the fraying ends.

He leads me beside still waters.

The candle burning at both ends.

He leads me beside still waters.

The core of our being stretched to its limits.

He leads me beside still waters.

Just for a moment to catch my breath.

He leads me beside still waters.

Just for two seconds to renew my strength.

He leads me beside still waters.

(©Dave Hopwood/engageworship.org)

Hymn: 274 God is love, his the care

God is love: his the care,
tending each, everywhere,
God is love, all is there!
Jesus came to show him,
that we all might know him!

Sing aloud, loud, loud!
sing aloud, loud, loud!
God is good! God is truth!
God is beauty! Praise him!

Jesus came, lived and died
for our sake, crucified,
rose again, glorified;
he was born to save us
by the truth he gave us: [Refrain]

None can see God above;
Jesus shows how to love;
thus may we Godward move,
joined as sisters, brothers,
finding him in others: [Refrain]

To our Lord praise we sing,
light and life, friend and King,
coming down, love to bring,
pattern for our duty,
showing God in beauty. [Refrain]

Percy Dreamer Words: Public Domain

Prayer

Safe in the knowledge that we are loved, we come to the Good Shepherd seeking succour for our souls. Let not the wolf snatch our thoughts and scatter them, for our minds belong to Jesus, and our hearts are open to him. AMEN

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 have our back. So many sheep, yet you know us all by name. Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd. AMEN

Reading Psalm 23

Meditation :

The LORD is my shepherd,

My guide, my satnav, my personal trainer, my president, my prime minister, my mentor. The one I look to...

I have everything I need.

I want plenty of things, long for so much, desire a world of things. But what Lord, do I need?

He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.

Lord, we burn ourselves out at times, take on too much. Please help us to pause, to find moments of refreshment amidst the busy-ness...

He renews my strength.

We are so tired at times, so wrung out from the day. Renew our strength Lord, please, give us patience and endurance...

He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name.

It's easy to get lost, to become distracted and lose our way. Please guide us in our decision making this week Lord...

Even when I walk through the dark valley of evil, I will not be afraid,

The news can be bad, it can frighten and overwhelm us. Help us to see it through your eyes, give us comfort, compassion and courage...

For you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

Popular opinion informs us that there is nothing out there, but you promise to always be with us, to never leave us. Help us to remember that Lord in all that happens this week...

You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.

Enemies appear in many guises - peer pressure, cynicism, rebuffs and negative criticism. Your word offers us a feast of encouragement. Thank you Lord.

You welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil.

Help us to keep in mind that we are your prodigal children, welcomed home, forgiven, invited in...

My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and love will pursue me forever. I will live in the presence of the LORD all my days.

Thank you for all the good things in our lives, and the promise of fullness of life with you. Amen

(© Dave Hopwood/engageworship.org)

Reading: John 10:11-18

Hymn: The Lord's my shepherd

Reading: 1 John 3:16-24

Sermon

I have during the past year come to see much of the major themes of the bible reflected in our experience of lockdown and this coronavirus. I have at times seen that the experience of the Jewish nation in exile felt very much our experience as we were unable to worship and be together as we have been used to. I have at times seen the experience of wandering in the wilderness similar to experience of isolation and loneliness and unclear of the direction that we are taking and where we will end up. I have also at times seen the analogy with stories such as Noah and the Ark and how at times we have been locked down in the Ark, we have battened down the hatches, in order to keep us safe from the virus until the danger recedes.

So today I can't help but hear the words of John's gospel, and the Good Shepherd, and of the sheep in the sheepfold and the attacking wolves, and reflect these words in our experience of being in lockdown. In some ways we have been sheltered away from harm, being kept safe, while the prowling wolf of covid stalks the streets of our communities.

In some ways I see this experience of lockdown in a very personal sense a way of being kept safe, in a place where we are comfortable and warm, in order to avoid the danger that is around us.

But I want us this morning to flip that illustration on its head. Because this virus and the lockdown that has

resulted can also be seen to have scattered us all in all directions.

This has become a big part of my experience of Church during lockdown. The church is empty. Everyone has been scattered.

Since we have no longer been able to meet in the church buildings, many of us have had to struggle with what it means to be church. No longer was church defined by where you went to on a Sunday morning. No longer was your denomination as relevant as we met together in online groups where we didn't know who was who. No longer were we directed to a particular way of worship as we were faced with a wide rich diversity of online worship from churches from all different traditions and all over the world.

The church had no walls.

Instead of being able to say "I am a Christian because I go to such and such a church on a Sunday" we were left to struggle with defining church in different ways. The sheepfold had been broken and the sheep were scattered into the world.

So the image I have is that instead of being safely gathered inside to keep us safe, in terms of church it feels rather that we had been scattered.

As a minister (especially being new to the pastorate) it was difficult for me to keep track of all the sheep that had been scattered. Instead of safely gathering everyone into church on a Sunday morning and checking everyone was accounted for. I am faced with an empty church and a congregation who are scattered far and wide and struggle to keep contact with.

One of the wonderful things that comes from the passage today are words of reassurance. To know that, unlike me, Jesus, the Good Shepherd knows his sheep. He knows each by name and goes and seeks and brings back those who are lost. So let me say to you today, if you feel lost, if you feel that since the church buildings have closed you have been left to wander aimlessly, then please hear the words of this gospel passage and know that the Good Shepherd knows you and finds you - but also please get in touch with me by email or phone to just say 'Hi', or drop a comment in the section below this video, so that I too can know all my sheep are safe.

So how does a scattered community retain its identity. As Christians who have been unable to meet in the buildings on a Sunday morning - how do we identify ourselves as Christian, as members of the church - what does it even mean to try and do that?

Well it seems the early Christian church struggled with the same problems.

God's people have always been a wandering nomadic people. A scattered people. Even in the very early stories on the bible, Abraham and Sarah journey to a different land, Moses wanders with the people in the wilderness, and when they do settle in the promised land they are overtaken by other powers, taken into exile and scattered – the scattering of God's people. What did it mean to be a nation with such transient origins and when the land had been overtaken and the occupants scattered far and wide.

Part of the reason why so many laws were laid down in the Torah was to create that identity. The Jewish nation were those who were circumcised. The Jewish nation were those who observed the sabbath in a particular way. The Jewish were those who avoided eating pork or hares or camels. This was what gave them their identity. This is how they knew they were part of God's people.

When it comes to the early church, there soon came a time when they could no longer rely on having the identity of being Jewish to distinguish the sheep of the fold. As churches sprung up all over the place, and many with Gentiles as well as Jews, the edges became a bit blurry. But also, in a time when your religious identity could mean the difference between life and death, what was it that made you Christian. How much of the established worship, whether Roman or Jewish, did you have to renounce to be fully Christian? And if you renounced the established religion, how did you know that you were part of those who would be saved from God's judgement? It was these questions of identity that we see the early church struggle with in the book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament.

That 1st letter of John wrestles with such issues. And as a scattered people today, who have tasted and seen what a church without walls might look like, the instructions we find in John's letters are helpful instructions for us today.

John writes "Dear Children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence." John's repeated insistence to these early Christians to love one another is the key sign that they are children of God. And for us too, it is our love for one another that confirms our identity. Instead of a whole long list of Commandments that shape and determine who we

are, and whether we have gained God's favour, John gives his followers just two. "To believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." It is by this that we will know that God lives in us, and we in him.

John writes "This is how we know that love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for each other." Jesus says the same thing in the gospel reading, the Good Shepherd does not turn and run when his life is threatened, but lays down his life for his sheep.

That is pretty discouraging isn't it. We've been told on the one hand that we know that we live in God if we love one another, and then on the other hand are told that love is laying down our lives for each other. How can we live up to such command? Suddenly not eating pork and being circumcised and all the other commandments seem the easier option.

But John in his letter writes: "if our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." And what I think John is saying here is that it is our hearts that judge us. We know the expression "in our heart of hearts" – it is our heart that judges what we are doing is right or wrong, judges our motives and reason for doing what we do. John says "If our hearts condemn us, if our hearts are telling us that we are not loving enough, that we have not done enough, then we know that this dissatisfaction is also part of our spiritual life.

John Wesley often prayer "Lord, cure me of my intermittent piety and make me thoroughly Christian". So when our conscience pricks us, when our hearts condemn us, we can set our hearts at rest in the assurance that God knows us better than we know ourselves, and that God will have mercy on us.

Let us be known by this. That we are God's people who believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love one another as he commands us. By this we shall be known. And by this we can set our hearts at rest in his presence. Amen

Prayer of intercession

Eternal God,
as Jesus and the early Church cared for those in need,
we pray for all who suffer
and are not cared for,
or whom care cannot reach.

We pray for the elderly who die alone,
the young who are neglected, or cruelly treated,

young and old whose weaknesses are exploited
and sensitivities abused

We pray for all who have grown hopeless
and weary as each day is like the last

For those who face hunger and homelessness
with no way out;
refugees from war and violence
to whom no-one wants to give a home.
Those whose lives have been wrecked by conflicts
they do not understand
and cannot affect or change.
Hounded by economic and political forces
or by the impact of climate change
which take no account of their need.

In this world of so much suffering
we pray too for all who are affluent,
comfortable, warm and cared for,
who do not care.

For those who know what they should do
but do not bother.

For those who close their eyes and minds;
and those who simply find
other people's troubles and needs
a cross they do not wish to bear.

We pray for those who do care –
Those who accept the pain and disturbance
that knowledge brings
but do not see what they can do.

Those whose consciences are hurt,
who want to help,
but cannot see how

We pray for all who do care –
Who are willing to go the extra mile
time and again
often at cost in so many ways.

For those who go
where trouble, pain and poverty are,
risking life and limb,
facing danger and fear.

Father, as we pray,
increase the depth of love in us
and in others who have something to give
to the ill, troubled and dying.
Give us such love
that Your sheep, both inside and outside the fold,
may be found,
given health, strength, food
and the ability to enjoy life to the full

and the joy to praise You.

We thank You that Jesus is the Good Shepherd
and for Your grace and mercy
that has made us part of His flock.
Thank you that You watch over Your flock
You know us by name,
You understand what we are like,
You call us to follow
and You accompany us along the path,
seeking us out when we stray,
keeping a loving eye on what we do.

Lead us into Your future
on the adventure of faith,
for Jesus' sake.

Amen

(Courtesy of Very Rev Colin Sinclair, Minister of
Palmerston Place Church, Edinburgh/ Church of
Scotland 'Weekly Worship')

Lord's Prayer

Hymn 552 The King of Love my Shepherd is

The King of love my shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never.
I nothing lack if I am his,
and he is mine forever.

Where streams of living water flow,
my ransomed soul he leadeth;
and where the verdant pastures grow,
with food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed,
but yet in love he sought me;
and on his shoulder gently laid,
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill,
with thee, dear Lord, beside me;
thy rod and staff my comfort still,
thy cross before to guide me.

Thou spreadst a table in my sight;
thy unction grace bestoweth;
and oh, what transport of delight
from thy pure chalice floweth!

And so through all the length of days,
thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
within thy house forever.

W.H.Baker Words: Public Domain

Blessing