

## ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 3<sup>rd</sup> MAY 2020

### INTRODUCTION

*The picture of God as Israel's shepherd was a powerful one for the Jewish People, and for Christians the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd has been equally powerful. This picture of Christ carrying home a lost sheep is one of the earliest pieces of Christian art yet discovered.*



*What a comfort to know that Jesus has taken responsibility for bringing us home!*

*As we begin this service, we pause for a moment to remind ourselves of God's utter faithfulness to us, and that He wants only good for us today: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*

### OPENING BIBLE VERSE AND PRAYERS

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul." (from Psalm 23)

The Lord is here.

**He is with us.**

Near or far.

**He is with us.**

The Lord is here

**We are His people.**

The Lord is here.

**He gives us strength for the journey.**

The Lord our God is here.

**And we welcome Him now.**

## **TURNING AGAIN TO GOD**

**Lord,**

**You have given us so much love,  
but we have not always accepted it.**

**You have shown us how to love,  
but we have not always learned it.**

**You have told us whom to love,  
but we have not always done it.**

**You have told us the cost of love,  
but we have not always been willing to pay it.**

**We are sorry for not understanding your love.**

**We are sorry for not sharing your love.**

**We are grateful for the love you offer, even now.**

## **GOSPEL READING**

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Thanks be to God.

## **REFLECTION**

Jesus says he is the Gate. From day one until the last day – and beyond – he is the Gate. And he is the Good Shepherd.

When we think of a shepherd and his flock we may have in mind something like One Man and His Dog. The image is one of a group of stupid creatures running mindlessly in all directions being brought to order by a skilled dog controlled only by a series of clever whistles from the man in charge, the shepherd. It's an image of an unruly crowd being brought to heel by force, fear and compulsion, however impressively it's done.

But this is an essentially British image.

In the hills of Palestine the picture is very different. OK nowadays, the shepherd carries a Kalashnikov but in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the image Jesus had in mind was of a shepherd in a personal and affectionate relationship with his flock.

The sheepfold too is different for us: our image is of a rather flimsy fence with a juddering fold-back gate. In Palestine the structure would have been quite massive: surrounded by high stone walls and with a substantial door-like gate – the whole thing built not only for holding but for protection.



What might break into such a sheep fold?

Wild animals, intent on finding a good meal; thieves looking to steal the flock. But this image is a metaphor: *we* are the sheep. No one is going to eat us or steal us away. Or let's hope not.

The things that threaten us are those weaknesses we're prone to that only have to whistle and we come to heel, slinking obediently after them, perhaps despising ourselves for doing so even as we do it.

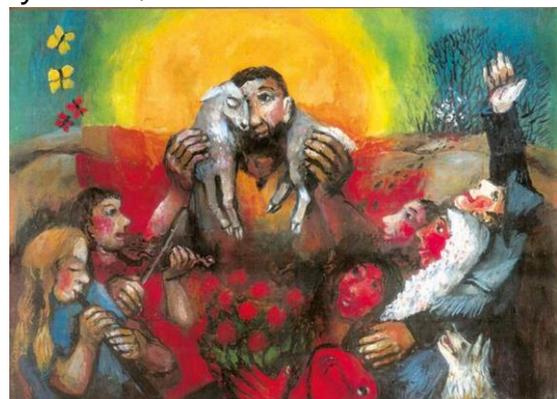
These weaknesses, these sins, don't come to us honestly through the gate but sneak up on us when we think no one's looking. Jesus says that his sheep know his voice and when they hear him they run from what threatens them into his protection. So it is with us: when Christ's voice breaks through to us we thrill to it and respond, sickening of whatever enticed us away from him and knowing that he is what we need, he is what we want and nothing else will do.

For even the most hardened heart, there is hope here.

Let me tell you a story. I was taking the service at the prison a few years ago and because there were only three men present at the early service for 'vulnerable prisoners' (mainly those accused or convicted of sex offences) we decided we would have a simple prayer service. I invited them to share their thoughts on the reading for the day. Two looked at their feet but one began to speak. He said that he had been in the grip of a compulsion for decades. He hated himself for what he did but somehow could not find the strength to stop. Then he began attending church and, in time, asked to see the vicar, someone he felt he could trust. He confessed. The vicar told him he would not give him absolution but would go with him to the police station.

He told the police the whole sorry tale of the crimes he had committed and was taken into custody. That night, in a police cell, he had the best sleep he'd had for twenty years. This had happened some years before and as he spoke his face was radiant with remembered joy of that moment when he found the courage to hear the voice of Christ above the din of his harmful predilection.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, 'calls his sheep by name', each one known and loved as individuals and individually precious. When we stray he calls to us, misses us when we wander, waits for us when we loiter, seeks us out when we are lost. We are his, wayward and annoying perhaps, even criminally weak maybe, but his – and he has accepted the responsibility of bringing us home.



## **PAUSE FOR REFLECTION....**

The Lord's my Shepherd I'll not want  
He makes me lie in pastures green  
He leads me by the still still waters  
His goodness restores my soul

*And I will trust in You alone  
And I will trust in You alone  
For Your endless mercy follows me  
Your goodness will lead me home*

He guides my ways in righteousness  
And He anoints my head with oil  
And my cup it overflows with joy  
I feast on His pure delights

And though I walk the darkest path  
I will not fear the evil one  
For You are with me, and Your rod and staff  
Are the comfort I need to know.

*Music by Stuart Townend*

## **PRAYERS**

The Lord is our shepherd,  
And we are the sheep of his pasture.  
Let us bring to him our cares and concerns  
For the Church and for the world.

Good Shepherd of the sheep,  
Thank you that you seek and save all that is lost in us,  
And so bring hope even in our darkest moments.

We pray for all whose job it is to shepherd us:  
For the leaders of our churches, especially our bishops,  
Tasked with giving a sense of vision and hope in these uncertain times;  
For our leaders in government,  
Tasked with difficult decisions to preserve our lives and livelihoods;

And for all health professionals,  
Carrying the burden of saving life and easing suffering.  
May we experience something of your care for us  
Through their care and diligence.

*Silence*

The Lord is my shepherd:  
**There is nothing I shall want.**

Good Shepherd of the sheep,  
We pray for the world that we inhabit –  
The world we have inherited  
And will pass on to successive generations.  
Teach us to look after it carefully and wisely,  
To share its gifts more fairly,  
And work together to ease its sufferings.  
Turn the hearts of those who do not care, or do not care enough,  
And encourage more of us to speak out for what is wholesome and good.

*Silence*

The Lord is my shepherd:  
**There is nothing I shall want.**

Good Shepherd of the sheep,  
We pray for the weak and vulnerable,  
For those who must live depending on others for every need,  
And for those who are bullied or constantly despised.  
We pray for a greater reverence, one for another,  
For a greater willingness to uphold and encourage one another;  
We pray for healing and wholeness.

We take a few moments to remember before God those who are struggling  
with illness – those we know, and those we don't.

*Silence*

The Lord is my shepherd:

**There is nothing I shall want.**

Good Shepherd of the sheep,  
We pray for those who have died;  
We pray for those who ache with sorrow at their going;  
We commend them all into your unfailing care  
Which lasts throughout this life  
And on into eternity.

Among those who have died, we remember Helen McCabe, Hilary Jones, John Smith, Peter Manning, Michael Turvey, Howard Cotterill, Hugh Stanbra, Sheila Wilshaw, Stan Woodfield, Roy Summers, and Daphne link – and those whose anniversaries fall at this time – Felix Alexander, Joan Kendall, Jim Thorp, Jo Wasley, Alice Laver and Joy Smith. We remember, too, the victims of Coronavirus, including medical staff who have given their lives in service of others.

*Silence*

The Lord is my shepherd:

**There is nothing I shall want.**

Good Shepherd of the sheep,  
We give you thanks that in you  
We are able to live through good and ill  
With abundance of life.

Merciful Father

**Accept these prayers  
For the sake of your Son,  
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

## **The Lord's Prayer (this version, or the traditional one)**

Rejoicing in God's new creation, as our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**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.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

### **ENDING**

**Loving God, bring us all to life  
by the power of your love.  
Bring us all to live  
in the life of your kingdom.**

**And may the grace of our Lord  
Jesus Christ,  
The love of God,  
And the fellowship of the Holy  
Spirit,  
Be with us all evermore.  
Amen.**

