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Service for the 4th Sunday of Easter, 25th April 2021

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

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.

HYMN: All people that on earth

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1 All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with fear, his praise forth tell,
come ye before him, and rejoice.

3 O enter then his gates with praise,
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise, laud, and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.

2 The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make;
we are his folk, he doth us feed,
and for his sheep he doth us take.

4 For why? The Lord our God is good;
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

William Kethe

PRAYER

Let us pray

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.

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.

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.

Lord, who laid down your life for your sheep, how can we doubt your forgiveness?
Arms once stretched out upon a cross now close in embrace. As we return, enfolded, may we know the fullness of love that lives to forgive, and forgives that we might live.

Lord, a year ago your house was not a fold in which we could meet. Confined to our homes, we prayed as a silent wolf prowled the world, a pandemic that threatened us all.
We thank you for watching over us, and for those of us who were safely delivered.
It was a testing time, Lord, but yet there was community.

We thank you for the proof that your Church has no walls, as we learned to reach out to one another and still to worship – but in different ways.

We thank you for those in our communities who had been taken for granted, overlooked, not considered of great importance, but on whom we came to rely to save lives.

We thank you that our values were tested, and that we saw what really matters.
Good Shepherd, who knows suffering and sacrifice beyond our imagining, we thank you that we are here today, enfolded in your love.

Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

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.

SCRIPTURE READING John 10: 11-18

¹¹“I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep. ¹²When the hired man, who is not a shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees a wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man and does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵I am the good shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them. ¹⁶There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become one flock with one shepherd.

¹⁷“The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again. ¹⁸No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it back. This is what my Father has commanded me to do.”

HYMN: The King of love

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

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

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

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

4 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.

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

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

H W Baker

ADDRESS: *Mr Geof Owen*

God is not done yet

One of the most beloved of Christian images is that of Jesus the Good Shepherd, a metaphor that we see developed by Jesus in our reading this morning. When we read this passage, we do so in the light of other shepherding images, most especially the words of Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...". When we read this psalm we often think of David, the Shepherd King. Since Jesus is seen in Christian tradition as the Son of David, the one who takes up the Messianic throne, the shepherding image has taken an important place in Christian life.

Our reading from John chapter 10 falls within the Easter cycle. The reason it was chosen for this day may have to do with the statement in verse 17, that Jesus lays down his life in order to take it up again. He is the good shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for the flock, but takes it up again. Laying down his life is not forced upon him, but is a decision that he has made of his own accord, again with the intention of taking it up again.

In verse 16, Jesus speaks of that other flock which he intends to bring to the sheepfold. There is, he says, one flock and one shepherd. Who are the sheep in the fold, and who are those on the outside? What is interesting here is that those outside the fold seem to be able to hear the voice of Jesus, and are willing to follow. Contextually it seems appropriate to conclude that Jesus is talking here about bringing the Gentiles into the church. Therefore those inside the sheepfold would be the Jewish Christians.

At the time when John writes this Gospel, the transition from a Jewish-dominated church to a Gentile one is well underway. Debates had erupted as early as Paul's ministry about how this was going to work. The tensions are present in this dialogue, but the message is that there is but one flock and one shepherd.

We continue to struggle with the question of who is in and who is out. The Christian world is rather diverse, with thousands of different versions. Down through the ages, attempts have been made to determine who is "orthodox" and who is not. But who gets to decide? If we say Jesus, which works for me, on what basis does he decide? If you listen to "conservative" Christians, it's the liberals who are beyond the pale. If you listen to liberals, it's the conservatives who simply don't get it. In other words, it's my job to determine whether you fit my criteria of what it means to be a good Christian: it would seem that God dislikes the same people as I do.

Amid Jesus' discourse on being "the good shepherd," what jumped out to me this time above everything else was Jesus' simple but bold assertion that, "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." Have you ever noticed that before? Or, more than notice it, have you ever given much thought to its theological implications?

What strikes me is that, quite simply, Jesus isn't done yet. Despite his healings, despite his preaching, despite all that he had already done and planned to do, Jesus isn't done yet. He still has more sheep to reach, sheep that are not in this fold. By extension, I'd suggest that God isn't done yet, either – and this matters for at least three reasons.

Firstly, God continues to call people from all walks of life, from every nation on the face of the earth, and from each and every generation across the two thousand plus years since Jesus first uttered those words until today. If that were not true, you and I would not have come to faith and I certainly would not be a lay preacher and proclaiming the Gospel.

Secondly, God is at work in our midst – and through us and our congregations – to extend the invitation to abundant life offered by the Good Shepherd. Do we know that? Do we imagine that God is using our lives and words to invite others to faith? Can we imagine that, simply by praying for someone or inviting someone to church, we might be the vessel by which God continues to reach out and embrace God's beloved sheep from beyond our congregations?

Thirdly, the members who will one day constitute Jesus' flock are beyond our imagining. There is a tremendous expansiveness to Jesus' statement here, and we do not know – for neither Jesus nor John tells us – just what are the limits of the fold Jesus describes. All we know is that Jesus – and therefore God – isn't done yet. Jesus is still calling, God is still searching: in time we will all be, as Jesus says, one flock under one shepherd.

I think this third point is the one that most animates my imagination, because I know more and more people who are worried about friends and family members who no longer go to church, who don't necessarily identify as Christian anymore, or who have married people of other faiths. While I don't think the sermon is the best place to trot out the merits of a universalist versus particularist view of salvation, I do think we can say with confidence that God is not done yet, that God works in ways beyond our imagining to bring together one flock, and that Jesus Christ's mercy and grace are for all. What makes me bold to proclaim these promises, even though I don't know for sure the fate of the various people you and I are concerned about? Just this: *Jesus is the Good Shepherd*, the one who laid down his life

for the sheep – all the sheep – and who was raised to life once again, validating his sacrifice and promise. Which means, I think, that while we may not know all that God has in mind for those who have followed different paths, I nevertheless trust them all to the mercy and grace of the Good Shepherd.

So perhaps this week we might name some of the anxieties we harbour and concerns we hold regarding those who have left the faith, or seem on the edge of our community, or have not heard of or yet believed in the good news of God's grace. Having named them, perhaps we might also pray for them, praying that God would work in us and through us to share the abundant life we've experienced. But we might also pray that we grow to trust to God the fate of all God's children and sheep, simply because of the faith God showed in us by sending the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for us and all people out of nothing other than sheer, abiding, and eternal love.

Thanks to be God.

PRAYERS of intercession

Let us pray

As we entwine our hands in prayer, so we entwine our love, our care, our thoughts, our concerns for those whose names and situations we pray for.

As our hands entwine, we see the world is linked, so our prayers are for the world and all its people.

O Lord our God, you are the shepherd of your sheep;
of those who are faithful and stay near,
of those who wander and are far off,
of those who know you and those who don't,
of those who have heard your name
and those for whom your name is a mystery yet to be revealed.

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those who are lost or alone or lonely, struggling through life with no one to guide them, to protect and shelter them, to care for and sustain them; for those without family, without friends, without roots, without homes.

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those with no food and no money to buy it, for those who day to day struggle to feed themselves and their family and who feel they have nowhere to turn and no one to turn too; praying especially for those in our own country who need to use food banks, that they may find there the support they need and a life-line in these times; praying too for the people of Brazil, especially those in the *favelas*, where over half have barely enough food for one meal a day.

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those who follow you in peril of their lives, fearful of arrest and persecution, and thinking at this time especially of those in China for whom worship is not easy.

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

For peoples of all faith who seek peace and harmony but are challenged with sectarian views and violent extremists, who fear for their lives and their communities and their very existence.

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those who struggle with damaged relationships and domestic violence, those who feel trapped and who see little option but the life they have and the path it has taken; that someone somewhere, will show them a better way, a safety net, a safe house and home and way of life.

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those whose lives have been turned upside down by the Covid pandemic, through illness itself, through isolation, fear, hardship, unemployment, debt, overwork, stress or grief; may the world pull together to help and support and vaccinate and may all see and know that until the world is vaccinated none of us are safe.

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

We pray for the people and situations whose images and pictures and words have imprinted themselves on our lives this last week. We see them now in our minds eye and, for them all in a moment of quiet, we pray.....

Shepherd of the sheep, **we bring our prayers for them all.**

O Lord our God, you are the shepherd of your sheep, bless all those for whom we have prayed – and bless us, each one of us as we seek to help those we can, those we encounter as we live out our lives.

May our feet walk for you, may our hands touch for you, may our voices speak for you and may our ears hear the needs of those who speak.

Amen.

HYMN: Loving shepherd

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Loving Shepherd of Thy sheep,
Keep Thy lambs, in safety keep;
Nothing can Thy pow'r withstand;
None can pluck us from Thy hand.

2 Loving Saviour, Thou didst give
Thine own life that we might live;
And the hands outstretched to bless
Bear the cruel nails' impress.

3 We would praise Thee every day,
Gladly all Thy will obey,
Like Thy blessed ones above
Happy in Thy precious love.

4 Loving Shepherd, ever near,
Teach Thy lambs Thy voice to hear;
Suffer not our steps to stray
From the strait and narrow way.

5 Where Thou leadest we would go,
Walking in Thy steps below,
'Til below our Father's throne
We shall know as we are known.

Jane E Leeson

BLESSING

Lord, when we feel lost and confused... **Help us to follow the 'good shepherd'.**

When we are tired by caring for others... **Help us to follow the 'good shepherd'.**

When we're tempted by the wolves... **Help us to follow the 'good shepherd'.**

When we're enjoying good pasture and rest... **Help us to follow the 'good shepherd'.**

Send us out to be faithful sheep and... **Help us to follow the 'good shepherd'.**

Amen.