

Worship for Fourth Sunday of Easter (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Welcome to worship with the South Warwickshire Circuit on the 4th Sunday of Easter. Thanks go this week to Rev. Elizabeth Clark who is our preacher, Michael Sharman and Rev. Barbara Greenwood for the readings, and the technical team for putting everything together. I am Pam Weston and I am the worship leader today.

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

Loving God, help us to remember that you are with us today, wherever we are. May we pray to you in faith, sing your praise with gratitude, and listen to your word with eagerness.

Hymn: StF 1 – All people that on earth do dwell

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

- 5. To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
the God whom heaven and earth adore,
from earth and from the angel host
be praise and glory evermore.**

William Kethe

Opening Prayers

Creator God, Great shepherd of the sheep,
we praise you.

As members of your flock, we thank you for the wonderful way you surround us with your love. With all your children throughout the world, we praise you.

Loving Lord, we rejoice that you have guided us through the pandemic to this moment. You are the shepherd who never neglects the flock for a second; the shepherd who handles his foolish and stubborn sheep with infinite patience and carries all those who struggle or despair.

Holy Spirit, give us your strength and courage, fill us with your peace as we worship.

Fill us with your joy as we listen.

Fill us with your hope as we pray.

And may your worship always fill our lives.

Holy God, we confess that we do get it wrong and have sometimes strayed from your ways just like lost sheep.

We have often been selfish and too concerned with getting our own way;
we have failed to follow you and we are sorry.

Help us to see ourselves as you see us and help us to hand our lives over to you.

Speak directly to each one of us the word of pardon and forgiveness. We know how much you love each one of us and we are so sorry when we let you down.

We ask this prayer in the Name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Here is good news. Jesus says, 'Your sins are forgiven'.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

We say 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 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**

Hymn: StF 367 – When I was lost you came and rescued me

- 1. When I was lost, you came and rescued me;
reached down into the pit and lifted me.
O Lord, such love,
I was as far from you as I could be.
You know all the things I've ever done,
but Jesus' blood has cancelled every one.
O Lord, such grace
to qualify me as your own.**

*There is a new song in my mouth,
there is a deep cry in my heart,
a hymn of praise to Almighty God –*

hallelujah!

***And now I stand firm on this Rock,
my life is hidden now and the new has come
– hallelujah!***

Your love has lifted me.

- 2. Now I have come into your family
for the Son of God has died for me.
O Lord, such peace,
I am as loved by you as I could be.
In the full assurance of your love,
now with every confidence we come.
O Lord, such joy
to know that you delight in us.**

***There is a new song in my mouth,
there is a deep cry in my heart,
a hymn of praise to Almighty God –
hallelujah!***

***And now I stand firm on this Rock,
my life is hidden now and the new has come
– hallelujah!
Your love has lifted me.***

Kate Simmonds & Miles Simmonds

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

1st Reading Acts 4:5-12 (NRSVA)

⁵The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' ⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of

Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ This Jesus is

“the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.”

¹² There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

Psalm 23 (NRSVA)

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Epistle 1 John 3:16-24 (NRSVA)

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ 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?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ 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. ²⁴ 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.

Gospel John 10:11-18 (NRSVA)

¹¹ ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ 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.’

Sermon

My first appointment as a minister was in Masham, a community which had more sheep than people. Sheep were sold in the livestock market, and celebrated at the annual sheep fair. There is even a Masham breed of sheep, with a distinctive curly coat and fringe. You can imagine my trepidation when I preached on these readings in that community!

Growing up in the city, Psalm 23 didn't have the same resonances that it has now. I was more at home with alternative renderings, God is my pace setter being one I can remember. However, in such a rural context these passages and others took on a whole new meaning.

The rhythm of the seasons shape rural life as does the farming year. An important part of Spring is lambing time. The exact time varies depending on where you are in the country. Lambing takes over and depending on the size of the flock can last weeks. It is a wise minister in such an area, that knows not to have too many meetings during lambing time, that's if you want people to come of course!

As I watched farmers tend their sheep all through the year, I learned the truth of a shepherd knowing his or her sheep. I have seen a farmer split out a group of sheep from a large pen, he knew exactly what he was looking for, they all looked the same to me. A good farmer knows which of his ewes will make good mothers, which will need to be kept an eye on.

The sheep in turn will know the voice of the shepherd and will spot the bucket of feed she carries over a huge distance! However, let us not get carried away, shepherding is not a romantic profession it is sheer hard work and it's about producing food. That doesn't stop there being a

real level of care for the sheep and pride in a well reared flock.

Psalm 23 isn't romantic either it is a very real psalm that talks about life as it is. Not, if, I should walk in the valley of the shadow, but when, the enemies are present and real, life can be tough. However, in the middle of all that, there is a level of trust; food, water, rest and nurture will be given by God, the shepherd to his flock.

In the passage from John's Gospel, Jesus compares himself with the hired hands, the 'jobs worths' if you like. Jesus is the Good Shepherd committed to his sheep, there is nothing he will not do for them. The sheep can trust him, they know him, they listen to his voice. Indeed, he will lay down his life for them.

Throughout the Old Testament we hear references to the leaders of Israel who were called to be shepherds of the flock and who so often led them astray. Jesus has come to show how it should be done, leading, nurturing, protecting the flock, keeping them on God's path. The sheep know his voice because it has the ring of authenticity, with Jesus, words and deeds are one, unlike some of those who seek to trip him up.

What do these two passages have to say to us? To say, with the psalmist, that the Lord is my Shepherd has implications. It means that we are content for God to be in control of our lives to take the lead and call us to follow. It also requires us to trust that God will care for and nurture us. As we have said it also reminds us that when life gets tough God is there guiding us through. No matter how hard things get, and life can be tough, whatever our dark valley is whether we face illness, redundancy or bereavement God will be with us. We can know ourselves loved, cared for and nurtured.

Trust doesn't always come easily, at times we can feel God has forgotten us, but we can hold on to the words of this Psalm as a promise of God's presence even when we can't feel it. There is a phrase in the reading from John that is also worth remembering, 'my sheep know my voice, I know them and they follow me'. We are known by God in Jesus. What I wonder does it mean to be known by God?

To begin with Jesus came to experience what it was like to be human, he knows the joys and delights as well as the sorrows and difficulties of being human. He knows what it is like to be us, that is what incarnation is all about. God stepped into the world God had made as a human being. I remember hearing a farmer preaching at a harvest and saying that the fact Jesus had been in business with Joseph, would have had to write a bill and collect the money, meant a great deal to him. It was something I had never thought about but as a carpenter it would have been so. Jesus knows what it is like to be us, warts and all.

Added to that the bible is full of reminders that God the creator knows us each by name, we are that special to God. Both readings are a reminder that we are known for who we are and we are loved, just as we are. At Easter we celebrate the biggest reminder of that fact; Jesus knows us, loves us and dies for us. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, it doesn't end there through the resurrection God has the last word and love wins.

Let us keep traveling the path, and trusting the Good Shepherd, listening for his voice in the storms of life. Not just for our own sake but so that with Jesus we may also call others to his fold.

Amen

Hymn: StF 481: The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want (Townend)

**1. 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.*

**2. 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 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.*

**3. 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.**

*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.*

Stuart Townend

THE RESPONSE

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

Lord, we thank you for watching over us during these difficult times. We thank you 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 for all your people who serve you in small and quiet ways. Who use their gifts in paid work, in church life and in their families.

We thank you that our values were tested, and that we saw what really matters.

Dear Lord, you are not just my shepherd but a good shepherd to all in the world. You give us all and more than we need and can ever want. May this abundance be a reality for many today in our world.

For those who are in desert seasons and living through difficult moments in their life we pray that you might quench their thirst and give them peace that surpasses all understanding.

We pray particularly for all those leaders who feel weak, physically, mentally or spiritually. May you give them wisdom and strength in their time of need so that they each might bring you honour through their actions.

We pray for those who live in fear and with an anxious soul. May your Spirit comfort so that they might know of your closeness.

In a moment of silence we name someone that we ask you to comfort and protect at this time.
[Silence]

For those facing trials and situations this week that seem impossible. Anoint our lives with your grace and Spirit, and cause our cup to spill over with blessings, for the benefit of others.

We pray that your unfailing love might flow out from this place today so that lives will be

transformed.

Amen.

The Offering & prayer

We give you thanks, for we have received in abundance.

You give us hope that a different world is possible.

May we put our gifts, and our skills and energy and time, to use in bringing your Kingdom closer.

Amen.

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 503 - Love divine, all loves excelling

- 1. Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.**
- 2. Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.**
- 3. Finish then thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise!**

Charles Wesley

Prayer & blessing

Lord, send us out like sheep who know their
shepherd well,
with wisdom to follow in Christ's footsteps and
obey his commands,
and the power of his Spirit to guide and bless us.
Amen.

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StF 367 – When I was lost you came and rescued me

Kate Simmonds & Miles Simmonds

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StF 481: The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want

Stuart Townend (b 1963)

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StF 1 – All people that on earth do dwell

William Kethe (d 1594)

StF 503 - Love divine, all loves excelling

Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

Bible Verses

NRSV & NRSVA

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