



**EAST SOLENT & DOWNS METHODIST CIRCUIT
DIGITAL CHURCH**

Week Beginning Sunday 1st August 2021

(Bill Berry)

**Digital Church Services can be found on YouTube
by searching 'ES&D'**

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this service of worship of the Digital Church of the East Solent and Downs Circuit of the Methodist Church. Our purpose is to glorify God, by celebrating His love - a love which drove Jesus to leave the glory of the heavenly realm, and to visit earth with the specific intention of separating us sinners from our sinfulness, and transform us from that corruption into which we have fallen by our rejection of God and His ways, into that perfect holiness which, from the beginning, was His perfect will for us.

As we approach our most Holy God, we confess that we are not worthy to come into His glorious presence.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those who confess their faults. Restore those who are penitent; according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

[Thomas Cranmer, The Book of Common Prayer, Great Confession for Morning and Evening Prayer]

May God who loved the world so much that he sent his Son to be our Saviour forgive us our sins and make us holy to serve him in the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *[Common Worship]*

Hymn Out of my bondage, sorrow, and night,

Out of my bondage, sorrow, and night

Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;

Into Thy freedom, gladness, and light,

Jesus, I come to Thee;

Out of my sickness, into Thy health,

Out of my want and into Thy wealth,

Out of my sin and into Thyself,

Jesus, I come to Thee.

Out of my shameful failure and loss,

Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;

Into the glorious gain of Thy cross,

Jesus, I come to Thee.

Out of earth's sorrows into Thy balm,

Out of life's storms and into Thy calm,

Out of distress to jubilant psalm,

Jesus, I come to Thee.

Out of unrest and arrogant pride,
Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;
Into Thy blessed will to abide,
Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of myself to dwell in Thy love,
Out of despair into raptures above,
Upward for aye on wings like a dove,
Jesus, I come to Thee.

Out of the fear and dread of the tomb,
Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;
Into the joy and light of Thy throne,
Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of the depths of ruin untold,
Into the peace of Thy sheltering fold,
Ever Thy glorious face to behold,
Jesus, I come to Thee.

“Out of my bondage, sorrow and night”

Words: William T. Sleeper

Music: G. Stebbins

Source: Small Church Music

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BIBLE READINGS

The first reading is from the book of the prophecies of **Ezekiel 34 v1 to 16**

The word of the LORD came to me: 2 ‘Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed those who are ill or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. 6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

7 “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10 this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

11 “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain

heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. 16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

The Gospel for today is from **John 10 v1 to 18**

‘Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger’s voice.’ 6 Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

7 Therefore Jesus said again, ‘Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

11 ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

14 ‘I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep 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 are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.’

REFLECTION

I admit that I was extremely concerned to learn that Conference this year has decided to allow same-sex so-called "marriage" in Methodist churches, and to bless in church the union of co-habiting couples. My concern is, that the authors of the report came to their conclusions by rejecting certain doctrines which I consider to be core to a proper understanding of the Christian faith, to the extent that the end result is a complete demolition of the Gospel of Christ. That is my personal belief.

"God in love unites us", in the "Conclusions" section, says "we seek to encourage all Methodists to love each other, despite holding differing opinions in matters of relationships and sexuality." That works both ways round – YOU are recommended to still love ME, even if the opinions I express in this sermon are diametrically opposed to your own.

However, merely saying WHAT I believe is undoubtedly inadequate. Simply shouting insults at each other will only serve to entrench our opponents in their errors. So I thought it would be better if I explained why I believe what I believe. It is from my personal experience. Even the most "liberal" of theologians will surely listen to my experience - after all, do not liberal theologians put personal experience and human wisdom as more certain authorities than that of the Bible?

As a child, I was an atheist. I was educated in a small village primary school, with one infants class and one junior class. We were all trooped down to the Parish Church, dedicated, as was the school, to St. Andrew. I used to think that there was more life in the fields and hedgerows than in that dank, dark, dingy, depressing Victorian church. I decided that a god who didn't understand modern English and had to be addressed in the ancient language of the Book of Common Prayer can't be much of a god. Funny how children's minds work.

The next school was Bishop Wordsworth's Grammar School for Boys, in the Close of one of the newer cathedrals in England - founded as late as 1220 to replace the older cathedral at Old Sarum, a few miles to the north. We were divided into houses, named for former bishops of Salisbury. Mine was Osmund, who I discovered had founded the first cathedral on the windy hill-fort to the north, consecrated in 1092. Each week, the houses had to attend service in the school chapel, in a form of worship owing more to the Sarum Use than to the Book of Common Prayer. The Sarum Use had been made redundant by the introduction of the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549, so we were going even further back in time. I remained an atheist. I was awarded A-levels in Physics, Chemistry and Biology, and went on to study Biochemistry at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. There, I learned how incredibly complex and inter-related is the basic biochemistry forming the essence of all life. We also learned about some genetic diseases, caused by defects in the genetic code. The ones we learned about resulted from some enzyme or other being malformed, and not working as it should - if it worked at all. The result was disease, and for some defects, even death. A simplified biochemical machine worked less well, or not at all.

In my mind, I tried to imagine evolution in reverse. Instead of building up complexity little by little, generation by generation, try simplifying the machine by imagining that this piece or that had not yet evolved. How many steps backwards in evolution was it possible to make, before arriving at a result that was too simple to be able to sustain life? Probably not many.

Thus, using my knowledge of science, and working purely on reason, I succeeded in persuading myself that evolution does not work as an explanation of the origin of life. This incredibly complex biochemical machine must have come into existence all of a piece - complete in all it's complexity. It must have been designed, not evolved. It must have been created.

As an atheist, I was appalled - this was not at all the conclusion that I wanted to come to. Using only science and reason, I had succeeded in proving that evolution is wrong, and that god in some form exists. However, instead of bowing to science and reason, and giving up my belief in the non-existence of god, I rejected my own reasoning, and continued in my atheism. Nevertheless, although I did not realise it at the time, my atheism was fatally injured.

I know that there are some who teach that we should re-interpret the Bible in the light of modern developments, so let me say something about some of my experiences of modern developments.

My first job after graduating was as a Research Assistant in a laboratory in Rotterdam. The research we were doing involved a lot of mathematical calculations. Done by hand, with only a calculator, they were very prone to error. Lists of numbers came off a machine, on a punched paper tape, with the numbers encoded in 7-bit ASCII, with an eighth, parity bit. I remember going through such a tape, line by line, translating in my head from the pattern of holes, converting binary-encoded ASCII numbers into decimal.

My boss had previously worked at a lab in Glasgow somewhere, and was still in touch with former colleagues. A research lab at a hospital in Glasgow was using the same kind of assay technique as ourselves, and had developed a computer programme to do the number crunching. They had even written it for the same type of computer that we had access to - a PDP 11. So I was sent to Glasgow, because I knew my way around, and because I could understand what Glaswegians were saying. The programme was on a set of 80-column punched cards, in a box the size of typical cabin baggage, weighing several kilos. The 8-inch floppy disk was about to be introduced; only to be made redundant in very short order by the 5 and a quarter inch floppy. How much easier, I used to think, to carry the programme on however many floppies were needed, rather than on punched cards. They in their turn were replaced by a more modern development, the 3 and a half inch floppy. Now, of course, all of those methods of data storage - punched paper tape, punched card, various sizes of floppy disk - are all in the same museum of ancient technology as the PDP 11 computer. The person who relies on the latest developments has to keep running just to keep up.

The job only lasted a year, and after that I got a job in a research lab in London, where I finally had to face up the fact that I would never make a career out of scientific research. I met a girl who was a lifelong Methodist, as were her parents.

Their friendship further chipped away at my atheism, until, on a certain day in May 1975, in a big blue tent on Streatham Common, as a result of the preaching of an evangelist whose name I forget, I surrendered my life to the Lordship of Jesus. My girlfriend was with me, weeping tears of joy at my conversion. The counsellor in the tent had given me some literature, including a set of dated Bible reading notes, and had advised me to read the Bible every day, and to join a local church.

As I started reading the Bible in the privacy of my bedsit, a thought entered my head, which cannot have come from me. It said "Do not be like so many others, sitting in judgement on my word, but let my word sit in judgement on you." Not having heard God speak to me directly before, to say I was surprised is an understatement. However, I knew perfectly well that I could get things wrong, and that I was not the source of all knowledge, nor the fount of all wisdom, so it made perfect sense. When I come across something in the Bible that conflicts with something in me, it must be that I am wrong, and the Bible is right. I must therefore change, to bring my life more into line with what I learn in my reading of the Bible. I went to see the Minister of my girlfriend's Methodist Church, told him what had happened, and that I wanted to join his church. He seemed very dubious, as if he did not believe that such conversions happen. Nevertheless, he agreed to add me to the list of persons being received into membership at the next scheduled service for that purpose. The others were all teenage girls.

The night before I was received into membership of the Methodist Church, I had a dream. I do not usually remember my dreams, but this one was so dramatic and life-changing that I remember it clearly. I knew that Jesus was in my dream, even though I could not see him. How I knew, I don't know. What I saw was a face. A terrible face. Sneering, arrogant, self-centred - the very personification of evil. I turned away from it, and cried out to Jesus to take it away. He told me to look again. When I did, I realised that I was looking in a mirror - that personification of evil was ME. Then Jesus spoke again "THAT is who I died for". I certainly did not want to remain like that, and knew that I could do nothing about it myself. If Jesus wanted me to change - and he most certainly did - it would have to be him that did it. I understood that Jesus would change me - if I co-operated with him. I was then overwhelmed by a sense of total peace, such as I have not experienced before or since.

The next year, I married my girlfriend. We are still together, having celebrated our 45th wedding anniversary earlier this year.

My new wife and I decided together that we would set aside time each morning to read the Bible and pray. We started with dated notes from the Bible Reading Fellowship, but then switched to Scripture Union. We have been reading the Bible daily together for 45 years.

In my reading, I came across Ezekiel chapter 34, in which God tells the prophet to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. God's judgement against them was, in

essence, that they were looking after themselves, rather than the sheep. As a result (vs 6) "My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them." Could that be a description of the decline in the Methodist Church over the last many decades? He goes on in verse 10: "I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them." Then, in verses 11 to 16 God says that He Himself will shepherd the flock and look after them.

When I first came across this, I took it personally, as a warning and as a promise. Translated, it meant that I was to be careful not to believe everything that teachers and preachers teach, because not all of them are true shepherds. That was the warning. The promise, repeated by Jesus in John's Gospel that he is the Good Shepherd, was that God himself will be my shepherd, and lead me where he wants me to go - if I follow where he leads.

Jesus also said "My sheep know my voice, and will not follow another."

After 46 years of daily Bible reading, and daily praying, asking God to show me what He wants me to learn from that day's reading, I believe that God has kept His promises to me – including the promise that I would get to know the voice of my Good Shepherd.

So, therefore, I believe what I believe, not because I blindly follow what John Calvin, or Martin Luther - or even John Wesley - have written. When I find myself agreeing with those who have gone before, it is because I recognise in what they have written the same voice of the Good Shepherd who has taught me. Where I disagree - and I do, even with Wesley at times - it gives me something to think about. Is the disagreement about something of minor importance? Usually - although I cannot abide Luther's virulent anti-Semitism. Is the disagreement because one or other is expressing his fallen human nature, rather than the teaching of the Holy Spirit? Undoubtedly. Indeed, the second sentence of John Wesley's sermon 10 "On the witness of the Spirit Discourse 1" reads:

How many have mistaken the voice of their own imagination for this witness of the Spirit of God, and thence idly presumed they were the children of God while they were doing the works of the devil!

I have also learned that when the Holy Spirit speaks today, He always agrees with what He has already said in the Bible. There are no new revelations - the Bible IS God's word. It does not "contain" God's word, as if some parts of the Bible are not God's word. Neither is God's word bigger than the Bible. God has already said everything He intends to say. All else is repetition and commentary on what He has already said, and most certainly not a contradiction of it.

So, I come back to Ezekiel 34, and God's promise to his beleaguered, harassed, lost sheep - that He will remove those who teach falsehood, thus confusing the sheep and leading them away to their destruction - and that He will, Himself, teach us the truth. This sounds harsh on the false shepherds - but it is because he loves the sheep who are being deceived.

My prayer is, that God will look to the precedent He has already set. I am referring to the story of the conversion of a man whose theology was sincere, but wrong, which led him to persecute the followers of the truth. Read Acts chapter 9, about Saul's conversion. Jesus arrested Saul on the way to Damascus, spoke personally to him, and shook him to the core by blinding him. Saul was totally transformed, becoming, himself, one of those whom he had previously persecuted. I pray for today's false shepherds, that the living, risen Christ will act in power in their lives, to turn them round. I pray that they will no longer be false shepherds, but true shepherds. To those who are not shepherds, but confused sheep, I say - read the Bible. Follow John Wesley's practice – outlined in the Preface to the standard sermons: "Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: - "Lord, is it not thy word, 'If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God?' Thou 'givest liberally, and upbraidest not.' Thou hast said; 'If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.' I am willing to do, let me know, thy will." I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach." Amen.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We are, today, accustomed to saying different Creeds to those approved by the early Church. So here is one of those more recent creeds.

We believe in The one true God who lives eternally in three persons
—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We believe in The love, grace and sovereignty of God in creating, sustaining, ruling, redeeming and judging the world.

We believe in the divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God
—fully trustworthy for faith and conduct.

We believe in The dignity of all people, made male and female in God's image to love, be holy and care for creation, yet corrupted by sin, which incurs divine wrath and judgement.

We believe in The incarnation of God's eternal Son, the Lord Jesus Christ
—born of the virgin Mary; truly divine and truly human, yet without sin.

We believe in The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.

We believe in The bodily resurrection of Christ, the first fruits of our resurrection; his ascension to the Father, and his reign and mediation as the only Saviour of the world.

We believe in The justification of sinners solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ.

We believe in The ministry of God the Holy Spirit, who leads us to repentance, unites us with Christ through new birth, empowers our discipleship and enables our witness.

We believe in The Church, the body of Christ both local and universal, the priesthood of all believers—given life by the Spirit and endowed with the Spirit's gifts to worship God and proclaim the gospel, promoting justice and love.

We believe in The personal and visible return of Jesus Christ to fulfil the purposes of God, who will raise all people to judgement, bring eternal life to the redeemed and eternal condemnation to the lost, and establish a new heaven and new earth.

[Statement of Faith, Methodist Evangelicals Together]

Hymn When quiet in my house I sit

When quiet in my house I sit,
Thy Book be my companion still,
My joy Thy sayings to repeat,
Talk o'er the records of Thy will,
And search the oracles divine,
Till every heartfelt word be mine.

O may the gracious words divine
Subject of all my converse be!
So will the Lord His follower join,
And walk and talk Himself with me;
So shall my heart His presence prove,
And burn with everlasting love.

Oft as I lay me down to rest,
O may the reconciling Word
Sweetly compose my weary breast!
While, on the bosom of my Lord,
I sink in blissful dreams away,
And visions of eternal day.
Rising to sing my Saviour's praise,
Thee may I publish all day long;
And let Thy precious word of grace
Flow from my heart, and fill my tongue,
Fill all my life with purest love,
And join me to the Church above.

"When in quiet in my house I sit"

Words: Charles Wesley

Tune: R. S. Newman (Companion)

Published in the Methodist Hymn Book 1933

Source: Small Church Music

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Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name

Father, how wonderful that you give to us the privilege of being called your children. Thank you that you want to spend time with us, to listen to our concerns, and to comfort us in our distress.

We are pained that your love is scorned, and your name used as an oath. We pray, Father, that more and more, people will come to respect you, and to give honour and praise to your majesty, power and love.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven

In your world, among the people whom you have made, we see such greed, selfishness, hatred and discrimination. We recognise, Father, that these things are

not you will for us, but are because we refuse to live by your Holy law of love. We rebel against your love, because our hearts are utterly depraved as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve. We, like them, prefer to believe the lies of that ancient serpent, the devil, rather than believe your truth. In your service is perfect freedom. As your slaves, Father, fully obedient to your will, there is more freedom than there is when we rule ourselves. We therefore get down from the thrones of our lives, and invite you to rule there, in all your kingly power.

We pray also for our friends and neighbours, for our relatives, and for all others throughout the world, that all will come to acknowledge your sovereignty, and submit themselves to you in humility, holiness and peace. Only this way, father, will the peace which we all long for finally come.

Give us this day our daily bread

You, Father, know what we need. How often do we crave for those things which do us harm, and ignore those things which bring us life. We ask, Father, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you will open our eyes to your truth, the Bread of Life, your Holy word written in which also we learn to see your Holy Word living.

Give us, Father, a hunger for spiritual bread, your words, which give us life. Stir up in us an eagerness to read your word, the Bible, and help us to understand it, so that we can live it. Above all, Father, give us a willingness – even an eagerness – to obey you fully.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us

We sin because our very nature is sin. Forgive, father, but more – transform us. Take away the love of sinning, that henceforward we might live to your glory, in holiness and righteousness of life.

Forgive us, also, our failure to forgive those who have sinned against us. Here and now, we forgive them.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

Help us, Father, to recognise temptation when it comes, then help to find a way out. Keep us safe from all the attacks of the evil one, that we might not fall into his snares.

The Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours

The world is in a mess, with evil gaining ground everywhere. But you, Glorious Father, are in control of everything – even when it doesn't seem like it. We praise you and thank you that you have sent your son, Jesus. He came in weakness and humility, giving his life on the cross for our salvation. But you have promised that Jesus will return – next time in great power and glory, to finally rid the world of all wickedness and evil. You have promised, Father, that, at the end, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Even those tongues which revile him now; even those knees which refuse to bow now.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and fulfil every last one of all your promises. **Amen**

Hymn Facing a task unfinished

Facing a task unfinished
That drives us to our knees
A need that, undiminished
Rebukes our slothful ease
We, who rejoice to know Thee
Renew before Thy throne
The solemn pledge we owe Thee
To go and make Thee known

Where other lords beside Thee
Hold their unhindered sway
Where forces that defied Thee
Defy Thee still today
With none to heed their crying
For life, and love, and light
Unnumbered souls are dying
And pass into the night

*We go to all the world
With kingdom hope unfurled
No other name has power to save
But Jesus Christ The Lord*

We bear the torch that flaming
Fell from the hands of those
Who gave their lives proclaiming
That Jesus died and rose
Ours is the same commission
The same glad message ours
Fired by the same ambition
To Thee we yield our powers

We go to all the world . . .

O Father who sustained them
O Spirit who inspired
Saviour, whose love constrained them
To toil with zeal untired
From cowardice defend us
From lethargy awake!
Forth on Thine errands send us
To labour for Thy sake

We go to all the world . . . x2

"Facing a task unfinished"

Original Words: Frank Houghton

New Words: Keith Getty, Kristyn Getty, Ed Cash, Fiona De Barra © 2015 JMF International

Music: Samuel Wesley

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BLESSING

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

[Hebrews 13 v20-21]