

## ORDER OF SERVICE – Worship at Home 25/04/21 – Easter 4

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### Opening declaration of Praise

Praise God, all you his people. Let the sound of his praise be heard.

**We will praise you, living God, for you are always with us.**

It is good and right to proclaim the praises of God.

**We will declare the word and works of God.**

Mighty in power and great in mercy is our God.

**We will honour you, Saviour and Lord.**

Come, let us worship the living God:

**We will praise the Father, we will praise the Son,**

**We will praise the Holy Spirit – the living God, three and one.**

**Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

### HYMN – SF 2249 <sup>1</sup>

Come, people of the risen King,  
who delight to bring him praise.  
Come, all and tune your hearts to sing  
to the morning star of grace.  
From the shifting shadows of the earth  
we will lift our eyes to him,  
where steady arms of mercy reach  
to gather children in.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!  
One heart, one voice, O Church of Christ, rejoice!*

Come, those whose joy is morning sun,  
and those weeping through the night.  
Come, those who tell of battles won,  
and those struggling in the fight.  
For his perfect love will never change  
and his mercies never cease,  
but follow us through all our days  
with the certain hope of peace.  
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!*

Come, young and old from every land,  
men and women of the faith.  
Come, those with full or empty hands,  
find the riches of his grace.  
Over all the world his people sing –  
shore to shore we hear them call,  
the truth that cries through every age:  
'Our God is all in all!'  
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!*

### Prayerful reflection on Psalm 23 <sup>2</sup>

**1 The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need**

Thank you Lord that you are my personal shepherd and care intimately about me. You know my needs better than I do, and even if I don't understand all that's happening right now, help me to trust you to meet those needs. Pause.

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

Lord, there is such a lack of rest in the world today it's so easy to be anxious, stressed and restless. Please lead me to places where I can rest, be still and know that you are God. Give me your inner peace that the world cannot give – a peace that's beyond my understanding. Pause.

**3a He renews my strength; he restores my soul.**

I thank you Lord that you know exactly what needs restoring in my life, physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. I name before you any area of my life causing me concern at the moment, and ask you to be at work there in the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing restoration and wholeness, in your way and your timing. *Pause.*

**3b He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name.**

Thank you Lord that you go before me today and every day, knowing what each day will hold. Help me to be open to your guidance and to put aside my own plans when I need to. *Pause.*

**4 Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.**

I may have to pass through a number of valleys during my life – perhaps disappointment, maybe bereavement, unemployment, loneliness, sickness or depression to name just a few... but thank you Lord that you walk close beside me through each one. *Pause.* Help me not to be afraid, knowing that you will protect and comfort me, and help me to remember that I'm passing through the valley – it's not my final destination. *Pause.*

**5 You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honour me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings.**

Thank you that you are a God who loves to bless me. When my cup overflows may I share your abundance with others, making a difference in their lives. I can't change the world, but I can bless individuals or groups of people. *Pause.*

**6a Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life.**

You promise that your goodness and unfailing love will be with me all the days of my life – how wonderful is that! *Pause.*

**6b And I will live in the house of the Lord forever.**

Thank you Lord that you are preparing me for an eternal future in your presence – my present life is only the beginning. I praise you Lord and give you the honour and glory. Amen

**HYMN – STF 161 <sup>3</sup>**

Speak, O Lord, as we come to you  
to receive the food of your holy word.  
Take your truth, plant it deep in us;  
shape and fashion us in your likeness,  
that the light of Christ might be seen today  
in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.  
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us  
all your purposes, for your glory.

Teach us, Lord, full obedience,  
holy reverence, true humility.  
Test our thoughts and our attitudes  
in the radiance of your purity.  
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see  
your majestic love and authority.  
Words of power that can never fail;  
let their truth prevail over unbelief.

Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;  
Help us grasp the heights of your plans for us.  
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time  
that will echo down through eternity.  
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,  
and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.  
Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built  
and the earth is filled with your glory.

## **Reading – John 10:11-18** <sup>4</sup>

<sup>11</sup> 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

<sup>14</sup> 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. <sup>18</sup> 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.'

## **Talk**

### **Introduction**

The nature and character of shepherds was well known to the people of Bible times. They knew and observed shepherds, saw their ways and their actions. They saw shepherds at work, even if they lived in the town, and the temple system had created a huge demand for lambs for sacrifice so tending sheep was a common occupation.

Then as now they knew there were good shepherds and bad ones, as in any line of work. There were those who were dedicated to their work, who put themselves on the line for their sheep to protect them, sought out sheep that wandered away and found them the best pasture. It was a lonely, dangerous and antisocial occupation. In contrast, there were those who saw it not as a vocation requiring sacrifice and dedication but as a means of income. They were just doing their job; they would not put themselves out or put their bodies on the line to protect the sheep, after all they were someone else's sheep. In the reading from John they are described as 'hired hands who do not care for the sheep' (v13)

Now I suspect, no matter how many episodes of Countryfile we may have seen, most of us are not familiar with shepherds. It may therefore help to think instead of someone who is a care-giver in a care home or hospital. We know the difference, don't we, when someone truly cares, when someone treats those in their care as if they are their own relatives; when they act not out of obligation, or because they are paid to do it, but because they have a true vocation to compassionate and loving care. Thankfully in my experience there are many more like that than the few bad examples who neglect or ill-treat those for whom they are supposed to be caring.

So, writers of the Bible, like Isaiah, Jeremiah and the psalmists, have used the picture of the good shepherd, the conscientious caregiver, as one way to describe the character of God. This continues into the New Testament as Jesus owns the title the Good Shepherd (capital letters). And, as so often, he builds on this picture, this metaphor, greater levels of meaning.

### **Jesus the Good Shepherd**

In our reading Jesus establishes three characteristics of the Good Shepherd: He

- willingly lays down his life for the sheep;
- will not run away in the face of danger and
- knows his sheep personally, by name.

In other words Jesus' connection with his sheep is founded on self-sacrifice, commitment and relationship.

We have just celebrated Easter and continue the celebration in this Easter season. In the joy of Easter morning it is all too easy to forget the agony of Jesus' Maundy Thursday heartfelt prayer and the horrors of beatings and execution on Good Friday. When Jesus the Good Shepherd speaks of laying down his life for the sheep he is not merely speaking about selflessness, commendable though that is. He really means laying down his life, giving his very life willingly. It is offered not taken from him. He did this

- to overcome death and evil,
- to defeat all the powers of darkness,
- to reverse the effects of the damage done to God's wonderful creation by humankind's foolish and arrogant decision that we knew better than God about the best way to live in the world God had made.

It was this self-offering love that marked Jesus out as the Good Shepherd (capital letters). It naturally meant that he was committed to the task he had to do, to save and protect his sheep from danger. He did not give up but continued to the very end until it was thoroughly completed on the cross with the cry of satisfaction 'it is finished'. Jesus lays down his life for his friends and calls us to go and do the same.

We probably won't be called upon to lay down our physical life for others as Jesus did, but we are called to sacrifice ourselves for our brothers and sisters. We are called to put their interests above our own. We are called to the same selfless acts of caring, commitment and relationship that the Good Shepherd shows for his sheep. It will involve stickability, not fleeing at the first sign of things getting difficult like the hired hand. Through this self-offering, once for all act of laying down his life, Jesus opens the way to true relationship. Astonishingly, it is akin to the way he and the Father are in relationship. Verses 14 and 15 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father

There is a wonderful closeness and intimacy shown in the recognition of individual voices - just as a mother knows the cry of her baby and a lover the voice of their beloved in a crowded room. A key part of the relationship we can have with Jesus is to hear and recognise his voice (v16).

The new community of the resurrection, founded in Jerusalem, beginning in an upper room where the disciples gathered in fear with the doors locked, learned from the example of the Good Shepherd, the Risen Lord. They changed the world by laying down their lives for their brothers and sisters, by following the Good Shepherd into action.

## **Response**

We are now part of the community of the resurrection of Jesus founded with a vocation to the same self-sacrifice, commitment and relationship Jesus has shown us.

Jesus' call and equipping for this task begin again with every new day. They begin as we continue our ordinary lives, in our ordinary places among the ordinary people we know. May God go with us and be with us as we follow the Good Shepherd, seek to live out our lives in self-sacrifice, commitment and relationship, listening for his voice and following his ways. Amen.

## **Prayer of Confession** <sup>5</sup>

Loving God, time and again we have strayed from you; time and again you have come looking for us like a shepherd looking for the sheep, putting us on your shoulders and carrying us home. We tell ourselves that next time it will be different, but it's not; still we wander from your side. We admit we are weak and foolish, sheepish, undeserving of your love, yet still you reach out in love, drawing us back to you.

We praise you for the wonder of your grace, for your willingness in Christ to lay down your life for the life of the world. We thank you for your constant provision for all our needs. Have mercy on our repeated failures, and continue to guide us, watching over us even when we lose sight of you. Lead us on through the green pastures and the rocky places of this life, and through the valley of the shadow of death, until we are safely gathered into your kingdom and the journey is done. In the name of the shepherd of all, Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

## **HYMN – STF 481** <sup>6</sup>

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 I will trust in You alone,*

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,*

## **Prayers for others**

### **We pray...**

For our Queen and the Royal Family as they continue their lives without the Duke of Edinburgh. His death must have left a huge void. Bring them your comfort and peace Lord.

For the UK, as lockdown restrictions gradually ease, for city and town centres, especially those in West Berkshire, that they will thrive again. We ask that you'll provide wholesome businesses to fill vacant premises.

For children, teachers and other staff back at school, naming before you anyone we know personally who is struggling.

For churches in the UK as they seek your guidance for their future, particularly those in our own Methodist Circuit. Give us courage to make changes where we need to.

For those known to us personally who need our prayers.

## **Lord's Prayer**

## Song – SF 1702 <sup>7</sup>

1. Amazing grace! how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me;  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believed!  
*My chains are gone, I've been set free,  
My God, my Saviour has ransomed me.  
And like a flood his mercy reigns,  
Unending love, amazing grace.*
3. The Lord has promised good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be  
As long as life endures.
4. The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun forbear to shine.  
But God, who called me here below,  
Will be forever mine.  
*My chains are gone, I've been set free,*

## Final Blessing <sup>8</sup>

May the beauty of God be reflected in your eyes,  
the love of God be reflected in your hands,  
the wisdom of God be reflected in your words,  
and the knowledge of God flow from your heart,  
that all might see, and seeing, believe.

May God be with us until we meet again and may we all be held in the peace and love of God  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen

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