

Circuit Service 25/04/21

Welcome to this morning's worship. As we gather in our own homes we come into the presence of God to sing, to pray and to reflect. As we look forward to a time when we will be able to meet together in person we consider how we can do this safely and at the same time embrace new ways of being church. We ask God for his guidance.

Call to Worship

The Lord is my 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 StF 314 This joyful Eastertide, H&P 213

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sT1dFvQgAM>

1 This joyful Eastertide,
what need is there for grieving?
Cast all your cares aside
and be not unbelieving :

*Come, share our Easter joy
that death could not imprison,
nor any power destroy,
our Christ, who is arisen !*

2 No work for him is vain,
no faith in him mistaken,
for Easter makes it plain
his kingdom is not shaken :

3 Then put your trust in Christ,
in waking and in sleeping.
His grace on earth sufficed ;
he'll never quit his keeping :

Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000)

Prayers

Lord, we praise you for this new day, for sunshine and showers, for beautiful bird song, for new life as the countryside reawakens as the earth warms and the days get longer. We thank you for the beauty of your creation and for the fellowship that we have through each other.

We thank you for your word in Scripture that teaches us of your deep love for all people and especially this morning for assuring us that like a shepherd you watch over each and everyone of us to keep us from harm. Help us to learn how we can love and care for each other, whoever they are.

But so often we fail to do this. Forgive us when we exclude those you have called into your fold, those on the fringes, those who we are uncomfortable with, and those of different lifestyles and faiths. Help us to speak with the voice of the shepherd, calling all into your presence and assuring them of your love. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Reflection

The last coach trip that I went on before the first lockdown was to Rushall Farm in Bradfield, accompanying 45 reception aged children. It is a trip I take every year with the local Primary School and this is the first year I have missed for a long time. The purpose of this trip was to see the new born lambs and it is one I enjoy. We didn't see any lambs born on this last trip but have on previous years and it is always a joy to see a new life coming into God's world. The ewes all have coloured spots on their backs to tell the shepherds how many lambs they are expecting, this helps them to know how much extra food to give each one and they are put in pens according to the colour. Most ewes lamb without help but the shepherds are on constant alert to spot any in trouble, often staying up all night when it is busy. When a ewe has more than two lambs the shepherd will try to get a ewe with a singleton to adopt one of them or if this doesn't work will bottle feed them until they are big enough to go out in the fields. When I think of lambing I remember our dear friend Alison who so looked forward to her yearly visit to the farm at lambing time, she said it was hard work but was always at time of refreshment and restoration.

The life of a shepherd today may be very different from when Jesus was alive but the care that the shepherds of Rushall Farm give their sheep was no different. They care deeply and will do anything to keep them alive and well. They may not face wolves these days but present day sheep are not so tough and are susceptible to other dangers. This gives us some idea of how Jesus, the Good shepherd, cares for us and will do all he can to keep us safe from harm.

Readings: 1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Hymn StF 481 The Lord's my shepherd, H&P 70

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4tPkX0MG0>

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| 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. | 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. |
| <i>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.</i> | 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. |

Stuart Townend (b. 1963)

Sermon

Forget about fluffy lambs gambolling around in lush green fields, being looked after by shepherds riding on quad bikes with well trained dogs to help them and going home to their families when their shift ends. Think instead, of wilderness, extreme heat, sudden storms, falling rocks and bandits. This is the world of the shepherd in Jesus' day. For them sheep

were not just their livelihood but their lives. They stayed with the sheep day and night and were responsible for their wellbeing. They carried oil to put on their cuts and scratches which would be caused by thorns and jagged rocks and protect them from wolves by literally lying down across the entrance to the sheepfold at night. They held the lives of the sheep in their hands and because of their lifestyle they lived on the very edge of society. This is the kind of shepherd that Jesus identifies himself with, one who devotes himself totally to the care and wellbeing of his sheep.

So, what qualifies Jesus to be a good shepherd? Three times in our gospel reading he draws attention to his willingness to lay down his life for his sheep, 'laying down' and 'taking up' was the shepherd's daily habit of lying across the gate of the sheepfold at night and rising each morning to lead them to pasture, actions also reflected of course in his death and resurrection. The shepherd like care, portrayed here, allows the shepherd and sheep to know each other in a way that reflects Jesus' relationship with the God he calls Father.

In his letter, John writes to a church that is falling apart over conflicts of belief. He commands a way of generous, self-giving love. In verse 16, which echoes the opening words of our gospel reading, the shepherd models a practical care that embraces individual and social relationships, in a world without a welfare state generosity can make all the difference between starving and surviving. Faith and action go hand in hand, believing in Jesus Christ as Son of God influences our behaviour because of the love that we receive and his command to live out our lives modelling God's all-embracing love for his people. Action that must extend beyond our known friends and contacts. This is our calling as disciples.

So how are we going to live out our Christian calling in, what we hope will soon be, a post pandemic world, the pandemic has highlighted the injustice and inequality of life for thousands of people both in this country and worldwide, how is the church going to respond? Foodbanks are reaching more than double the previous number of families, there are thousands who have lost their jobs, many from the poorer end of society and the vaccination programme is showing the inequality of distribution worldwide. Is this what God wants? It seems to me that before the pandemic many churches seem to be mainly concerned about aging congregations and falling numbers, how is this inward looking way of thinking living out our calling? A year ago, with people responding in numerous ways to help those who were isolating, helping the health service and volunteering in various ways, people were talking of a new normal where there would be much more concern for others. As we start to return to a more normal way of living we must not lose this and as Christians we have the opportunity to lead the way. The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, talking on Songs of Praise last weekend calls us to rediscover the important values of life, to rediscover our common humanity and the sense of belonging that we have in Christ. He says we have been given the chance to re-evaluate our lives and our priorities and we must not lose this. He calls for a Christian presence in every community, living out their faith, serving the community by meeting needs.

In this circuit we are being encouraged to draw up a mission action plan to show how we are planning to move forward as a Christian presence in the future. As we move out of lockdown, we need to think which things are important to keep and which we need to let go

of, so that we can fulfil our calling and serve the needs of our local community, as well as support causes further afield. This letting go will be painful but it is one we all must face if we are to emerge a stronger, more Christlike church bringing the all-embracing love and care of the Good Shepherd to those around us.

Jesus lived on the edge of society and gave priority to the least, the smallest and the most despised. The parables are full of upside down thinking and imagery that show us the value that is placed on the most insignificant things and the least important people. The epistle reads “let us love, not in word and speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:18) We are called to follow the good shepherd who knows us by name and who has laid down his life for us and not just by what we say but by what we do lead others to his side. This is what we are trying to do as we re-evaluate our life as church in the twenty-first century.

Each day the Methodist Church puts a short pray on its Facebook page, I quote a recent one to end with

“In an age of change, help us see what we can do to make a difference in your world. In a world where people are fearful, help us to spread your message of hope and never forget that the world is yours. Amen.”

Hymn StF 249 Jesu, Jesu, H&P 145

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvQz513Jl8M>

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| <i>Jesu, Jesu,
fill us with your love,
show us how to serve
the neighbours we have from you.</i> | 3 These are the ones we should serve,
these are the ones we should love.
All these are neighbours to us and
you. |
| 1 Kneels at the feet of his friends,
silently washes their feet,
master who acts as a slave to them. | 4 Kneel at the feet of our friends,
silently washing their feet,
this is the way we should live with
you. |
| 2 Neighbours are rich folk and poor,
neighbours are black folk and white,
neighbours are nearby and far away. | North Ghanaian song
<i>adapted by Tom Colvin (1925–2000)</i> |

Intercessions

Lord our shepherd, you lead us with tender loving care. We pray for those who are lost, those who in these days of uncertainty are trying to find direction in their lives, those who are unemployed or who are homeless because of the pandemic

Lord our shepherd, **guide us.**

Lord our shepherd, we pray for those passing through dark valleys, the sick, the dying, the bereaved, the depressed and anxious, the hungry, those who have had to leave their homelands.

Lord our shepherd, **guide us.**

Lord our shepherd, we pray for those called to leadership roles, the leaders of nations, of local communities and of religious communities. All those are seeking to guide us through the pandemic safely.

Lord our shepherd, **guide us.**

Lord our shepherd, we pray for ourselves, that we may set the table of hospitality before all who need our help, that our overflowing cup will be shared with others.

Lord our shepherd, **guide us.**

Lord our shepherd, we pray for the dying, that they may come to live in your house and know your comfort at the last.

Lord our shepherd, **guide us.**

All this we ask in the name of the Good Shepherd, Jesus our master and friend.

Amen.

Hymn StF 681 Community of Christ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1I4i3IOPBU>

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| 1 | Community of Christ,
who make the Cross your own,
live out your creed and risk your life
for God alone :
the God who wears your face,
to whom all worlds belong,
whose children are of every race
and every song. | 3 | Community of Christ,
through whom the word must sound
cry out for justice and for peace
the whole world round :
disarm the powers that war
and all that can destroy,
turn bombs to bread, and tears of
anguish
into joy. |
| 2 | Community of Christ,
look past the Church's door
and see the refugee, the hungry,
and the poor.
Take hands with the oppressed,
the jobless in your street,
take towel and water, that you wash
your neighbour's feet. | 4 | When menace melts away,
so shall God's will be done,
the climate of the world be peace
and Christ its Sun ;
our currency be love
and kindness our law,
our food and faith be shared as one
for evermore. |

Shirley Erena Murray (*b.* 1931)

Blessing

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

Amen.