

Call to worship: Psalm23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

“He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul”: we approach almighty God in worship, seeking to be calmed in a world of turmoil; seeking restoration in our lives of the people God creates us to be. Our first hymn, too, recognises God at work, nourishing, restoring, gently touching our lives in the places we need it most.

Hymn StF 88; HP 16: Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCnQNwQG5GI>

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| <p>1 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation.
 all ye who hear,
 brothers and sisters, draw near;
praise him in glad adoration.</p> <p>2 Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee,
surely his goodness and mercy shall daily attend thee:
 ponder anew
 what the Almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee.</p> <p>3 Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life and restore thee,
fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee,
 then to thy need
 he like a mother doth speed,
spreading the wings of grace o'er thee.</p> | <p>4 Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness of sin is abounding,
who, when the godless do triumph, all virtue confounding,
 sheddeth His light,
 chaseth the horrors of night,
saints with His mercy surrounding.</p> <p>5 Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him!
 Let the 'Amen'
 sound from his people again,
gladly for aye we adore him.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Joachim Neander (1650-80)</i>
<i>Tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827-78)</i>
<i>and Rupert E Davies (1909-91 – v.3)</i></p> |
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Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of comfort and compassion, through Jesus, your Son, you lead us to the water of life and table of your bounty. We have received the tender love of our Good Shepherd, who died for us and rose again to life to be our life, our strength and giver of your grace, that we might care for your flock, love as you do, and give as he gives. In our worship be amongst us, excite our spirits in praise and our minds in wonder, and may we be, simply be, as we remain in your presence. Amen.

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

Reading: Revelation 7.9-17

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Address 1 – Too good to be true?

So here we are, still celebrating the season of Easter, even though all the chocolate is long gone, we dwell in resurrection hope, live as Easter People, fuelled by the beauty of springtime and the love of God revealed all around us... in all this goodness and hope we are given a reading by the compilers of the lectionary that plunge us into a remarkable view of heaven from St John in his Revelation. What makes it so remarkable? Is it the sheer number of worshippers, the dazzling whiteness of their apparel, the enthusiasm of their worship, the presence of the angels, or the diminutive figure of the Lamb at the centre, the object of worship?

How do you find you react to reading of this perfect worship in heaven? Part of me finds it jarring with our life-experience. Pictures of crowds from every nation and language worshipping God in unity clash with my sense of unease at the fragile state of international relations, which threatens to unravel before us. The promise of no more famine and drought, no more yielding to the heat of the sun in the dry, dry desert, run counter to our lived reality now of devastation to lives and refugees in the current climate crisis and the seeming indifference of the rich nations. Where is this God who wipes away every tear from their eyes?

And yet, is this not the worship of our churches week by week? Of course, John is painting a picture in words of a vision granted to him of the new heaven and the new earth which is beyond our limited worldview of time and space. We can only imagine it, for it seems too good to be true to be breaking out into our world as we live in it today. And yet, it is the stuff of Easter. We who proclaim resurrection believe in a living God and in the loving shepherd who dies as a lamb sacrificed on our behalf to save us from the ravages of evil, and we do have the reality of heaven before us and within us. We worship because we are washed clean, perfect before God; as we worship we are joined with countless others from all nations of the earth. Alone in my front room, or one of a few in our chapel or church, this may seem like a huge leap of imagination, but if it were not so, for what are we praising God today? Resurrection life, albeit unfulfilled in our era and seemingly unfulfillable, gives us the impetus and inspiration to drive an agenda of love and sacrifice into a difficult world. John's glimpses into the completeness of things give us the reason and essence of Easter, and provide our reason for hope and faithfulness today.

Hymn StF 350; HP 238: I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62wk5Kvl7-w>

- 1 I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship,
should set his love upon the sons of men,
or why, as Shepherd, he should seek the wanderers,
to bring them back, they know not how or when.
But this I know, that he was born of Mary
when Beth'lem's manger was his only home,
and that he lived at Nazareth and laboured,
and so the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is come.
- 2 I cannot tell how silently he suffered,
as with his peace he graced this place of tears,
or how his heart upon the cross was broken,
the crown of pain to three and thirty years.
But this I know, he heals the broken-hearted,
and stays our sin and calms our lurking fear,
and lifts the burden from the heavy laden,
for yet the Saviour, Saviour of the world is here.

3 I cannot tell how he will win the nations,
how he will claim his earthly heritage,
how satisfy the needs and aspirations
of east and west, of sinner and of sage.
But this I know, all flesh shall see his glory,
and he shall reap the harvest he has sown,
and some glad day his sun shall shine in splendour
when he the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is known.

4 I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,
when at his bidding every storm is stilled,
or who can say how great the jubilation
when every heart with love and joy is filled.
But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,
and myriad, myriad human voices sing,
and earth to heav'n, and heav'n to earth, will answer:
'at last the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is King!'

William Young Fullerton (1857-1932)

Reading: John 10.22-30

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one."

Address 2 – Lifting Souls

When was your soul last lifted within you? Perhaps there was a moment of delight at watching a young child at play; perhaps an act of love came from an unlikely source; perhaps you were stirred into praise at the sheer beauty of the natural order of the world? Whenever it was, and in whatever circumstances, in that moment heaven was glimpsed: this is how God intends it to be!

In John's gospel, we learn to be wary of "the Jews". For good reason, in the very next verse after those that we have read, John 10.31, we're told that "...the Jews took up stones to stone him." That was because they perceived Jesus to have made a blasphemous statement, equating himself to God. And ultimately, of course, it was the Jews who handed Jesus over to be crucified by the Romans.

But, the picture is not entirely without nuance. It rarely is, and when we think it is that's usually because we're trying to justify our own worldview in the face of challenge by somebody else's! Just before our reading from John, in v.19, we read that the Jews were divided because of Jesus' words. They were not a consistent force for evil, set against everything Jesus said and did. Indeed, it is John who records in his gospel that one of "the Jews" became Jesus' followers in Nicodemus.

So it is that in our portion from John today, we do not read the Jews' conversation with Jesus as being entirely hostile. They are wavering in their judgement of him, and are not of a single mind. And it is a big question that they are deciding upon, "Is this man the Messiah?" Verse 24: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Now, I'm no scholar of New Testament Greek, but I have in my possession an old "Youngs Analytical Concordance to the Bible", a family treasure, passed down through a number of generations. In it is listed each word in English (as written in the old "Authorised" King James version), with separate entries for the same English word where they are translated from different words in Greek. Where our modern version of the Bible uses the word "suspense" ("How long will you keep us in suspense?"), the Authorised Version uses "doubt". But the Greek word thus translated in this verse appears only here in all of Scripture, and the literal English translation of the Greek is "lift up the soul". So the Jews in their question to Jesus are actually asking him for how long is he going to go on "lifting their souls", raising their hopes, giving them such an inner yearning for the things of God, without also giving them hard proof of him being God's anointed One! It seems as if they are saying, "When you talk like this, Jesus, about being the Good Shepherd, and we see the signs you make in healing the blind, our hearts skip a beat, our souls are lifted, and praise wells up inside us. We see God at work in you and hear God's word in your words! But then we

catch ourselves, because we are leaders, and we have responsibility, and we cannot be carried away because that wouldn't be right... so please, just tell us whether we can rely on you”

Faith, of course, is not like that. Faith is to believe in what is unseen. Any of us can believe in the love of a parent or child or friend who is here with us demonstrating that love by putting themselves out for us, but faith is needed to believe the same of Jesus. He is here with us, but we cannot prove it to a sceptic until their heart is changed and they are able to listen to their yearning, hungry souls. Jesus tells the Jews that he has told them and given them all the evidence that they need, but still, they do not believe. They cannot let go of the false certainties upon which they have built their lives and their status.

It is no easier for us today than for the Jews of Jesus' time. God continues to speak into and act in the world and our lives, and our souls are lifted within us. But it is only when we listen to that word and our soul's delight, and make the step of faith into an unknown, do we dare to believe it, in that presence, that God can prove our salvation deep within us. “²My sheep hear my voice” says Jesus. “I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

Do we hear the voice of Jesus? It speaks into our lives, touches parts of us deep within us. Sometimes, in the words and actions of another person. Sometimes, as we sit and reflect upon the Bible. Sometimes, as we spend time noticing God's creation in our gardens, by our rivers, in the countryside. And even sometimes as we do something we know to be good and helpful for someone else without thought of being godly, and Jesus speaks within us, “That was right, that was of me”.

And when our belief in and love for Jesus is real and strong, then we believe in the Lamb who dies, who is enthroned, and before whom all the nations will worship as one. For he will then lead our lives to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away our tears. It is a vision of what is yet to be fulfilled, but it is a hope for today borne of the reality of eternal life in us through faith.

May your souls be lifted with you as you meet Jesus today. Amen.

Hymn StF 548; HP 668: Blessèd assurance, Jesus is mine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3TGrRKf4H8>

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| 1 Blessèd assurance, Jesus is mine:
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God;
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood:

<i>This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.</i> | 2 Perfect submission, perfect delight,
visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending bring from above
echoes of mercy, whispers of love:

3 Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Saviour am happy and blest –
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with his goodness, lost in his love: |
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Frances Jane van Alstyne (1820-1915)

Prayers of Intercession

Sisters and brothers in Christ, God invites us to bring our doubts and fears, our joys and concerns, our petitions and praise, and offer them for the earth and all its creatures.

We pray for peace in Europe, particularly remembering the people of Ukraine and Russia;

We pray for climate justice throughout the world, asking that our leaders may unite in efforts to turn around climate change and share the resources that you give to us all;

We pray for those who are in hospital, in care, on in a place which is strange to them...

We pray for those in whose family, marriage, or close relationship, there is stress or a break-up...

We pray for those who are waiting for a birth, or a death, or news which will affect their lives...

We pray for those who need to forget the God they do not believe in and meet the God who believes in them...

Receive these prayers, O God, and transform us through them, that we may have eyes to see and hearts to understand not only what you do on our behalf, but what you call us to do so that your realm will come to fruition in glory. Amen.

Hymn StF 498; HP 726: God of all power, and truth, and grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lp5E8QA-LI>

- 1 God of all power, and truth, and grace,
which shall from age to age endure,
whose word, when heaven and earth
shall pass,
remains and stands for ever sure;
- 2 That I thy mercy may proclaim,
that all the world thy truth may see,
hallow thy great and glorious name,
and perfect holiness in me.
- 3 Thy sanctifying Spirit pour
to quench my thirst and make me clean;
now, Father, let the gracious shower
descend, and make me pure from sin.
- 4 Give me a new, a perfect heart,
from doubt, and fear, and sorrow free;
the mind which was in Christ impart,
and let my spirit cleave to thee.
- 5 O that I now, from sin released,
thy word may to the utmost prove,
enter into the promised rest,
the Canaan of thy perfect love!
- 6 Now let me gain perfection's height,
now let me into nothing fall,
be less than nothing in thy sight,
and feel that Christ is all in all.

Charles Wesley (1707-88)

Blessing

Trusting in what is unseen,
believing the best is to come,
in hope the universe waits:
God's purpose shall be revealed.

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May you know the enduring friendship of the Christ who died for you, the close companionship of the Spirit who dwells with you, and the eternal love of God who holds you close, today and every day. Amen.