

25th April 2021

Welcome to worship at home for the prepared by
Joan Bailey Local preacher in the Ripon and
Lower Dales Methodist Circuit.

Collect for the day

Good Shepherd of the sheep,
by whom the lost are sought
and guided into the fold:
feed us and we shall be satisfied;
heal us and we shall be made whole;
and lead us, that we may be with you;
for you are alive and reign,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and for ever. Amen

StF 36 There's a quiet understanding

*Let us reflect on these words and make them our
prayer as we approach God in worship today.*

There's a quiet understanding
when we're gathered in the Spirit,
it's a promise that he gives us,
when we gather in his name.

There's a love we feel in Jesus,
there's a manna that he feeds us,
it's a promise that he gives us,
when we gather in his name.

And we know when we're together,
sharing love and understanding,
that our brothers and our sisters
feel the oneness that he brings.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Jesus,
for the way you love and feed us,
for the many ways you lead us;
thank you, thank you, Lord;
thank you, thank you, Lord.

Tedd Smith (b. 1927)

As a townie born and bred I always feel
somewhat challenged to preach about the Good
Shepherd in rural North Yorkshire. Don't get me
wrong I love cuddly little lambs as much as
anyone and twice, last Spring and this on the
permitted daily walk, I have enjoyed watching
them gambolling in the fields nearby and growing
..... and then disappearing..... perhaps to end
up neatly plastic wrapped on our supermarket
shelves! Sheep are very valuable giving wool,
milk and meat so the role of those who care for
them is also very valuable.

Twice during this pandemic I have watched Adam
on Countryfile in his lambing sheds day and night
helping ewes give birth and I have recognised the
dedication and work that goes into being a
shepherd.

Sheep, I understand from the books of Henry
Brewiss, can be very foolish animals born with a
tendency to get themselves into expensive or
fatal trouble. I am reminded of the words 'all we
like sheep have gone astray'. Is that why we need
to be shepherded?

I have seen how much the sheep depend on the
Shepherd and how important is the shepherd's
role in keeping sheep alive and safe. It's no
surprise therefore that the image of good
shepherds and shepherding features so much in
both Old and New Testaments with God as
shepherd and his people as sheep.

The Bible also uses the image of shepherding to
describe the role of political leaders.

A few weeks ago my ears pricked up when I
heard Matt Hancock refer to the present
government's responsibility to *shepherd* the
people through this pandemic. I was surprised to
hear, nowadays, a Biblical image used in this
context. I don't know why he used it too, had
been watching Adam lambing. It continues to be

an apt metaphor, though, as we look for leadership through the pandemic from those armed, not with crooks and slings, but with advice from scientists and the money and power to act to bring us through our present predicament. We pray that our leaders are indeed good shepherds.

Our first prayer is based on **Psalm 23**. The words of the psalm from the New International version are here but between each section, in italics are our prayers.

Let us pray

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

*Our Lord and Shepherd, we come to you today
with grateful hearts,
as we remember all our experiences of your care.
When we were in danger you showed us the way
to safety,
when we were lost you found us,
and in times of despair you healed us and gave
us a fresh start.
We thank and praise you.*

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

*Life is often difficult.
We know pain in our own lives,
we see others suffer and often don't know how to
help.*

*Forgive us, Lord,
when we make our own suffering worse,
through our actions or through our neglect of you,
Forgive us when we cause others pain,
through thoughtlessness or our deliberate acts
or simply because we do not have the courage to
reach out and help.*

*We bring to mind, confessing to you,
all those deeds done or not done which cause us
shame.....
Lord we ask for your forgiveness
knowing that you forgive all who truly repent.*

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

Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

*Loving Lord and shepherd,
we will follow you into an uncertain future,
knowing that we are in your care.
Amen*

Lord's prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive them 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. Amen

We now have two readings, the first from John's gospel using Jesus' words about his own role as the Good Shepherd and the second from 1 John talking to members of the early church about love and loving.

Following the events of Easter and Pentecost we and the disciples move on from simply being sheep in Jesus' flock to carrying on his role as a shepherd to all and accepting the responsibilities of that role. In doing so we care for those already in our flock, our church or immediate friends who share our beliefs but also, like Jesus, we invite and care for those not already in our flock.

It has been difficult to do this with our buildings closed and all of us socially distanced and not allowed to offer hospitality. We have been confined to using social media, telephone calls and chats behind masks on the High Street. And yet, praise God, amazing things have happened and new things are being tried too.

If this pandemic has taught us anything it is that we are herd animals and the sheep of the B&D fold can hardly wait to get back together and yet, if we are realistic, we know that even when we can there will perhaps be times when we don't agree, when we annoy each other. Those who taught in the early church were dealing with the same problems. It's not that we followers of Christ don't love each other it's just that we don't always agree. In our reading from 1 John we are gently and firmly pointed back to Jesus and reminded to take him as our example.

John 10:11-18 New Living Translation

Jesus said "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. ¹² A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so

the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, ¹⁵ just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.

¹⁷ "The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. ¹⁸ No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded."

1 John 3:16-24 New International Version

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

¹⁹ This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰ If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴ The one who keeps God's commands lives in

him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Recently I re-read a book by Adrian Plass, titled *The Shadow Doctor*. Like many of the modern saintly helpers each of us have met on our journeys, Adrian Plass has the ability to come at our spiritual dilemmas with compassion and humour helping us to look again at our motives and actions, not to stop us in our tracks but to urge us forward, looking at life's challenges from a Jesus perspective.

The hero of this book is such a person, he is called Doc for short. He is a mysterious person who takes Jack under his wing as a trainee Christian counsellor, or perhaps we should say shepherd, and leads him to look at situations from a new perspective as he meets different people with different problems and Jack watches, at first with horror and then with dawning understanding of Doc's rather unconventional approach. We are reminded of the disciples puzzlement in response to some of Jesus actions.

As we first met Jack he was in a mess. He had worked so hard within his church to be a good leader, to support people in difficulty through prayer and biblical quotations that he had burnt out. He worked tirelessly to convert everyone he met whether they were ready or not. What distressed him most was that those he'd helped kept coming back as their same problems recurred. Doc showed him a different way of shepherding. The book is full of humour, challenge and a gentle wisdom.

Towards the end we are given an insight into Jesus' suffering on the cross and the weight of the pain of the sin and isolation from God that he felt and then we also realise the personal cost to

Doc of following Jesus and travelling alongside the pain he witnesses. Being a Good Shepherd demands sacrifice, even death. We get an insight into why Doc continues when giving up seems so much easier. The answer is in the word love.

The love of God in Jesus and the love for those 'sheep' he is called to shepherd.

..... and that brings us back to Jesus' words.

The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded."

For Jesus, and for Doc, love knew no other way. Although there seemed to be choices, in the end the conviction that what they were doing was God's will and the closeness of their prayerful walk meant that both Jesus and the fictional Doc could take no other way.

In the story Jack was suffering from a bad case of hardening of the 'oughteries', following the rules he had been taught. He is slowly brought to realise that, while what he is doing is what he should be doing, he was doing it by carefully worked out rules which left him blind and deaf to what those he was trying to help were really saying and thus he blocked the free passage of the love of God through him.

We can all be tripped up that way can't we? We are caring, welcoming, accepting. We share and give, of course we do, but, when, sometimes, we find it getting difficult then maybe we need to let go of the 'oughts' and go back to the maker's instructions.

Jesus chose time and again a course that would lead him to the cross. He chose to say what he did, to act as he did, even when it broke the rules, because he really cared about the truth he

preached, about the people he met. He loved because he was God showing God's love in a way that humanity could recognise and understand. Jesus chose to do what he did because of the divine love that was within him. In Gethsemane Jesus realised that there simply was no other way and that what he had been sent to earth to do could, indeed, lead to the cross. For us perhaps we find that truth in the Easter hymn when we sing 'Life is naught without thee, aid us in the strife'.

There is no other choice but to follow Jesus because any other life would be meaningless. It isn't easy and that's why it is good that sometimes we are allowed not only to be shepherds but sheep again, to be cared for and led.

Love is not just about obeying religious instructions or rules, although they can be a guide. Love is not simply doing what we ought to do. Love must come from within, an act of freewill on our part that recognises the love of God shown in Jesus.

The love of God in Jesus was so powerful that it brought him through death back to life and made the Kingdom of God visible and accessible on earth.

Through that love the Good Shepherd knew his sheep and his sheep recognised him. Through that love we can be empowered to be Good Shepherds in his name.

StF 615 Let love be real

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,
without the need to manage and to own;
a haven free from posing and pretending,
where every weakness may be safely known.
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,
give me your love wherever we may go.

As God loves us, so let us love each other:
with no demands, just open hands and space to
grow.

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;
that helps us face the risk of truly living,
and makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength when all my words are
weakness;
give me your love in spite of all you know.

Let love be real, with no manipulation,
no secret wish to harness or control;
let us accept each other's incompleteness,
and share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope through dreams and
disappointments;
give me your trust when all my failings show.

Michael Forster (b. 1946)

Let us pray.

Loving God, Great Shepherd we come to you in
prayer. We have heard your promises, we know
you and know that you guide and strengthen us
and yet today, especially, we are aware of so
many who need to be protected and led by you.
And so we come to you in prayer to bring those
concerns most on our hearts today.
Loving shepherd **Lead your sheep.**

We pray for those escaping terrifying situations
leaving all behind because life has become so
hard that they are desperate to escape, to take
risks made greater in these times of pandemic.
People so vulnerable that they are exploited by
those who, like wolves around a sheepfold, are
only concerned for themselves and care nothing
for those they promise to help.

Loving shepherd **Lead your sheep.**

We pray for our nation as we move towards new freedoms but aware of how fragile those freedoms may be and how easily they may be lost. Guide those in positions of responsibility in our country encouraging in them wisdom and compassion.

Loving shepherd **Lead your sheep.**

We remember and pray for those in countries less fortunate than our own where leaders may act foolishly and selfishly or where there are not the resources to protect, care for or vaccinate their people. Let us never forget that no one is safe until we are all safe.

Loving shepherd **Lead your sheep.**

We pray for those we know for whom we feel a special burden of concern. In quietness we name each before you now. Empower us to be brave and loving shepherds to your sheep.

.....

Loving shepherd **Lead your sheep.**

We bring these prayers to you for already know about each situation and each person, we know that you are already at work but still we come in prayer to ask you guide us and show us what we should do. **Amen**

StF 664 Lord you call us to your service

Lord, you call us to your service,
each in our own way.
Some to caring, loving, healing;
some to preach, or pray;
some to work with quiet learning,
truth discerning,
day by day.

Life for us is always changing
in the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
to the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us,
as you need us,
anywhere.

Seeing life from your perspective
makes your challenge plain,
as your heart is grieving over
those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion,
you may fashion
hope again.

Lord, we set our human limits
on the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit,
pour your power through,
that we may be free in living
and in giving
all for you.
Marjorie Dobson (b. 1940)

Benediction

And now socially distanced but one in Christ let us bless each other with the words –
And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit remain with us all now and always. Amen