

Call to Worship

Kia noho a Ihowa ki a koutou. May God be with you:

Ma Ihowa koe e manaaki. May God bless you.

The Lord is our Shepherd who calls us by name

We rejoice in the one who cares for us

Whether we dwell in green pastures or deepest darkness

The great Shepherd of our souls is with us.

God's goodness and mercy follow us all our days

We come to worship in God's house.

We sing (Tune: Lewis Folk Melody – CH4 510)

Jesus calls us here to meet him
as, through word and song and prayer,
we affirm God's promised presence
where God's people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps the promise;
praise the Son who calls us friends;
praise the Spirit who, among us,
to our hopes and fears attends.

Jesus calls us to confess him
Word of life and Lord of all,
sharer of our flesh and frailty,
saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
tell his tales that all may hear;
tell the world that Christ in glory
came to earth to meet us here.

Jesus calls us to each other -
found in him are no divides.
Creed and colour, class and gender:
such are barriers he derides.
Join the hand of friend and stranger;
join the hands of age and youth;
join the faithful and the doubter
in their common search for truth.

We pray

Loving and gracious God, we come to worship you this morning because we have heard your voice and responded to your call in our lives.

We come to worship together, as the sheep of your pasture. Because we belong to you, we belong with one another.

We come to rejoice in your presence with us, whether this past week has been green pastures by still waters, or more like the valley of darkest shadow.

We come to praise you because you came in Jesus, the great shepherd of your sheep. In him we see the depth of your love and care and concern for us and for all your sheep, all your creation.

Good Shepherd, you lead us in the paths of righteousness, but too often we have strayed from your way in anger, in greed, in apathy, in pride. We have hurt others and we have hurt you.

Forgive us, God, for not following you. Forgive us when we have not listened for your voice and instead have acted according to our own inclinations.

Heal the hurts we have inflicted on others, and the hurts we have absorbed. Guide us back to your path, loving you and loving our neighbours. Help us to hold out our hands to others in hope and healing, forgiveness and love

In the name of Christ our Shepherd we pray. Amen.

We share the peace of Christ

Kia tau tonu te rangimarie o te Karaiti kia koutou: the peace of Christ be with you:

And also with you.

LISTENING FOR GOD'S WORD

Today rather than reading the psalm responsively, we will sing it. The psalm today is Psalm 23 and the words we use are from the Scottish Psalter. The 23rd Psalm sung to *Crimond* is so often used at funerals that it becomes associated with death and grief and loss. Today we will sing it to another psalm tune, *Kilmarnock*, and I hope this different music will give you space to attend to the words as you sing, and to recognize how much this is a psalm about living – about our need for food and drink, for guidance and protection – and the way that this psalm celebrates our shepherding God, who cares for us and provides for us and brings us to dwell in God's presence throughout our lives

We sing (Tune: *Kilmarnock*)

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie
in pastures green: he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again;
and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness,
even for his own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale,
yet will I fear none ill:
for thou art with me; and thy rod
and staff me comfort still.

My table thou hast furnishèd
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint,
and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me:
and in God's house for evermore
my dwelling-place shall be.

The first reading today from the book of Acts is a summary of the first days of the church. It describes key elements in the way that the growing number of believers in Jesus (3000 had just been added to their number on the day of Pentecost) were living and being formed as the church.

The gospel reading is from John 10 – which comes immediately after John 9 and is really a continuation of that story. Jesus has healed a man born blind on the Sabbath, and the man and his parents get into big trouble with the religious authorities. In the end the man is thrown out of the synagogue, because he will

not deny the reality of his healing or that Jesus had done it. And the chapter closes with the Pharisees asking “Surely we are not blind, are we?” and Jesus saying ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.’ And then he goes on speaking....

First reading: Acts 2:42-47

Gospel reading: John 10:1-10

Sermon

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” Jesus said.

It feels like today it’s all about sheep! And I proceed with caution here, because I think some of you know sheep much better than I do: I speak of what I have been told, but you know firsthand. So feel free to correct me after the service as necessary.

Sheep in first century Palestine needed a lot of looking after. There were thieves and bandits about – sheep rustlers – who were keen to steal and kill and destroy the sheep. And there were marauding animals that would attack sheep. So sheep needed protection, they needed security, they needed care, they needed to be guided in good paths, they needed help to find food and water in a dry land. They needed a shepherd and they needed a sheepfold.

Sheepfolds in a village would be communal, big enough that a number of flocks could come together inside the sheepfold at night for shelter and protection. Working out whose sheep was whose wasn’t done with eartags or a mark on their backs – it was all done by voice: sheep knew the voice of their shepherd when he called, and they would follow his voice. That’s how close the relationship was between sheep and shepherd, a relationship of care and trust. A shepherd knew his sheep, individually, just as the sheep knew their shepherd.

Sheepfolds out on the hillsides provided much-needed protection and shelter particularly at night – were the shepherds on the hills above Bethlehem sitting around a sheepfold when the angels appeared to them with glad tidings of great joy? Those sheepfolds were smaller and quite rough, a circle of stones just big enough for one small flock, with a gap as an entrance way. The shepherd would sleep across the entrance, making his body the gate to the sheepfold to keep the sheep safely in during the night and to keep any intruders out. In the morning he would lead his sheep out to find pasture to graze on and still water to drink.

Sheep needed protection, and they relied on a shepherd who looked after them and provided for them so that they had all they needed. There were thieves and bandits about, those who did not use the entrance but came in another way. But they had no relationship with the sheep, their voices were not recognised, and they did not care or protect the sheep.

Jesus said “I am the gate for the sheep.” Which can sound like “I am the one who decides who gets to be in and who is out.” But Jesus is clear that the gate provides two-way access – it is the way in to the safety and security of the sheepfold, but the sheep can’t stay there all the time. To find pasture and water, they need to go out through the gate into the world beyond. But not on their own. They go out led by the shepherd, listening for his voice and following where he leads.

And later in this chapter Jesus will tell his disciples “I have other sheep who are not of this fold – I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice.” Jesus is the gate into a place of welcome and inclusion.

Earlier I said that John chapter 10 belongs with chapter 9, which you may have heard read back in the middle of March – it’s all one story. John 9 tells of Jesus healing a man born blind, and the controversy that caused with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were sure that they knew the way God wanted God’s people to live, in obedience to the Law as they interpreted it. And they judged Jesus to be far too lax in his

observance of the law - because he did not obey the Law as they believed it should be obeyed, because he had healed this man on the Sabbath, they said he was a sinner, that he could not be doing God's will. The Pharisees saw themselves as the shepherds of Israel, those who cared for, protected, and nourished the people. But rather than rejoicing in the man's healing, they had driven the man out of the synagogue, excluding him from their community, and they refused to believe that Jesus and his healing work came from God. They could not see God at work in what Jesus was doing – and then they asked Jesus "Surely you aren't saying that we are blind?" They were more concerned about guarding their power and authority than about the well-being of the people. They were not the gates into the sheepfold of God that they probably intended to be.

But Jesus said "I am the gate". He opened the way to usher his flock into safety, and he led the way out into places of nourishment, of living abundantly - living in the care of the shepherd. Jesus is the gate for all who recognise Jesus' voice calling them, all who trust him and trust where he leads them.

When Jesus is the gate, we are not – we don't have to make up rules about who should be in and who should be out, but rather we can learn to receive with love all who are in the sheepfold with us, all who with us follow Jesus out into the world beyond, trusting that he will guide us to green pastures and still water, that he will lead us in the right paths, that he will always be with us.

But there is more to this life, isn't there, than an idyllic pastoral scene. Thieves and bandits are real. Walking through the darkest valley is real. The enemies in whose presence we live are real. When Jesus talked about having life abundantly, he was not offering an easy life or a happy life or a stress-free life. There are those things in our world that steal and kill and destroy, that turn our world upside down, taking away things and people who were precious to us, stripping us of what we valued.

What does living abundantly look like in the aftermath of a cyclone

or watching and waiting at the bedside of a loved one

or worrying about how far the food budget is going to have to stretch this week (and what happens when the winter power bills shoot up?)

or hoping and praying that a loved teenager who has found some very dodgy friends will have the strength of character and sense of self-worth to stick by the values and ways they were brought up with?

"Even when I walk in the valley of deep darkness, you are with me"

The phrase at the heart of Psalm 23 is the answer that God's people have always held on to and witnessed to – that in all the circumstances of life, at the worst of times as well as the best of times, we are not alone: God is with us. And even when we are not aware of it in the moment, God is still with us.

One of the things about sheep is that they stick together. When we are part of the flock of God, that is what we are called to do too: to be like sheep, to be together. We learn together to hear and recognise the voice of the shepherd. We are helped in that when we come together in fellowship, sharing our lives in practical ways and talking together about the ways we can follow the shepherd. That often happens over food, sitting around a table, and like on the Emmaus road, it can become a sacramental meal where Jesus is present with us, taking, blessing, breaking and giving. And we come together for prayer and worship.

The description in Acts of the first days of the early church seems such an ideal and idealised picture. Especially when it talks about people sharing all that they had to support those in need. And yet, I have heard stories of the ways in which churches here have reached out to their communities in many different ways this past couple of months, some of them amazingly imaginative, some of them the continuation of everyday community care that was happening anyway, but all of them sharing what they had with their neighbours in need. It's not only the churches doing that, of course. But when I see that sort of caring and sharing, it is always feels to me like a glimpse of the abundant life that is God's intention for God's people, and for all people.

In recent years there's been a new catchphrase around to describe what sounds to me like abundant life – it's "human flourishing". There's even a programme at Harvard University involving researchers across a

wide range of disciplines - public health, medicine, philosophy, psychology, theology, social sciences. Their working definition of flourishing is "a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good". They focus in five areas: happiness and satisfaction in life, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose in life, character and virtue, and close social relationships. They want to develop programmes to encourage and enhance human flourishing.

And they have some results so far, based on their research, and suggestions for activities that can enhance human flourishing.

Like practising gratitude – regularly (once a week) identifying three things for which you are grateful, and writing that down or talking about it with someone else.

Like deliberately recognising and savouring the good in our lives.

Like performing acts of kindness – and it is more effective to pick one day a week and plan five acts of kindness to do that day!

Like engaging with a community – being part of a church community is encouraged!

Like learning to forgive.

I thought many of the suggestions sounded rather familiar, like the way that Christians have sought to live as they follow in the way of Jesus.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Jesus has come to share his life with us, to make a way for us to find safety within his care and to lead us out into places of nourishment. Jesus calls us together into his flock, to learn to know his voice and to follow where he leads. In times of plenty and in times of deepest darkness, Jesus will be with us.

Whatever the circumstances of your life now and in the future, I pray that you will each know – and that together you will know – that we belong to God: we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Amen

We sing (Tune: Kelvingrove – CH4 533)

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go

where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

We dedicate our offering

We pray for others and ourselves

Loving God, grant us something of the compassion of Christ in our hearts as we pray for others and for ourselves.

We pray for the taming of the wolves of war and terrorism; we pray for the people of Ukraine, for the people of Sudan, for the people of Afghanistan, for all whose lives are torn apart by conflict, and for those who have become refugees.

Good Shepherd, hear us.

We pray for the end of injustice, neglect, discrimination, around the world and in our own land, and for the end of the apathy of those who look on, yet do nothing. May all your children know the abundance of your life, and may we share what you have blessed us with, so that it may be a blessing to others.

Good Shepherd, hear us.

We pray for people who have been misled and misused by false shepherds, or exploited spiritually and materially by scams and fraud, or by slick religious and political salesmen.

Good Shepherd, hear us.

We pray for the removal of the hurts, resentments and misunderstandings that cause the breakdown of relationships; for families, neighbourhoods and faith communities where those who were once close are now divided; for those who have felt excluded and no longer welcome; for the rescue of those who once had faith in God but have fallen into empty cynicism.

Good Shepherd, hear us.

We pray for the blessing of all who are good shepherds to their fellows; who foster hope and build community through the work of medicine, counselling, social planning, legal aid, wise laws, and sincere good-neighbourliness.

Good Shepherd, hear us.

We pray for those who are ill in body, mind or spirit, asking that you would bring them the healing they need. And we ask your special care for the dying and those who grieve; may they know in the depth of their being the comfort of the Shepherd whose love is stronger than death, who remains with them in the valley of the shadow of death...

Good Shepherd, hear us.

Most loving God, enable us as your flock to embody the spirit of these prayers, as we join with all your people in the prayer Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those 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, now and forever, Amen

Closing responses

Coming and going

God watches over us

Resting and traveling

God watches over us

Through good and through evil

God watches over us

All the days of our lives

God safeguards us with love

We sing

(Tune: Slane)

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my Wisdom, thou my true Word;
I ever with thee, thou with me, Lord;
thou my great Father: thine own I would be;
thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my dignity, thou my delight,
thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tower:
raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always;
thou, and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of Heaven, after victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Benediction

Sung blessing

Now as we go, kind Spirit keep us,
in all we see, Christ be our focus,
in all we do, his story shape us,
that we may grow to God's good purpose.

Now as we go, sister and brother,
give us good care one of the other,
more hope to share, more strength to gather,
more life to know in faith together.