

Worship @ Home

10.45am Sunday May 3rd 2020

Minister: Revd Val Reid

Music: Catriona Bevan

Reader: David Rossall

Technology: John Hamblin



Call to worship

Jesus says: *I am the gate.*

Come, and be loved.

Come, and receive peace.

Come, and find life.

Opening prayers

For our opening prayers today, I invite you to spend a little time with today's psalm, psalm 23.

It's so very familiar, that I think it's easy to miss the profound truths the psalmist has shared.

It's easy to forget that they apply to us.

To me.

Today.

As I read the psalm, in a translation by Jim Cotter, I'll pause and invite you to meditate on the psalmist's words and images.

During each pause, Catriona will play 'The Lord's my shepherd' (H&P 70 Crimond)

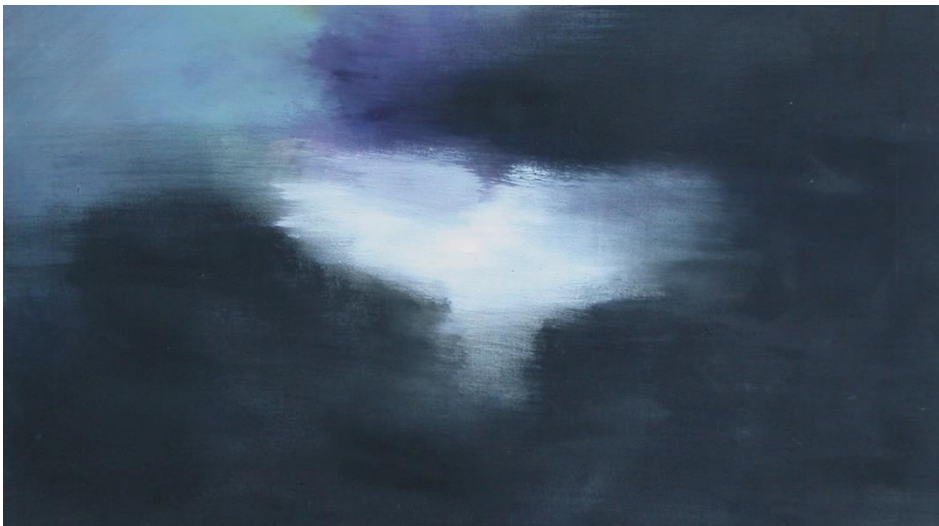


Image – John Brokenshire 'Pentecost'

Dear God, you sustain me and feed me;

Like a shepherd you guide me.

You lead me to an oasis of green,

To lie down by restful waters.

Quenching my thirst, you restore my life:
Renewed and refreshed, I follow you,
A journey on the narrowest of paths.
You keep me true to your name.

Take a moment of quiet.
When did you last find yourself in an oasis of green?
When did you last feel yourself renewed and refreshed?
Irenaeus said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive.
When did you last feel fully alive?

Close your eyes.
Revisit that place in your imagination.
Where are you?
What can you see?
What can you hear?
What can you smell?
What can you feel?
Who is with you?
Or are you alone?

...
Sit still in that place in your imagination, while we listen to music, and enjoy it again.
In your heart, tell God what you valued about that time.
Promise yourself that you will go there again.
Remind yourself that you owe it to God to be a human being fully alive.

Crimond

Even when cliffs loom out of the mist,
My step is steady because of my trust.
Even when I go through the deepest valley,
With the shadow of darkness and death,
I will fear no evil or harm.
For you are with me to give me strength,
Your crook, your staff, at my side.

We know, of course, that our lives are not all still waters and green pastures.
Certainly at the moment.
A human being fully alive will find him or herself in some dark places.
Sheep don't ask questions of the shepherd.
But we ask questions of God.
We will not just question...
We will be angry. Accusing.
Despairing.

Because it sometimes feels as though God is absent.
Why do I struggle to feel the presence of God when life gets tough?
Where is that crook, that staff when I need it?

Psalm 23 faces dark times with honesty.

What will get us through?

What will make us able to bear it?

In the original Hebrew, in the first section of the psalm the psalmist refers to God in the third person.

The Lord is my shepherd.

He makes me lie down in green pastures...

In this section, as the psalmist reflects on walking through the darkest valley, it becomes personal.

You are with me.

Your rod and staff, they comfort me.

In Jim Cotter's unfolding of the psalm, he speaks the whole psalm to God.

God is 'you' all the way through.

Perhaps the way to walk through the valley of the shadow of death is to keep talking to God.

Keep addressing God as you.

Even if we are questioning, angry, accusing, despairing.

Don't stop talking.

Don't stop listening to what God might have to say in reply.

...

Take a moment of quiet.

Close your eyes.

Allow yourself to call to mind a time of darkness in your life.

It might be this time of lockdown.

It might be some other time.

If you could ask God one question about this, what would you say?

...

Listen for God's answer...

Crimond

Even in the midst of my troubles,
With the murmurs of those who disturb me,
I know I can feast in your presence.

You spread a banquet before me,
You anoint my head with oil,
You stoop to wash my feet,
You fill my cup to the brim.

Your loving kindness and mercy
Will meet me every day of my life.
By your Spirit you dwell within me,
And in the whole world around me,
And I shall abide in your house,
Content in your presence for ever.

Psalm 23 ends with a slightly disturbing image.

A banquet in the presence of my enemies.

'With the murmurs of those who disturb me' in Jim Cotter's version.

Feasts with friends are just a distant memory these days.

But they will happen again!

Though why would you want your most disturbing enemies present at a feast which is about celebrating life and love and the presence of God?

There's a kind of smugness about this that makes me uncomfortable.

Sometimes the psalmist puts us in touch with parts of ourselves that we don't like very much.

But I think this part of the psalm is saying something quite profound.

God's hospitality is not just for me.

God's pools of refreshment are not just for me.

God's accompaniment through the darkest valley is not just for me.

God is for everyone.

*By your spirit you dwell within me,
And in the whole world around me,
And I shall abide in your house,
Content in your presence for ever.*

This is Jim Cotter's conclusion to the psalm.

We shall be content in God's presence not because our enemies are excluded, and look on enviously.

But because they are no longer enemies.

Because we can see God in them.

And they can see God in us.

Because there will be no more us and them.

Take a moment of quiet.

Imagine the feast which God has prepared.

Close your eyes.

What food would be on the table?

Smell it.

Taste it.

Enjoy it.

Who would you invite to share the feast?

Look around the table.

Call to mind the people who mean most to you.

Who have loved you and whom you love.

People in whom you find it easy to see God.

Look into their faces.

Smile at them.

Thank them for their companionship.

Thank God for giving you these people.

Invite them to sit down and share the feast.

...

Who would you prefer not to be at the feast?

Whose presence do you find disturbing?

Call to mind one particular person.

Look into their face.

Smile at them.

...

Thank God for giving you difficult people.

People who make you work hard to find that of God in them.

People who show us hidden aspects of God that we might otherwise overlook.

Invite your difficult person to sit down and share the feast.

Crimond

God our companion

You refresh us and disturb us

You feed us and you walk beside us.

You ask us to keep talking

And to keep listening.

You want us to trust you

In green pastures

And darkest valleys.

Open our eyes to see you

Familiar and surprising

Expected and startling

But always there.

Your goodness and mercy follow us

All the days of our lives.

We cannot escape the pursuing shadow of your love.

Thanks be to you,

God our shepherd.

Amen.

John 10: 1-10

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Reflection

Revd Val Reid

I have a very clear memory from my Sunday School days.

On the wall were some of those pictures.

Jesus – improbably blonde and with film star good looks – chatting to a group of slightly too well-behaved children.

Jesus fixing you with his eyes ('what have you been up to?')

Jesus with a sheep over his shoulders.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is very familiar to us.

And I imagine that many of us who grew up in the 60s still have a mental picture of the good shepherd from those Sunday School pictures.

Psalm 23 uses that imagery to reassure us – that we are in good hands.

That we will be accompanied.

That there is nowhere we can go where God is not.

And all of that is true.

But in today's reading, Jesus uses a slightly odder, more disturbing image.

I am the gate.

We are still in the world of sheep and shepherds.

We are still listening out for the familiar voice of the one who calls.

The one we can trust.

But – *I am the gate.*

What's that about?

We've now been in lockdown for nearly six weeks.

Some days it feels almost normal.

Some days it feels intolerable.

Some days we are full of energy and ideas and plans to be a good neighbour.

Some days the sense of being trapped completely paralyses us.

Some days we are stuck in the never-ending present of getting through this day, this hour.

Some days we are beginning to look ahead to coming out of lockdown.

What will the world be like?

What have we learned through this pandemic?

What might we do differently because of this experience?

One thing that has become clearer in recent days is that we are not really all in this together.

Some of us have a spacious house and a nice garden.

Some of us are cooped up in a tiny flat with no outside space.

Some of us are on the edge of the lovely Hertfordshire countryside.
Some of us are in the middle of a city where simply to step onto the pavement means risking infection.

Some of us are enjoying more time with our families.
Some of us find ourselves locked in with our abusers.
Some of us are really lonely.

Some of us find working from home really liberating.
Some of us have lost our jobs and are wrestling with the queues for the Universal Credit helpline.
Some of us are working in hospitals and care homes and supermarkets and public transport, keeping on with the essential tasks of our community, despite poverty wages and lack of PPE.

Office for National Statistics figures this week show that twice as many people are dying of coronavirus in poorer areas of the UK than in the wealthier areas.

Singapore has been held up as a model of how to deal with the pandemic.
Its government moved fast, using technology and good communication to stop the virus in its tracks.
The first wave peaked at just 200 cases.
Then this week thousands of new infections were discovered.
All amongst the migrant workers of Singapore, living in huge dormitories on the outskirts of the city.
Restrictions and rules that protected the wealthy citizens ignored the problems of poverty and overcrowding which were out of sight, out of mind.

This pandemic has made visible all the fault lines in our world.
Things which we have found it tempting to ignore – inequality, our damage to the environment, our exploitation of others – are suddenly hugely significant.

Jesus says I am the gate.

Gates face both ways – into the protected sheepfold, and out into the world.
Gates are on the cutting edge of community.
They keep us safe.
And they encourage us out to take risks.
Gates open up communication between the insiders and the outsiders.
Gates create pathways.

It's clear that Jesus is not inviting his chosen sheep into a nice, safe, comfortable gated community, while everyone else is locked out.

He wants us to come in and go out.
He wants us to have life, and to have it abundantly.
All of us.

So what might we do differently as we emerge from lockdown?

I think we have learned something profound about our interconnectedness.
About our need for each other.

Locally – neighbours who pick up shopping and collect prescriptions and chat on the doorsteps as we clap for carers on Thursday evenings.

And globally – co-operation in procuring medical supplies and researching vaccines is always going to win out over selfish protectionism.

We are the body of Christ.

We too are called to be gates.

What might that look like?

How can our church community open up pathways of communication and support and welcome when we at last emerge blinking from our homes?

We're beginning to think and pray about that now.

I hope and trust that Christ the gate will inspire us to a new openness.

A new sense of global belonging.

A new sense of responsibility for all humanity.

I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.

Amen.

Be thou my vision (H&P 378)

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,

Be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;

Be thou my best thought in the day and the night,

Both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,

Be thou ever with me, and I with thee Lord;

Be thou my great father, thy child let me be,

Be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou me breastplate, my sword for the fight;

Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;

Be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower;

O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

High king of Heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,

O grant me its joys after victory is won;

Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,

Still be thou my vision, O ruler of all.

*Irish, c 8TH century
Tr. Mary Byrne
Versified Eleanor Hull*

We turn now to our prayers for ourselves and others

Let us pray.

God our shepherd,
We hold in the light of your presence
Those who are frazzled,
Drained,
Overwhelmed.
Those who need to be led to an oasis of green,
To lie down by restful waters.

...

God our companion,
We hold in the light of your presence
Those who are walking through the deepest valleys,
Those who travel in the shadow of darkness and death.

...

God our host,
We hold in the light of your presence
Those who need to be fed
With food
With company
With friendship.

...

God our hope and our promise,
You came that we might have life,
And have it abundantly.
Bring rest where there is exhaustion,
Light where there is darkness,
Community where there is isolation,
Trust where there is despair.
May your abundant life fill our world,
Our church,
Our selves.
Amen.

I invite you now to say the Lord's prayer out loud.

Use whichever version you are familiar with.

Use whichever language feels like your mother tongue.

Although we are apart, we join together in praying the prayer that Jesus gave us.

Blessing

Go on with the journey of your life,
Whether you are out in the world,
Or confined within doors.
Wherever you travel,
Know that God is with you.
Amen.

O God our help in ages past (H&P 358)

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home:

Beneath the shadow of thy throne,
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guide while troubles last,
And our eternal home!

Isaac Watts

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