

Morning Worship at Christchurch Sunday April 25th at 10.45am

A gathering prayer

As a shepherd gathers the flock, so the love of God has gathered us here today.

The Lord leads us where we need to go,

Making our paths as smooth as they can be.

Whatever life throws at us, we have no reason to fear,

For you Lord, are with us and comfort us.

Whatever struggles we have to endure,

Whatever opposition we face,

Your goodness and mercy go with us,

And we will worship you, our God for ever.

Amen

Good morning, I do welcome you to worship from Christchurch, Hitchin. I am Christine, a local preacher in the North Herts. Circuit and a member at Christchurch. I should like to thank Steve, Toby and Mandy who are leading our music today, Claire who is our reader and Tony who is doing all the important technical stuff behind the scenes.

Let us worship God who is with us throughout our lives whatever we may face.

STF 41

Blessed be your name

in the land that is plentiful,

where your streams of abundance flow,

blessed be your name.

And blessed be your name

when I'm found in a desert place,

though I walk through the wilderness,

blessed be you name.

Every blessing you pour out

I'll turn back to praise.

And when the darkness closes in Lord,

still I will say:

Blessed be the name of the Lord,

blessed be your name.

Blessed be the name of the Lord,

blessed be your glorious name.

Blessed be your name

when the sun's shining down on me,

when the world's 'all as it should be,'

blessed be your name.

And blessed be your name

on the road marked with suffering

Though there's pain in the offering,

blessed be your name.

Every blessing you pour out

I'll turn back to praise.

And when the darkness closes in, Lord,

still I will say:

Blessed be the name of the Lord.....

You give and take away,

you give and take away.

My heart will choose to say,
'Lord, blessed be your name.'

Blessed be the name of the Lord.....

Matt Redman and Beth Redman

Let us pray

Loving God, great in love, wisdom and might, majestic without compare;

We worship you.

You are the Creator - flinging stars into space, bringing the light of life to the darkness of barren waste.

God of compassion, comforter of wounded souls, meeting pain with peace, turning pride and power upside- down and lifting humble hearts high.

You are our Good Shepherd always there, always watchful;

We worship you.

You are the Redeemer – rescuing us from sin and shame, bringing the promise of forgiveness to the despair of guilt.

God of liberation, lifting lives crushed by circumstance, raising hopes dashed by sorrow, filling hearts fearful of worth,

We worship you.

You are the Inspirer - urging us on to find the Way, the Truth and the Life for all our days.

We worship and adore you.

In Christ's name. Amen.

Our reading today comes from John's gospel. It follows immediately after Jesus has healed a man who was born blind. There is a long dialogue following this healing which involves not only the man himself but his parents who are challenged by the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the time. They question

who Jesus – how does he have the power to heal? Then Jesus opens out the conversation to all who were listening. To share with them who he is - the Good Shepherd.

Reading John 10 11-18

‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd ; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.’

Reflection – Enfolded in God’s love to care for others.

For once this week, our news has not been dominated by COVID related stories apart from the extremely tragic situation in India. It has been dominated instead by those in leadership who have used their power, and who they know, rather than helping or considering others. Be it football club owners or past and present prime ministers or even the bosses at the Post Office who must have been aware that things were amiss with the computer programme that was in use. Using their positions for their own gain.

When Jesus speaks about being the Good Shepherd those listening, and especially the religious leaders, would know about the concept of the leader of Israel being likened to a shepherd. They would surely have known what Jesus was trying to tell them. David was upheld as the shepherd king. In Ezekiel 34:15 the Sovereign Lord speaks ‘I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.’ And in Isaiah 40:11 ‘He will tend his flock like a shepherd, he gathers his lambs in his arms.’ So those listening to Jesus , if they knew their Scripture ,would have known

what he was saying to them ; ' I have come to you more than a king and a leader but as a Shepherd, God's Messiah, to give you the fullness of life from God in the security of his love and care.'

Even today, as in the time of Jesus, shepherding can be a hard profession. Then, and in many countries still today, the shepherd is often regarded as an outcast from main society. Across the world in poorer communities, larger flocks may be lead hundreds of miles to find pasture and as they travel the shepherd will share the animal's drinking water at streams and sleep in tents or huts. Even in our country, although shepherds are not so visible, [I remember when we lived near the North Yorkshire Moors, you could drive for miles seeing lots of sheep but never a shepherd in sight!!] these men and women are certainly on hand when the sheep are giving birth or they are ready to splash through endless mud to heave wanderers out of bogs. As we have seen on several recent T.V programmes, it is lonely and sometimes dangerous work. And in the time of Christ, it was certainly a 24 hour occupation. Not many off duty moments! So shepherds would lead their flock, during the daytime hours, to find grass in the middle of terrain where fertile areas were scare. And it was leading rather than rounding up with dogs, the sheep following the distinctive sound of their own shepherd's voice , nibbling the grass as they went , not needing to look up to see the path ahead , such was their trust and confidence in the one who lead. And when, at night the sheep were lead into the fold, which was often a communal pen, they would be guarded by the shepherd himself, a human gate, protecting them from predators. And then, in the morning, even though, at times, there were several different flocks in the fold, the sheep would recognise their own shepherd, their leader's voice, as he called them out, they would follow him.

Jesus, in this section of his teaching, talks about the hired hand and how someone in that position would not have the sense of responsibility nor the love and the care for the flock and may abandon the sheep to the ravages of a wolf. The bad shepherd is the leader who neglects or exploits their sheep. The good shepherd is one who totally committed to the well- being of the sheep. Jesus our Good Shepherd was prepared to lay down his life for us [his sheep]. What an example of utmost, costly leadership.

This is unlike some of the examples of leadership we see and experience today. So often people who are in positions of leadership and power are removed from those who work for them in their company or team, they may have little

concept of those people's everyday lives. Think back to your own experiences, where have you grown and felt valued? Was it in situations where the person in charge made it their business to get to know you, would empathize with your needs and hopes. For me I know this is true. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, not only shows costly leadership, he also know us each individually [at times better than we can know ourselves] He says 'I am the Good Shepherd : I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.' He knows us at our times of greatest strength but also our times of greatest weakness, when we have nothing more to give, when we have to totally rely upon him. [And I guess in this last year, we have all had days, if not periods like that]. And so often it is, in those times, when we feel completely resourceless that we are aware of Jesus, who knows us inside out, and through His Spirit can give us the strength we need. Let us remember that Jesus at the moment of His greatest weakness, as he hung on the cross and died for us all, showed his greatest strength of love.

And Jesus talks too about other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is telling those who are listening that he has come for others who are beyond the boundaries of what they might call respectable. The Samaritan woman, those with leprosy or the blind. Jesus' ministry and mission is not just to Israel either, it goes beyond the borders of their land. Jesus reminds his audience and us too, that the whole world is the focus for God's love, there are no boundaries. So we too need to remember God's love is not just focussed on the Church but reaches out to all. We, who know how it feels to be enfolded in God's love, how can we enfold others in this love too?

We began this reflection by thinking about the actions that have made headlines in this past week. How different our world would be if the focus was more on relationships rather than achievements and monetary gain, on love instead of hate? How can we show others that, as followers of Jesus, the Good Shepherd we value them? Jesus is faithful to us, let us be faithful to others but most of all let us be faithful and true to Him.

Forgive us, Lord,

when we exclude those you have called into your fold:

those on the fringes, those we are uncomfortable with,

those of differing life styles and faiths.

Help us to speak with the voice of the good shepherd,
calling all to a place of safety, to a relationship of trust
and a common identity in your name,
celebrating diversity and bound in your love . Amen

STF 481

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.

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.

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.

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*

Prayers for the people of God's world

In this prayer there is a response:

In the name of Christ who gave his life for us; **may your love be known and shown.**

Good Shepherd we pray for those in need:

Those who are hungry and homeless and particularly praying for those whose lives have been turned upside down by the effects of the pandemic during this past year. We pray today especially for the country of India where there is a shortage of oxygen for those in desperate need.

We pray too for victims of warfare and disaster realising that in recent months, when other news has taken the forefront, these people and places are barely mentioned in the news bulletins and therefore get forgotten in our prayers. And yet these people are still in great need, they may have been displaced or their homes destroyed and caught up in the cross fire.

We pray too for all those who are trying to alleviate need;

Volunteers who have come forward during this past year to help, charity and relief workers, peacemakers, medical and rescue staff.

In the name of Christ who gave his life for us; **may your love be known and shown.**

Good Shepherd, we pray for all those who at this time are struggling with ill health and pain;

Those waiting for postponed hospital treatment, those suffering the effects of COVID or other diseases.

We pray too for the isolated and the lonely, those for whom each day is a struggle,

And especially we pray for the bereaved, those coming to terms with the death of someone close and special to them.

And so we pray too for all those trying to alleviate suffering;

doctors, nurses and carers, counsellors, pastoral workers and concerned friends.

In the name of Christ who gave his life for us; **may your love be known and shown.**

Good Shepherd, we pray for those who are lost: the regretful and bitter, the empty and despairing;

Children and youngsters who are finding it difficult to adjust to being back at school, adults too who are facing changes whether it be going back to a different routine of working or facing the prospect of being without work.

We pray too for those in roles of leadership and responsibility that they may exercise this privilege in the right way, working for the good of all rather than just their own gain.

So we pray for those who are helping people in these times of adjustment; therapists, social and community workers, ministers and chaplains.

And we pray for ourselves that we may be able to offer, in appropriate ways, friendship, acceptance and the new life and love of the gospel.

We pray in the name of Christ, who gave his life for us; **may your love be known and shown. Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

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 for ever. Amen

No other salvation

Reader

No other means of salvation-
none, except through the activity of a God
who became one of us
through a human life ,
experiencing rejection, suffering and death
to reach out to estranged humanity.

No other means of salvation –
none, except through the life of the man for others;
the good shepherd
who lays down his life for his sheep.

No other means of salvation –
none, except through a love so great
that it reaches out to enfold
the whole of humanity
holding nothing back
that whosoever will may be brought within its embrace.

Edmund Banyard

Closing prayer and blessing

Lord Jesus Christ we acknowledge what you have done for us,

teach us more of your love

that we may become open doors for many to enter and know you – the Good Shepherd.

May God's blessing be with us as we go:

A blessing from the one who calls us together;

A blessing from the one who never deserts us;

A blessing for life in all times and circumstances and places;

A blessing from our gracious God. Amen

STF 443

Come let us sing of a wonderful love,

tender and true;

out of the heart of the Father above,

streaming to me and to you:

wonderful love

dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,

joyfully came;

came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,

sharing their sorrow and shame;

seeking the lost,

saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;

why do they roam?

Love only waits to forgive and forget;

home, weary wanderer, home!

Wonderful love

dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,

come and abide,

lifting my life, till it rises above

envy and falsehood and pride;

seeking to be

lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Robert Walmsley