**25th April 2021**

**Call to worship**The Lord is my good shepherd – and yours.
The Shepherd knows you –and he knows me.
Come and walk with him beside still waters.
Come and have your soul restored.

**A gathering prayer**

Come, sheep, and gather: let us flock together.
Come, sheep, and gather: in the shelter of the shepherd –
nurtured and protected, guided and known.
Come, sheep, and gather: in the shepherd’s embrace.
Come, sheep, and gather: let us listen to his voice.

**A prayer of approach**

Safe in the knowledge that we are loved,
we come to the Good Shepherd
seeking succour for our souls.
Let not the wolf snatch our thoughts and scatter them,
for our minds belong to Jesus,
and our hearts are open to him.
**Amen.**
**A prayer of adoration**

Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd;
always there, always watchful.
Your fold is the space you hold for us,
where we know we are loved.
Although dangers surround us,
and in foolishness we may stray,
you have our back.
So many sheep, yet you know us all by name.
Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd.
**Amen.**
**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, are we sheep or are we wolves?
For sometimes it seems that a killer instinct
is more valued in this world,
and we become one who preys on communities
rather than living in community.
We may not be aware of it,
for the ways of the world are seductive
and we slip into wolves’ clothing without thinking.
We make bad choices – how and where we spend our money –
not thinking of the exploitation that may have taken place.
Lord, Good Shepherd, forgive us these times –
when the wolf lurks beneath.
Remind us that, as Christians, we are creatures of the fold.
Bring us back to the community of love and life
as it should be lived. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, who lays down your life for your sheep,
how can we doubt your forgiveness?
Arms once stretched out upon a cross
now close in embrace as we return;
enfolded, may we know the fullness of love
that lives to forgive,
and forgives that we might live. **Amen.**

John 10:11-18 - **"The Good Shepherd"**

In this week’s passage, we see Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd: one who gathers his flock together, creating community, safety, and provision. It’s clear that all are welcomed into Jesus’ flock and each one is known personally. Jesus makes it clear that he’s prepared to lay down his life for the flock. He contrasts his care for the flock in comparison to the hired hand, one who does it purely for the money and who when the wolves gather and their own comfort and safety is threatened, runs off and abandons the flock.

Community, a sense of people looking out for each other, caring for each other, has improved so we are told, through this pandemic. Though the isolation and lockdown and home working has made many people realize how lonely they are. They say loneliness is one the greatest causes of mental ill health in our society. Belonging to a church can help to give you a caring community – can – but we well know that we too are human and fail badly at times**.**

Relationships make us feel cared for. A group of older people living in a block of low-rise inner-city flats looked forward to Mondays, when their bins were emptied. Over the years, the residents and the binmen got to know each other by name. They exchanged gossip while the bins were being emptied, and asked after each other, especially those they hadn’t seen for a while. Then, without warning, the rotas were changed and the team of binmen were given another area to work. Monday mornings weren’t the same for the residents, who now had to get used to a new set of binmen. They said the changes made them feel less cared for.

How do we make a caring, safe community?
This week, we have seen former U.S. police officer Derek Chauvin convicted of the murder of George Floyd. George Floyd was an African American who was stopped by the police after allegedly trying to use a fake bank note in a shop. One of the police officers, Derek Chauvin, knelt on his neck and back for 9 minutes and 29 seconds in order to detain him. After Floyd’s death, there was widespread outrage and protest over police brutality towards people of colour, reigniting the Black Lives Matter movement that had started in 2013. Chauvin is likely to spend the rest of his life in prison. George Floyd was crying out ‘I can’t breathe’ as Chauvin knelt on his neck. He also called out “Mama” as he took his last breaths. That deep desire for someone to care for him. Tragic.

We have had the tragic death of a young person this last week in Cam and many are now having to cope with the guilt, real or imagined, of not protecting him, of preventing this stabbing in whatever way. We are reflecting on whether we are a caring society. Are our young people being brought up right? Are they being exposed to harmful influences like the wolves in this Bible passage?

Many people will be aware of the challenges that arise from being both a target-driven business and one that tries to give care. So much of society is measured by output. The ‘care system’ itself now has targets, time limits on home visits, and so on. People in caring professions caught up in this often feel torn between what is expected of them and what they would like to do. Many feel our care system is broken. How different would our society be if the focus were on (e.g.) the quality of relationships rather than achievements? How can we show others how much we value them?

The beautiful game was riven with scandalized outrage as six clubs attempted entry into a European Super league and stood to benefit by millions of pounds. This has now collapsed as the ‘big six’ pulled out following widespread protest from fans.

My team Burnley refused to join the European Super League: not that we were ever invited!

Many have commented that the big crisis moment in football has often been years in the making. It is a result of a long-standing arrangement whereby national assists are sold off, privatized and run-on a for profit basis.

As some emergence from Covid changes the shape of our lives again, the issue of how the existing inequalities in our society allowed for worse impacts to be experienced by those least able to cope needs urgent action. Given God’s prioritizing of the poor, what is the challenge to us?

Globally the existential crisis is climate change and pledges were made this week to try and save our planet.

In this week’s passage, we see Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd: one who gathers his flock together, creating community, safety, and provision. It’s clear that all are welcomed into Jesus’ flock and each one is known personally. Jesus makes it clear that he’s prepared to lay down his life for the flock. How do you experience the glaring differences between the way that human beings treat one another badly because of their colour, their class or their wealth and the way that the Good Shepherd treats his flock?

In February 2020, parts of the UK were hit by Storm Ciara. [[1]](#endnote-1)Amanda Owen, from Swaledale in Yorkshire, is a shepherd who lives on one of the highest and most remote hill farms in England. She posted footage on Twitter that showed one of her livestock trailers being carried five miles downstream by what she called ‘a flood of biblical proportions’. She described the sheer energy and power of the storm as ‘unreal’. Her astonishing footage reminds us of the risks of hill farming. There’s nothing romantic about being a good shepherd.

How does Jesus model what good shepherding is like? The shepherd shows the cost of caring by laying down his life. The shepherd knows us. The shepherd is inherently good. The shepherd is faithful to his sheep – he doesn’t abandon them (us) when life gets tough. The shepherd is faithful to, and keeps in close contact with, God. The shepherd is in control. The shepherd searches out the lost. How can we mirror these attributes as a loving community serving God?

For the common good.

We are asked not to serve our own ambition or our greed but to lay down our lives for others just as Jesus laid down his life for us (John 10.11-18).

Picture yourself in the place of the Shepherd in the Gospel reading - shepherding is no easy task. The sheep are difficult; the dangers are many; the hours are long and the pay is poor. On top of that the weather its unpredictable, the life takes everything out of you and you are often lonely. If we are honest I guess all of us would immediately want to run away rather than find ourselves facing impossibly demanding situations or realizing we are at risk. It is not about us in the end - we are the person standing in the gap with a choice to make. ‘it’s all about the sheep.’

We shouldn’t be under any illusions about life in community either. The people are difficult; the demands excessive; the hours long and yes sometimes the pay is poor or non-existent. Jesus knew he would be let down by the wavering, the wobbling and the wandering - by us in short. Living and working with the disciples was a living demonstration of human potential and human failings. The New Testament letters are full of advice on behaviour and community life for the Early Church. When it works we might say see how they love one another - but let’s not forget the cost of that love and the ongoing commitment required from us to build the kingdom with the living stones of our lives.

This pastoral model of shepherd and sheep has been used to compare the relationship of ministers with their congregations, or their flock. Visiting your flock can be literally dangerous, like a shepherd confronting wolves.

I remember once visiting someone and being confronted by a less than friendly dog. Though I tried to step away, the mutt growled menacingly snapping at my legs. Belatedly from the doorway a person hollered, ‘oh! Don’t bite him – he’s the minister!’

This incident, gives cause to reflect on this person’s remark. Was the concern directed primarily toward the minister or the animal? Was it fear of food poisoning for the dog or fright that God might unleash divine revenge on a favourite pet? Perhaps the dog was permitted to bite anyone but the minister – clergy discount! Or it might be a rabies scare – you never know if the minister was carrying something!

Since biblical days many provocative and profound images of ministry have enlivened the imagination and empowered the people of God. The wounded healer, the prophet, the servant. Arguably the dominant image of the minister, the pastor, the priest, has been the pastoral one. The shepherd and his flock.

Jesus of course called himself the Good Shepherd.

Many people think that God wants to take things away from us. They think that God wants to destroy their fun. Jesus says that, in fact, the opposite is the case. It is the ‘thief’ who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10a). By contrast, Jesus says, ‘I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full’ (v.10b). This has been my experience. In a relationship with Jesus, we find meaning, purpose, fulfilment, peace, forgiveness, and life in all its fullness.

Shepherd may not be the most contemporary image of Christian ministry. Some models may border on dead metaphors. In a culture in which the verb ‘preach’ has negative connotations of judgemental moralizing and a lack of genuine dialogue, the traditional portrait of a ‘preacher’ is more problematic. The ‘shepherd’ image, as precious as it is to most Christians historically, may have lost some of its communicative power in a time when people are no longer agrarian.

Additionally, few contemporary congregations care to be characterized as ‘sheep’, for that comparison evokes a degree of ‘dumbness’ and passivity is not prized. Dependency is not good – you need to take responsibility for your own life and faith and relationship with God. In a deep way we need to be dependent on each other – or more accurately inter dependent. No one is an island – and we need each other. But we also need each other to be responsible and independent as much as possible.

We should encourage each other to feed on what is good, to find the good pasture and life in all its fullness. Often like sheep we have gone astray. We pray for those who have wandered off – or find themselves in trouble – pray to the Good Shepherd to go and find them to lead them back to good pasture.

Modern society sees leaders as often looking after number one – in it for themselves and what they can get. Greatness for the world is like a pyramid, with the greatest at the top and the rest scrambling to reach higher levels with fewer equals and more subordinates.

Robert Greenleaf in his book ‘servant leadership’ suggested that the great leader is seen as servant first. People do not readily accept authority in other persons. In other eras, just to be selected as say a teacher or appointed as a minister brought immediate respect and trust. Now Greenleaf says: ‘Those who are granted the permission and power to lead are those who prove to be servants first.’

The definition of a true shepherd is that they aren’t in it for their own profit. In fact, the supreme test of what they are in it for will come when they are faced with a choice. A predator appears – a lion, a wolf, or a bear. You can tell the difference between the true shepherd and the false one by what they do. The false shepherd saves their flock prospects at the cost of their reputation. The true shepherd shows who they are by being prepared to die for the sheep. The sheep are facing danger; the shepherd will go to meet it.

It is frequently said that the church exists for those who do not belong. Does love for those not of the fold occupy most of our time and commitment and our agendas? This week’s readings ask us to look at the examples in the news of failed priorities, but we should perhaps also take time to look at our own motivations and renew our commitment to serve others - offering our gifts, our time and even our money for the common good and the service of the Good Shepherd: The one who comes that we may have life and have it to the full.

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord, a year ago your house was not a fold in which we could meet.
Confined to our homes,
we prayed as a silent wolf prowled the world,
a pandemic that threatened us all.
We thank you for watching over us,
and for those of us who were safely delivered.
It was a testing time, Lord, but yet there was community.
We thank you for the proof that your Church has no walls,
as we learned to reach out to one another
and still to worship – but in different ways.
We thank you for those in our communities who had been taken for granted,
overlooked, not considered of great importance,
but on whom we came to rely to save lives.
We thank you that our values were tested, and that we saw what really matters.
Good Shepherd, who knows suffering and sacrifice beyond our imagining,
we thank you that we are here today, enfolded in your love.
**Amen.**


**Prayers of intercession**

As we entwine our hands in prayer,
so we entwine our love, our care, our thoughts,
our concerns for those whose names and situations we pray for.

As our hands entwine, we see the world is linked,
so our prayers are for the world and all its people.

O Lord our God you are the shepherd of your sheep;
of those who are faithful and stay near,
of those who wander and are far off,
of those who know you and those who don’t,
of those who have heard your name
and those for whom your name is a mystery yet to be revealed.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those who are lost or alone or lonely,
struggling through life with no one to guide them,
to protect and shelter them, to care for and sustain them;
for those without family, without friends, without roots, without homes.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those with no food and no money to buy it,
for those who struggle from day to day to feed themselves and their family
and who feel they have nowhere to turn and no-one to turn to;
praying especially for those in our own country who need to use food banks,
that they may find there the support and lifeline they need in these times;
praying too for the people of Brazil, especially those in the favelas where over half have barely enough food for one meal a day.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those who follow you in peril of their lives,
fearful of arrest and persecution,
and thinking at this time especially of those in China for whom worship is not easy.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

For peoples of all faith who seek peace and harmony
but are challenged with sectarian views and violent extremists,
who fear for their lives and their communities and their very existence.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those who struggle with damaged relationships and domestic violence,
those who feel trapped and who see little option but the life they have and the path it has taken;
that someone somewhere, will show them a better way, a safety net,
a safe house and home and way of life.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

For those whose lives have been turned upside down by the Covid pandemic,
through illness itself, through isolation, fear, hardship, unemployment, debt, overwork, stress or grief;
may the world pull together to help and support and vaccinate
and may all see and know that until the world is vaccinated none of us are safe.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

We pray for the people and situations whose images and pictures and words
have imprinted themselves on our lives this last week,
we see them now in our minds' eye and for them all in a moment of quiet we pray.

Shepherd of the sheep,
**we bring our prayers for them all.**

O Lord our God, you are the shepherd of your sheep,
bless all those for whom we have prayed
and bless us, each one of us as we seek to help those we can,
those we encounter as we live out our lives.
May our feet walk for you, may our hands touch for you,
may our voices speak for you
and may our ears hear the needs of those who speak.
**Amen.**

 **A sending out prayer**

*Response after each bidding*: **Help us to follow the ‘good shepherd’.**

Lord, when we feel lost and confused…
When we are tired by caring for others…
When we’re tempted by the wolves…
When we’re enjoying good pasture and rest…
Send us out to be faithful sheep and…
**Amen.**

1. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/easter-4/explore-and-respond [↑](#endnote-ref-1)