**30th April 2023**

**Call to worship**

Jesus said, **‘***The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

***11****“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*.

Jesus says, ‘I am the gate.’
Come in, and be loved.
Come in, and receive peace.
Come in, and find life.

**Hymn: King of Kings**

**The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want**;
(And I will trust in You alone),
**Use Psalm 23 as a way to meditate on being a follower of Jesus.**

* The following is based on ‘The Lord’s my shepherd’ by Stuart Townend, but could be adapted to work with other versions of the psalm. After singing each verse together as indicated below, the musicians should play a verse instrumentally in the background. After each set of biddings, sing the chorus as a response to the prayers.
* Sing verse 1; then say: Let us think about how Jesus leads us in times past and in the present time. (*pause*) Let us think about the life Jesus offers us, life in abundance. (*pause, then sing the chorus*)
* Sing verse 2; then say: Let us think about and receive again inner peace offered by Jesus. (*pause*) Let us think about and receive again the contentment Jesus offers. (*sing the chorus*)
* Sing verse 3; then say: Let us think about Jesus’ presence in difficult times holding before him our troubles. (*pause*) Let us think about drawing closer to Jesus and receiving his love and protection from harm. (*sing the chorus*)
* End with:
Loving Lord,
may we continue to trust you today and always.
**Amen.**

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**A gathering prayer**

We come because we know we are welcome, O God.
We come because you call us by name, O God.**.**
We come together to offer you our worship, O God.
**We come in the name of Jesus.**
**Amen.**

 We come to you, O God, in penitence for what we have done.
We come to you in anticipation for what you offer to us.
We come to you in hope,
for we know you will give us abundant life.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession**

Generous God, you offer us abundant life, yet we ask for more;
you offer us security and sanctuary, yet we seek our own way – despite the risks;
you offer us guidance and direction, and we ignore you and take our own way.
We are sorry for our ingratitude.
We are sorry for our arrogance.
We are sorry that we think we know best.
Forgive us, renew us and restore us to abundant life in you,
in the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

For your presence in our lives,
great Shepherd of the sheep:
**we praise and adore you.**

For the security you offer us,
great Shepherd of the sheep:
**we praise and adore you.**

For your life that enriches our life,
great Shepherd of the sheep:
**we praise and adore you.**

For the sense of belonging,
great Shepherd of the sheep:
**we praise and adore you.**

For our place in your sheepfold,
great Shepherd of the sheep:
**we praise and adore you.**
**Amen.**

**Bible Reading: Psalm 23 ; John 10.1-15**

**All age activity?**

**The voice**

* **You will need: up to six cards with the words ‘Hello it’s good to see you today’ written on them.**
* **How good is your hearing this morning? Invite a volunteer to help you. Start by asking if they are good at hearing. Really good? Good at recognising voices? Ask them to put on a blindfold or hide behind a screen. Distribute cards to various people and ask them, one by one, to read the phrase aloud. Can the volunteer identify who is speaking? If it is proving difficult, ask a friend or relative of the volunteer to read the phrase. Collect the cards and repeat two or three times with different volunteers and speakers.**
* **Isn’t it good that we can often identify people by their voice alone? Jesus said that his followers know his voice, and that is what we are exploring today.**

***Or/as well as:***

 ** Sheep drive  10 mins A**

**Draw everyone together with this fun game**

**You will need: paper, pens, dice.**

* **Give everyone paper and a pen. The aim is to be the first to draw a complete sheep. Take it in turns to roll the dice and draw the body part that corresponds to the result of the roll: 1 = body; 2 = head; 3 = legs (x4); 4 = tail; 5 = ear (x2); 6 = grass.**
* **The first person to finish a sheep must shout ‘baa’.**
* **A prayer for all ages together**
* Praise to God who loves us and gives us life.
**Jesus said: ‘I am the gate.’** *(mime opening a gate)*
Praise to God who comforts us and offers us protection when things go wrong.
**Jesus said: ‘I am the gate.’**
Praise to God who unites us by his Spirit and fills us with his peace.
**Jesus said: ‘I am the gate.’**
O God, give us the courage and wisdom to enter the gate and to know the abundance of the life you offer.
**Amen.**

**Hymn: The Lord’s my shepherd I’ll not want**

**Sermon**

This week’s Gospel passage speaks of a shepherd whose sheep know him by the distinctiveness of his voice. We hear these words from Jesus, according to John’s telling, at a time when many people might be reflecting on the loss of three entertainers known for their distinctive voices or catchphrases: Dame Edna’s Australian megastar-isms; Len Goodman’s East End strictly-one-liners; and Paul O’Grady’s (aka Lily Savage) Birkenhead sharp-edged comebacks. These voices, along with King Charles himself, have surely long been in the repertoire of any would-be stand-up comedic impersonator.

Some might frown upon those who have built such a career by using the voices of others but, in some sense, clergy and worship leaders have been doing it for centuries. So today we use words from the Bible, written by John, to hear Jesus speak about the voice of a shepherd.

John’s Gospel is famous for Jesus*‘I am…*’ sayings. In John 10:7-9 Jesus states twice:*‘I am the gate’*. This is closely followed in verse 11 by Jesus expanding his sheep illustration as he also says: *‘I am the good shepherd.’* Let’s face it, the gate one is of the more weird ones. ‘I am a gate?!’ But it gets you thinking.

*‘Hellooooo, Possums!’* Dame Edna was a megastar who pushed the limits of political correctness. Barry Humphries who played the character had friends in royalty. Apparently King Charles telephoned him a few hours before he died.

Dame Edna, claimed Queen Elizabeth II and her family would call her for advice on life in polite society: *‘I’ve had to change my telephone number several times to stop them ringing me.’* She said.

Our ears are bombarded with loud and influential voices every day. Some of them are worth listening to, either for entertainment value or for worthy advice. Jesus speaks of sheep and sheepfold and shepherd as an illustration that he knows us. But, unlike so many celebrities or public figures such as our new King, Jesus wants us to get to know him too. That it is in knowing him more, that we will have more of life!

Some of those voices we can trust. Others we should not listen to. Some want to be like a thief – they come to steal and destroy. Who can you trust?

During the pandemic we had to trust a lot of people and authorities. We had to trust in the scientists to make informed judgement calls on the virus, we had to trust our Government to make decisions that protected our loved ones and our livelihoods, we had to trust health carers to look after those who were ill. We even had to trust fellow customers in Supermarkets to stay two metres away from us. For a nation that has celebrated the individual and been sceptical of authority in recent generations, it was a huge leap. And of course now there is the predictable backlash against all that.

But at the heart of our faith is the call to trust. To place our lives, our futures, our hope in Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The one who not only would, but did, lay down his life so that we might understand the love God has for us and the abundant life he wants us all to live.

In this week's reading (John 10:1-15) we hear how Jesus calls us by our name and we follow because we know his voice. We recognise a truth more ancient and profound and powerful than anything we might hear in this information-laden age.

Jesus said he is the Good Shepherd – and says it to contrast himself to bad shepherds.

There’s a story about an Army sergeant and a private who were doing survival training in the Rocky Mountains. As they made their way through the wood, suddenly they encountered a big angry grizzly bear in the distance that was about to attack them.

Quickly the sergeant sat down, ripped off his heavy hiking boots, took some running shoes out of his backpack, put them on and laced them up in a hurry.

The private stood there watching in disbelief. ‘Excuse me sir’ he said. ‘Do you really think that you’re going to be able to outrun that bear?’

‘Well private’, replied the sergeant ‘I don’t have to outrun the bear. I only have to outrun you!’

The parable of that story and the message in this chapter of John’s gospel is that that the world offers us leaders who don’t really have our best interests at heart but look after themselves first and foremost.

Daniel Pink[[1]](#endnote-1) a renowned business thinker and author, speaking to Chief Executives in America the other week said, “If you’re a leader, the first line of your obituary may be how you responded to the covid crisis”.

These are still difficult times for businesses and we can only pray for those who lead them that they make wise, just and fair decisions at this challenging time.

Many people know what it is like to work for a boss whose sole allegiance is to him or herself. In other words, if the situation becomes him or you, he’s going to save himself as the sergeant was trying to do in the story of the bear. But what the pandemic made us realize was that the only way we got through was by a collective effort – by us looking out for one another.

Never before had the NHS been so treasured, never before has the country relied on Big Government to step in and pay people’s wages and offer guarantees for loans and grants to keep businesses afloat.

Memories are short aren’t they? I hope none of us is going to begrudge paying taxes after this because it is that collective insurance, everybody looking out for each other, rather than each one on their own, which is the big moral, the big learning point, of the pandemic crisis.

Revelations of the wealth of royalty and where that wealth came from remind us that for all the pomp and circumstance and patriotism, we cannot be blind to issues of privilege, power and wealth and the where it comes from and how it is used in society.

Jesus makes a distinction here between good and bad shepherds. One comes to steal and destroy the lives of others. One comes to bring life in all its fulness – to seek the wellbeing of others not of themselves. It’s a text about leadership and power.

The Good Shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

I know of only one sure fire way to determine whether my leader is really in my corner. Is she or he willing to take a bullet that was meant for me? It would be like the sergeant in the story saying ‘private, you run for cover; I’ll stay here and take on the grizzly bear’

If you are in a leadership position you have to earn respect and you earn it by looking after those you lead and, where you can, protecting them and not your own back. Though of course there are plenty in the world who see it differently.

Jesus makes it a test of a true shepherd that they are not just in it for themselves. The issue of sacrifice is a touchstone.

There is a story about a new recruit who went into training hoping to become a marine. He was one of those young men who seemed a bit out of his depth and didn’t quite fit in. He easily became the subject of ridicule for those who enjoy picking on slightly strange people.

In the particular barracks to which this young marine was assigned, there was an extremely high level of meanness. The other young men did everything they could to make a joke of the new recruit and to humiliate him.

One day, someone came up with the bright idea that they could scare the living daylights out of this young marine by dropping a disarmed grenade onto the floor and pretending that it was about to go off. Everyone else knew about this and they were already for a big laugh.

The hand grenade was thrown into the middle of the floor and the warning was yelled. ‘It’s a live grenade, it’s a live grenade! It’s about to explode!’

They fully expected that the young man would get hysterical and perhaps jump out of a window. Instead, the young marine fell on the grenade, hugged it to his stomach, and yelled to the other men in the barracks, ‘run for your lives! Run for your lives! You’ll be killed if you don’t’

The other marines froze in stillness and shame. They realized that the one they had scorned was the one ready to lay down his life for them.

And so, it was with Jesus. The Son of God, who could make the storms cease and blind see, gave himself for us on the cross, so that we may know the love and forgiveness of God towards us.

He is the Good Shepherd. He is someone you can rely on. He has come not for his own benefit, not to look after his own back, but so that we may have life, life in all its fullness, life abundant.

What about you?

If you are in a position of leadership how self-motivated are you? How motivated by a sense of purpose and service are you?

Who inspires you?

And what about Jesus? You may believe Jesus is the Good Shepherd but can you say the Lord is MY shepherd.

It is not enough to believe – you have to make that step of commitment. You can believe Jesus is the Good Shepherd but can you say that Jesus is MY shepherd and I am part of his flock, the sheep of his pasture.

Have you heard the voice of Jesus? The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and they know him.

People: we have a shepherd we can rely on. A shepherd who doesn’t lose his sheep. A shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep.

The pastoral image of the sheep and the shepherd is very popular in Christian devotion. It can be problematic when this encourages a passivism on the part of the sheep – you and me. Sheep are not the brightest of animals. They have a tendency to follow unquestionably. They don’t have a mind of their own.

Metaphors have their limit. Elsewhere in scripture the relationship between the Church and Christ is more of co-workers in God’s mission, where we have our gifts and our aptitudes to contribute. The emphasis in this passage is on caring nature of the Jesus and his good leadership of his flock.

Joan Kingham was a much loved member and elder of Dursley Tabernacle and was a lay preacher around the district. She died at the age of 99 in December 2017. She was a Christian who lived for others. Her first priority was serving her Lord, her Shepherd, and those who Christ cared for. She told me I had to preach on this text at her funeral. John chapter 10, verse 10: *I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness.*

She didn’t want her funeral to be focused solely on the gift of eternal life through Christ, wonderful though that is. The Christian gospel is Good News. But Joan wanted it made clear that following Christ meant the fulness of life now, it should be good news for all in this world not just the next. If we follow Jesus we actively take up his ministry and carry on his work, feeding the hungry, lifting the broken and lowly, reconciling and offering forgiveness, and sharing the love of God with all – now and not just thinking and waiting for heaven.

We don’t have to feel guilty for living an abundant life – we count our blessings for all we have in this country. We shouldn’t feel guilty for that – unless, like in this passage we have gained that life through stealing it from others, being thieves, exploiting others as Jesus puts it.

But I would hope we want to play our part in ensuring others find that abundant life as well, especially that abundant life in Christ - for materialism doesn’t satisfy – for as Jesus said, we can’t live on bread alone – though we need daily bread, a level of material comfort – but we also need spiritual bread – the word of God.

Christian Aid, is an organisation that Joan was very committed to. In Christian Aid week her house was turned into a warehouse of bags –She didn’t expect people to pick up their envelopes – she took them round to their homes. She worked tirelessly for Christian Aid, and for the plight of the poor and hungry.

Joan loved the Christian Aid slogan ‘We believe in life before death’. It summed up what she worked for and longed for. Joan gave her life to help others experience life in all its fulness. I hope you can support Christian Aid at this time of world need.

Jesus said, **‘***The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

***11****“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*.

Our own word for good doesn’t quite catch the full meaning of the word John has written here. The word John uses can also mean ‘beautiful’. This doesn’t refer to what Jesus looked like. It’s the sheer attractiveness of what, as a Shepherd, he was doing. When he calls - people want to come. When they realize he has died for them, they want to even more. The point of calling Jesus ‘the Good Beautiful Shepherd’ is to emphasize the strange, compelling power of his love.

You belong as sheep of his pasture. You are loved – so much that the shepherd will lay down his life for you. It's that simple and it can also be that profound and beautiful.

Lord lead us on the right pathways to green pastures. Bless us, give us peace, comfort, and hope. Help us know that your home is always there for us, with a table prepared and a cup that runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all our days.

Amen.

**Hymn: The King of love my shepherd is**



**Prayers of intercession**

Dear Lord, help us to listen to the voice of Jesus:
**and follow where he leads.**

Dear Lord, as we come together now to pray for the needs of the world, help us to focus on who you are. Help us to choose you to be our great influencer. Help us not to listen to the voices in the world that would turn us away from you but instead to focus on your words and your ways. We pause for a moment to confess, in the silence, times when other voices have had priority over yours this week.

Help us to learn from these experiences so that, when we face the same situations again, we will know how to focus on your guidance and leading instead of going our own way.

We also think now about times this week when we had the courage to follow your lead. Help us to grow in our faith so that it becomes easier and easier to go your way and not ours.

Dear Lord, help us to listen to the voice of Jesus:
**and follow where he leads.**

Heavenly Father, we rejoice that this week will bring the coronation of King Charles III. We pray for him as he prepares for this moment. Fill him with your wisdom that he may reign righteously and with integrity. Help him to listen only to you as his guide and influencer so that he will lead our nation with wisdom. Give the king courage and an awareness of your presence as he comes to this auspicious moment. We pray for the ceremony in Westminster Abbey that it might be another opportunity for the world to see who you are through the words, readings, hymns and prayers. We ask for safety during the ceremony and the celebrations around the country. We ask that your blessing will rest on all who are participating in any way. And we remember with joy the service and dedication of Queen Elizabeth II, who followed you all her life.

Dear Lord, help us to listen to the voice of Jesus:
**and follow where he leads.**

We pray for our world, where so many leaders and rulers do not follow your way, Lord Jesus. We ask that you would show yourself clearly to all those in power so that they choose to follow. We lift particular places of conflict and pain to you this week: Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen, and other places of conflict no longer in the news. Lord, raise up people of courage and peacemakers in these lands whose influence will lead to a cessation of violence and, instead, your reign of peace.

Dear Lord, help us to listen to the voice of Jesus:
**and follow where he leads.**

We pray for our own government, asking that its minsters will be people of integrity. We pray for those who are decision-makers, that they will be given (and listen to) wisdom. We continue to pray for an end to the strikes and unsettling situations. We pray for all those who just cannot make ends meet anymore and are in despair. We continue to pray for our foodbanks and other support agencies. Help us as individuals, and as a church community, to seek your wisdom on what more we might be able to do to help others in our local communities.

Dear Lord, help us to listen to the voice of Jesus:
**and follow where he leads.**

Dear Lord, we pray for those who are in particular need of your comfort and sustaining love right now. We pray for those who are ill, in sadness or in confusion. We lift up to you those who are anxious or depressed, asking you to give them a revelation of your joy. Bring peace to those in distress. Especially we remember…

Give us the wisdom to know how to be a help, a comfort and support.

Dear Lord, help us to listen to the voice of Jesus:
**and follow where he leads.**

Dear Lord, as we enter a new month that seems full of bank holidays and opportunities for recreation, we ask that we will find time to rest and enjoy all that the springtime has to offer: warmer days, spring flowers, time with family and friends. We ask you to help us know how to truly make the most of time away from work so that we can be refreshed. We pray for all those who need to work at these times, that they will have other opportunities to spend time away.

Dear Lord, help us to listen to the voice of Jesus:
**and follow where he leads.**

As we go into this new week, go before us, Lord, so that we can see where you are leading. Whether life is very normal this week or full of surprises and unexpected moments, help us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on you and our ears tuned to listen to your voice.

All these prayers we ask in the name of Jesus, our Good Shepherd.
**Amen.**

**A reflective way into prayer**

*Based on Psalm 23*

*Invite people to sit quietly. Leave a pause after reading each phrase.*
**23 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

Remember and silently offer thanks for all the ways that the Lord provides for you…

**2He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.**

Rejoice in the rest God offers you in his presence…

**3He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

Commit yourself to be guided by God, to trust in his wisdom…

**4Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.**

Open yourself to the generosity of God’s love – beyond measure, beyond words, beyond our imagining…

**5Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.**

Praise God that in times of joy and celebration, he is with you…
And in times of sadness, confusion and loss, he is with you…

**6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.**

 For all time, and in whatever we face: the Lord is our shelter, our security, the place where we will find a home.

**HYMN: I will sing the wondrous story**

**A sending out prayer**

Go out into the world with the Good Shepherd.
Go where God leads you.
Go that you may serve him.
And wherever you go, know that God is with you.

And the blessing of God Father son and Holy spirit be with you all.
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/03/ceos-think-of-coronavirus-response-as-first-line-of-your-obit.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)