



*St Margaret's,
Old Catton
Sunday
worship
3rd May 2020
4th Sunday of
Easter*

Come! Let us worship and praise God, the Shepherd of our souls. The one who has created us, who sustains us, who redeems us, who walks beside us in good times and bad, and who calls us to follow. Surely God's mercy accompanies us on our journey, and we will dwell in God's house for ever. Amen

With joy we come this day to worship the Lord.
God provides for us abundantly even when we doubt and fear,
even when we turn away. God is faithful.
Open our hearts today, O Lord, to hear your word for us,
that we may become your faithful disciples all our days. **Amen**

Christ our passover lamb has been sacrificed for us.
Let us therefore rejoice by putting away all malice and evil
and confessing our sins with a sincere and true heart.

Find this service online through 'A Church Near You', and look for St Margaret's Old Catton, and 'This Sundays Service' or find it directly on Youtube by typing in this code -

<https://youtu.be/fyCNfc1LVNA>

**Almighty and most merciful Father,
 we have wandered and strayed from your ways
 like lost sheep.
 We have followed too much the devices and desires
 of our own hearts.
 We have offended against your holy laws.
 We have left undone those things
 that we ought to have done;
 and we have done those things
 that we ought not to have done;
 and there is no health in us.
 But you, O Lord, have mercy upon us.
 Spare us. Restore us,
 and grant that we may live a righteous and godly life,
 to the glory of your holy name. Amen.**

Our Lord Jesus Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross
 so that we might be dead to sin and alive to righteousness.
 By his wounds you are healed!
 Once you were like sheep who wandered away.
 But now you have returned to your Shepherd,
 the Guardian of your souls. **Alleluia. Amen.**

A reading from St John's gospel chapter 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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection

Shepherding is one of the great themes of the bible, and one of the most powerful images of Christian ministry, that of the pastor, the one who leads feeds and guards his sheep.

We ask especially for your blessing on all who are in dark places at this time **6**
for those suffering Coronavirus
for the doctors and nurses who care for them
the care workers looking after the elderly and frail, and all the key workers
who support their efforts to combat infection.
We pray for those whose livelihoods and businesses are threatened.
We pray for the dying, and those who are afraid of dying alone
and for those grieving the loss of loved ones

We thank you that we are yours, created for your glory;
that you have called us all by name,
that through Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep,
who lived and died and rose again for us, you have redeemed us;
and that your love will neither let us go, or give us up. **Amen.**

Risen Christ, faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep: teach us to hear
your voice and to follow your command, that all your people may be
gathered into one flock, to the glory of God the Father..

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

BLESSING

May the goodness and mercy of God
follow you all the days of your life,
that you may dwell in the house of the Lord for ever;
and the blessing of God Almighty
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be among you and remain with you always. **Amen**

We tend to think of a shepherd acting alone, but that's not entirely true. **3**
In 1st Century Palestine, a shepherd would have had one or two others
helping him, since they weren't in nice green fields with hawthorn hedges
round, as we might picture them, but up in the dry and rocky hills,
scrabbling around to find green patches here and there; it was easy to lose
sight of sheep over the rough terrain, and several pairs of eyes and ears
would be a great help.

And of course there were implements to help too. David spoke of using a
sling as a weapon against lions and bears. It sounds overblown, but the
range of many wild animals has retreated so much over the years, and it
does seem that they really did roam round those parts then. Life in those
parts may sometimes be dangerous today, but then, a sling and stone
could become a highly potent weapon, as Goliath found out.

And shepherds might have a crook, as bishops still do. You may have seen
Adam Henson wielding one on Countryfile last Sunday - not actually
catching his lamb. This one is from an old shepherd from Burnham Market.
It's a lovely sign of care, of rescue from danger and being brought home.

And a sheepdog too would be normal in English shepherding, though they
don't seem to feature in biblical shepherding. This is a version of Psalm 23
written from the perspective of a sheepdog.

- 1 The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want:
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
- 2 He whistles to me beside still waters and up in the hills:
he guides me and I obey him implicitly.
- 3 When I run where he tells me I fear no evil:
he shields me from trouble as I guard his sheep.
- 4 I listen intently, for he is my shepherd:
he holds the staff, and we work as one.
- 5 He prepares a meal before me at the end of the day:
he washes and feeds me, and my bowl overflows.
- 6 Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will sleep at the feet of the Lord for ever

It may be a lighthearted idea, but it's worthwhile putting yourself in the
picture. If Christ is the Good Shepherd, where are you in the picture? Are
you a wandering sheep, a sheep that keeps close, a crook or a dog; a sling,
maybe? What does the shepherd do for you?

And talking of pictures, we have a lovely stained-glass window of Jesus the Good Shepherd in St Margaret's. (front page) It's really nicely drawn, but it gives us a very English view of Jesus. One of the images of Classical art was of a figure bearing an animal on his shoulders. Traditionally it was of a clean-shaven handsome young man with curly hair, and is thought to have been a representation of the god Apollo.



Christian art emerged only rather slowly and tentatively. In an age of persecution, you didn't broadcast your beliefs lightly, for fear of being penalised or thrown to the lions. So the crucifixion was not a subject for Christian art for 400 years - too explicit, too controversial. But Christians were able to adopt secular classical forms, and the figure of a young man with a lamb over his shoulders became quite popular as a statue or wall painting - he could be passed off as Apollo, or when you knew you were in safe company, recognised as Christ the Good Shepherd.

And the image of the Good Shepherd is one for tough times, when people lie in busy hospital wards with oxygen masks on their faces, thinking maybe they will die alone, without having had time to say goodbye to their loved ones.

Psalms 23 is one to remember in dark times;

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:

for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

People sometimes blame God for the awful things that happen to them, as if it didn't bother him. They haven't noticed that he's right there beside him. I'm sure he's there with those who suffer in every generation.

In the valley of the shadow. it invites us to rehearse our faith and sing God's story. When the shadows would overwhelm us, telling God's stories reminds us of other realities, that evil shall not prevail, and death has no dominion. The praise of God can be wonderfully subversive!

Going back to St John's gospel. While Jesus contrasts himself to the sheep stealer who climbs in a back way to make off with an animal, he is the one who comes in by the gate and who is recognised by the gatekeeper and the sheep; the sheep know his voice and so will follow him. Sheep are on the face of it very stupid creatures, but they are wonderfully alert to danger, easily scared, and they *all* trot off when *one* senses danger. But they are reassured by the voice of their shepherd whom they trust.

Jesus also calls himself 'the gate', or 'the door of the sheep'. The reference here is to the pen, a rough stone enclosure that the shepherd would make up on the hillsides, to protect his sheep from wild animals at night, rather than in the farmyard down in the village, which would have its wooden gate. He himself would crouch in the gap and *be* the door, preventing wolves or other wild animals getting near them, keeping the sheep from getting out. 5

The other reference may be that he is the gateway to heavenly pastures, the gate of life eternal. And by the grace of God, we are one with that flock who gathered in those early days with the disciples around the true shepherd, and who found that after his death and resurrection, that they spoke with the shepherd's voice, and could lead others through that same gate.

May he keep you safe so that you may know his voice and follow him. Alleluia! Amen.

PRAYERS

Merciful Father, you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd, and in his love for us to lay down his life and rise again: keep us always under his protection, and give us grace to follow in his steps; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gracious God, help us to live in love and charity with others, and, as we ask for your forgiveness, enable us to be forgiving. Take from our lives the hidden grudges and concealed hate. Forgive us that we have so often denied you; that like lost sheep we have turned away from you; that we have sung with our lips what we have not had the courage to practice in our lives.

Forgive our sins, comfort our sorrows, calm our fears, and take from us every proud thought. So fill us with love and concern for others, and make us ready to help and quick to forgive.

We thank you for every good thing in our lives for home and friends and family; for all the beauty and loveliness in the world about us which has lifted our hearts and made us glad; for life itself with all its promise and possibility.

We thank you that in every great experience of life, when it seemed as if we were passing through water and fire we are not alone, but you were there as companion and friend.