

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church - 3 May 2020

Sit comfortably in a quiet place and prepare, start with a brief period of silence, turning your mind and spirit towards God. You may want to have a cross or candle in view as a focus.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Hymn StF 295 Alleluia, alleluia
Give thanks to the risen Lord

A prayer of praise

Glory to you, O God:

You raised Jesus from the grave,
Bringing us victory over death
And giving us eternal life.

Glory to you, O Christ:

For us and for our salvation
You overcame death
And opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, O Holy Spirit:

You lead us into the truth
And breathe new life into us.

Glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Now and for ever, **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

If we have fallen into despair,
Lord, forgive us.

If we have failed to hope in you,
Lord, forgive us.

If we have been fearful of death,

Lord, forgive us.

If we have forgotten the victory of Christ,

Lord, forgive us.

Silence

May the living God

Raise us from despair,

Give us victory over sin

And set us free in Christ. **Amen.**

Let us join together in the Lord's prayer. Our Father

Readings

The theme this morning is Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Psalm 23 either in the bible or in StF 805

John 10. 1- 18

Address

A few years ago we went on holiday to Morocco. We haven't been to the Holy Land, and we were fascinated to see in Morocco some of the sort of landscape and customs that we had read about in the Bible.

We flew to Marrakesh and were driven across an area of semi desert to the mountains. I was surprised to see no fences or hedges. The land wasn't divided into fields, it was just open. I shouldn't have been surprised, because we all watch nature and travel documentaries on the television, but I suppose there is always a gap between what we see on the television and what we see in real life.

The level plain stretched into the far distance where the mountains were visible. The tarmac road along which we were speeding had no barriers or fences. There was a steady traffic of cars and lorries with the occasional cart pulled by a donkey.

Occasionally we could see a shepherd leading a few sheep or goats from patch to patch of vegetation in the semi desert. The shepherd didn't drive the animals ahead of him. Just as in the New Testament, he walked in front, leading the way, with the animals following him. The vegetation didn't look promising to me – it was grey green and dry looking – but the animals ate it.

Then one of the shepherds led his small flock towards the tarmac road along which we were travelling at speed. "Oh no" I thought "he is going to take them across the road and there will be an accident". But I was wrong. When they got to the edge of the road the flock stopped and began to graze along the side of the road. Then I saw that the builders of the road had created a shallow depression in the earth and sand at each side of the road, to drain water from the road when it rained. In that depression, all the way along both sides of the road, was a bit more vegetation than could be seen in the rest of the sandy plain that stretched into the distance. The shepherd had chosen to lead his flock there for that slightly better grazing.

As our journey continued we saw other shepherds doing the same. The animals seemed to know not to stray onto the tarmac.

This image has stayed with me as a living picture of the scene that we have read about in Psalm 23, of the shepherd leading his flock through life.

There were no "green pastures" or "quiet waters" on that occasion, but later on as we stayed in the foothills of the mountains we did see other shepherds leading animals to stream beds. Once we even saw a shepherd lead his flock to a well. It had a stone wall round it, and a heavy wooden cover, which he lifted off. Then he pulled water from it and poured it into troughs for the sheep to drink. When they had had their fill, he carefully replaced the cover.

We are all familiar with sheep. But the image of British sheep that I have is of a flock harried by a sheepdog while the shepherd stands at a distance. The image that Jesus used in our gospel reading was one that his audience knew – the close relationship between shepherd and sheep that meant that "the sheep listen to his voice [as] he calls his sheep by name and leads them out" v3. "He goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" – v4.

Jesus says "I am the good shepherd". This saying is one of the seven sayings recorded in St John's gospel when Jesus explains who he is. We have another in our reading "I am the gate for the sheep". Let us focus on those two sayings.

First the phrase "I am". The commentary that I'm using tells me that in the original language in which the gospels were written, Greek, the words "I am" are emphatic. And his audience would have thought of that great moment in Israel's history when God appeared to Moses in the desert and spoke in flames of fire from within a bush. God told Moses that His name was I AM WHO I AM – Exodus 3.14. So the phrase "I am" used emphatically by Christ would have carried echoes of divinity to the people listening.

"I am the gate [for the sheep]; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture".

The context is that at night the sheep are penned up in a sheepfold with a watchman to look after them. In Jesus' day wolves and bears would prey on flocks so they

needed to be protected at night. Sometimes the sheep would stay out in the countryside and the shepherds would have to stay with them overnight to protect them. But often they were brought back to the village and put in a communal sheepfold. Again, they were guarded through the night by a watchman. At daytime the owner of the sheep would come to the sheepfold to call for them. "The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" – vv 3 and 4.

How close is the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep! Every day the shepherd comes and calls his sheep and leads them out to pasture. Our relationship with Christ can be that close – a daily walk with God.

Opinion polls show that many people in this country have a belief in God. But what sort of God do they believe in? A vague something out there? A creator, a divine watchmaker, who set the world going and left it to its own devices? Jesus tells us that he is "the gate" where we can see the eternal and almighty God in His own person. We can enjoy a close relationship with him where we know ourselves to be loved and valued each one – Luke 15.3-7. Perhaps during this crisis we will have the opportunity to share with a friend how knowing Jesus strengthens us.

The second "I am" saying that we have in this passage is "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

There really was danger in looking after animals in those days. Do you remember that in the story of young David killing the Philistine, David told King Saul that he had learnt to fight by driving lions and bears from his father's flock (1 Sam. 34-37). Jesus contrasts the good shepherd who will stand up and fight for his flock with a hired hand who does not have this commitment and runs away.

Despite this, we know that shepherds were considered to be poor and unimportant people in the society of Jesus' day. In the "I am" sayings, Jesus compares himself to plain, ordinary things – "I am the bread of life" "I am the light of the world" "I am the true vine".

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me ...and I lay down my life for the sheep" – vv 14 and 15.

This Easter we have again celebrated the Jesus who suffered the ultimate penalty – death – to redeem us from our sins and to restore that close relationship between the creator and the created that we see pictured in the story of the Garden of Eden. All praise to Him for evermore!

A Reflective Prayer:

Good shepherd of the sheep,
by whom the lost are sought
and guided into the fold:

feed us and we shall be satisfied;
heal us and we shall be made whole;
and lead us, that we may be with you;
for you are alive and reign,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

**Hymn StF 516 What shall I do my God to love,
My Saviour, and the world's, to praise?**

Prayers of Intercession

Most merciful God, in a world shaken by the coronavirus Covid 19,
We look to you in hope and trust,
Acknowledging that there is much in life
Beyond our present understanding.
Help us to cope with the isolation and with all the restrictions placed upon us;
Bless those working to find a cure, and those who are looking after the sick;
Show us what we can do to share in their task,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Let us pray for the Church of God throughout the world,
particularly as today we the people of God cannot meet together
in our building as we have always done.
Help us to remember that the Church of God is built within our hearts
And stands firm there.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us pray for those in authority.
Help them to make wise decisions at this difficult time.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us pray for the powerless,
For those who feel overwhelmed by the present crisis
And for all in difficult personal circumstances.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us pray for our ministers and our pastors,
and for our families and friends.
We name them and ask for your blessing on them.
Pause
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

