

# Sunday Worship from the United Reformed Church's Daily Devotions

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020 - Easter 4



## Welcome

Hello. The Lord be with you. My name is Nigel Uden. I am a United Reformed Church minister serving both the Downing Place and Fulbourn churches in Cambridge. For the past twenty months it has also been my privilege to join Derek Estill from Blackburn, as Moderator of the URC General Assembly. Welcome to this act of worship for the fourth Sunday of Easter, known in some traditions as Good Shepherd Sunday. The liturgy follows a familiar pattern of hymns and prayers, of readings and a sermon. A copy of the words being used is available via the Daily Devotions' email and also on the website, Facebook and Twitter. Although like exiled Daniel we are having to worship where we live – he opened his Babylonian window to face Jerusalem - in fact, we are embracing an ancient tradition of making our homes places of prayer, and at the same time the internet enables us to be virtually one, wherever we are and whenever we connect. May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

## Responsorial Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! **He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels! Exult, all creation around God’s throne! Jesus, our King, is risen! Sound the trumpet of salvation!

**Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!**

Rejoice, O Earth, in shining splendour, radiant in the brightness of our King! Jesus has conquered! Glory fills you! Darkness vanishes for ever!

**Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!**

Rejoice, O holy Church! Exult in glory! The risen Saviour shines upon you! Let this place resound with joy, as we sing, echoing the mighty song of all God’s people!

**Hymn:**    *Angel voices, Ever Singing*       RS 405  
             Francis Pot (1832-1909)

Angel voices, ever singing, round thy throne of light, angel harps, for ever ringing, rest not day or night; thousands only live to bless Thee, and confess Thee Lord of might.	3: Honour, glory, might and merit, Thine shall ever be, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, blessèd Trinity! Of the best that thou hast given earth and heaven render thee.
2: For, we know that thou rejoicest o'er each work of thine; thou didst ears & hands & voices for thy praise design; craftsman's art & music's measure for thy pleasure all combine.	4: In thy house, great God, we offer of thine own to thee; and for thine acceptance proffer, all unworthily, hearts and minds and hands and voices, in our choicest Psalmody.

## Sources and Thanks

Allusions in the Welcome from Statement by Church Leaders Holy Week 2020 Churches Together in Britain and Ireland & I Peter 1.2

Opening Responses from the Exultet adapted by Andy Braunston.

Prayer of Approach written by Francis Brien, Deputy General Secretary for Mission.

Prayer of Confession in Edwards, Maureen ed 1997 More Living Prayers for Today Birmingham: International Bible Reading Association page 86  
Allusion in introduction to the readings from Newbigin, Lesslie 1982 The light has come: an exposition of the Fourth Gospel Edinburgh: Handsel Press page 126

Affirmation of Faith from the Christian Reformed Church of America.

Allusions in the blessing from Thorogood, Bernard 2017 A Basket of Prayer: resources for worship Gordon, New South Wales: Xlibris page 153  
Angel Voices by the BBC's Songs of Praise  
Stewart Townend sung his Psalm 23  
The Choir of King's College, Cambridge sang Psalm 23 to Brother' James  
Air for Songs of Praise.  
Father Hear by the BBC's Songs of Praise

## Thanks To

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## Prayers of Approach, Confession and Assurance of Pardon

Christ, who stood among the disciples, showing them your hands and feet to take away their doubts, we welcome you.

Christ, who met with the disciples, eating in their presence to make them see, we welcome you.

Christ, who spoke to the disciples, opening their minds to reveal God's promise, we welcome you.

You, who stand among us, meet with us, speak to us,  
have mercy upon us.

If we are ruled by doubt, have mercy upon us.  
If we live in fear, as if you are still dead, have mercy upon us.  
If we fail to be your hands and feet, have mercy upon us.  
If we read scripture, but do not grasp the Gospel, have mercy upon us.  
If we do not forgive, as we are forgiven, have mercy upon us.

We receive the gift of grace, from Him who promised grace.  
We receive the gift of peace, from Him who promised peace.  
We receive the gift of life, from Him who died and lives again.  
Thanks be to God.

## Introduction to the Readings

Shepherds feature a lot in the Bible. It's not really surprising; sheep farming was many people's way of life in those days. If you are a younger listener, you may like to see if you have a cuddly sheep or lamb amongst your toys. Actually, it doesn't matter how old you are; I keep one on the bookshelf beside my desk - it's with a teddy bear. Sometimes the lamb comes to church with me, to help when I am speaking about God as a shepherd.

As you hold your soft toy in your hands you could imagine how God thinks of us as God's sheep. Of course, when we've finished with a toy, we put it down and look for another one. God is not like that. God's care for each of goes on and on – and as if were the only sheep needing to be held.

In a moment, as we listen to today's readings from the Bible you will be able to hear how New Testament writers sustain the Old Testament's shepherd and sheep language. In the first epistle of Peter we hear of Christ as shepherd; later in the letter church elders are urged to tend the flock of God. And then from the Fourth Gospel, in the verses that immediately precede Jesus describing himself as the good shepherd, the writer has him using sheep farming language to sum up his own work. But in the Fourth Gospel the imagery is 'complex and mobile'; as we will hear, Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate of the sheepfold. The two ideas perhaps lead us into exploring how Jesus offers both new life and security. So, preparing to listen for the Word of God, let us pray.

### **A Prayer of Illumination**

Eloquent God, as these written words are recited, and we ponder them through proclamation and prayer, by your Holy Spirit may they be for us living words that take us into the Word made flesh, even Jesus Christ, the good shepherd and our risen Lord, Amen.

### **Readings**

*1 Peter 2.19-25*

For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

### **Blessing**

May the Lord bless you, not with easy roads, but with strong steps.

May the Spirit bless you, not with certainties and proofs, but with the leap of faith.

May the eternal God bless you, not with happiness for an hour, but with peace and joy for ever.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen

loosing financial stability and people with fragile mental health. God of love **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray with people in leadership roles: in governments and local councils; in third sector organisations and faith communities; in industry and commerce. God of love **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray with people who work the land: growing crops and rearing cattle and shepherding sheep. God of love **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray with people persecuted for their Christian faith, especially in North Korea, Afghanistan and Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan and Eritrea, Libya and Iraq, Yemen and Iran but also anywhere else where it's dangerous to walk the way of Jesus or of any other religion. God of love **hear our prayer.**

Let us offer our own prayers...God of love **hear our prayer.**

**The Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn**     *Father, hear the prayer we offer*                      RS 495  
                 Love Marie Willis (1824-1908)

Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.

3: Not for ever by still waters  
would we idly rest and stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way.

2: Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly.

4: Be our strength  
in hours of weakness,  
in our wanderings be our guide;  
through endeavour, failure, danger,  
Father, be thou at our side.

‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

*St John 10.1-10*

‘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.

**Introduction to Psalm 23**

Walter Brueggemann said that ‘at its best, the Church sings rather than disputes or reasons.’ I find that so true in these Covid-shaped days. Dispute and reason will change little. But for many of us, Sunday by Sunday it's singing that takes us beyond ourselves. Singing also enables the Church to point others beyond themselves, in a way that disputing and reasoning never will – whether they are people of religious faith or

of other convictions. And few texts have enabled that more than Psalm 23, which now is sung in the Stuart Townend version.

**Hymn**     *The Lord’s my Shepherd*  
Stuart Townend Copyright © 1996 Thankyou Music

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.	2: 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.
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<i>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.</i>	4: 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.
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**Sermon**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

So what is a good shepherd like?

Shepherds are hardy souls. For many of them, the quad bike may have changed what it means to traverse the hillsides, but still their lives are shaped by long periods of isolation from others, and by serious risk as they go in search of new-born lambs lost in late snowfall. It can also be an intensely physical task.

Now, I am not a farmer, though I did used to do some vacation jobs for an uncle who was. I remember doing lots of ploughing – until his favourite cherrywood pipe slid off the dashboard as I too rapidly

With tempered impatience, eager to see injustice ended, we expect the Day of the Lord. And we are confident that the light which shines in the present darkness will fill the earth when Christ appears for **our world belongs to God!**

**Offertory**

Although we are meeting in many separate places, we are still the Church. Our serving God’s mission is still happening, albeit in different ways. And we are invited to express our membership of the church through our financial giving, amongst other things. So it is that we are all invited to sustain our giving, and perhaps where it is at all possible to do so by Standing Order, so that throughout the pandemic the gifts continue to maintain the church’s life and work. And now an offertory prayer.

Living God, the good shepherd made the ultimate gift, laying down his life for the sheep. We answer that with the gifts we bring; not to reciprocate, less still to reward, but rather to give thanks and to dedicate all we have and are in pursuit of your mission that all may have life, and have it abundantly, through Jesus Christ, Amen

**Prayers of Intercession**

We offer now our intercessions. After the biddings there will be brief pauses. When I say “God of love” I invite you to say, wherever you are, “hear our prayer.”

Grateful for the good shepherd, who guards and guides us, we pray through him to God, in the power of the Spirit. *Pause* God of love **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray with people suffering because of Covid-19: those unwell and those stressed by caring for them; people bereaved and those providing funerals; people without a job and those with too much work; people

a million lives – some 25% of the population. The novel tells of how that bubonic plague led to a ‘catharsis process’, in which ‘the essential’ is finally rediscovered. As so much of the world endures Covid-19, might we allow it to take us back to the essential, where truth is preferred to expedience, where mercy is preferred to vengefulness, where beauty is preferred to vulgarity, where compassion is preferred to where God is enjoyed and glorified?

We cannot dignify our present natural calamity with having come for such a purpose, but we can *use* it to reverse our sheep-like straying through the gate left open by thieves and bandits, and return to the shepherd and guardian of our souls. For such, Christ ‘bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you[we] been healed. And that’s what a good shepherd is like.

Thanks be to God, and to God alone be the glory, Amen

**Music:** *Psalm 23 to Brother James’ Air*

### **Affirmation of Faith**

As followers of Jesus Christ, living in this world—which some seek to control, but which others view with despair—we declare with joy and trust: **our world belongs to God!**

From the beginning, through all the crises of our times, until His Kingdom fully comes, God keeps covenant forever. **Our world belongs to God!**

We rejoice in the goodness of God, renounce the works of darkness, and dedicate ourselves to holy living, for **our world belongs to God!**

As committed disciples, called to faithful obedience, and set free for joyful praise, we offer our hearts and lives to do God's work in his world, for **our world belongs to God!**

negotiated a corner, and ploughed it into the field. As I read about them, though, it seems to me that shepherds’ tasks include saving the sheep when they fall into danger, and setting the parameters of their movements and behaviour, often aided by a highly skilled sheep dog.

That’s what a good shepherd is like – guardian and guide.

As I have journeyed through life, I have been aware of people shepherding *me* like that.

I recall my parents, who loved us profoundly. They expressed it in all sorts of ways, which included being quite clear what they expected of my siblings and me. There were standards and boundaries, and until the day they died, I knew when I had over-stepped their marks. But they were always there, unobtrusively, as the safety net, when cars crashed, jobs failed, relationships ended or I simply messed up.

Thinking of other shepherds, I recall mentors in the church, accompanying me as I cut my ministerial teeth. They taught me what it’s all about, modelling ministry for me as I walked beside them. How I treasure the colleague who said to me, ‘Remember, Nigel, we live by grace, not law.’ And then, when my ministry went wrong, they were on the doorstep, bowl of fruit in hand, to soothe the bruised ego and set me back on the Way.

That’s what a good shepherd is like – guardian and guide.

As we read the first letter of Peter, there seems to be a similar shepherding going on. Even within the few verses we heard, the writer both proclaims the good news – ‘by his wounds you have been healed’ – and urges a renewed way of life – ‘so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness’.

The letter seems to have gone to the embryonic church in Asia Minor at the end of the first century. Clearly it's to people for whom the Christian life is a struggle; in fact, they're described as 'suffering'.

- In this distant outpost of the Roman Empire, which also had a strong Jewish community, they suffer persecution for their commitment to Christ,
- Being in Asia Minor, the Christians suffer separation from the majority of the church far away,
- And they are new to the faith – the big questions we have were likely to be the big questions *they* had, and there were not mature Christian mentors to bring them bowls of nourishing fruit.

The letter comes, therefore, as an encouragement. There's the assurance of being free from sin – and let's not miss the significance of how the letter puts that. Their sins are not just forgiven; they are freed from them. That's big! Both guilt and bondage gone. And the encouragement goes on. It also emphasises how those Christian hallmarks, faith and hope, are not things we conjure from within ourselves, but Easter's gifts – faith and hope are the response stirred by the awesome victory of God's love that we see in the resurrection. It's as if they are being urged in the strength of Christ to bear up in times of trial and to cheer up in times of tragedy.

But, echoing a good shepherd, the author of I Peter is always ready to exhort as well. Alongside that encouragement, I Peter expects the response of renewed living that being released from guilt and bondage justifiably require. The Christian vocation is to serve society, however separated from society's priorities, values and *zeitgeist* Jesus's followers might feel. This service to society – sacrificial, if it is like Jesus's – might even add to their suffering – 'drained in making others full'. But, we read, 'if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.'

That's what a good shepherd is like – guardian and guide.

Now it is obvious that the church in western Europe today is not suffering as these people in Asia Minor were. We may know apathy and even antipathy but not persecution, such as some 200, 000 of our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world do.

And yet suffering is a word with which we feel more familiar today than perhaps we did even three months ago. The immediate and the longer-term impact of Covid-19 is bringing what feels like unprecedented difficulty – from the inconvenience of physical distancing and shortages in the supermarket to the loss of job, of equilibrium, and even of a loved-one's life. All of a sudden, the world, which belongs to God, is united in this very particular suffering.

How we need I Peter today, with its potent mix of good news and challenge. Even as it offers us the promise that we are free from sins, so it stirs us to live for righteousness. In part, this righteousness could be that living which carefully works for the well-being of all, confident that others are committed to our own well-being, too. That living which seeks not personal gain but the common good, assured that the common good does not exclude our own good. Yet such a call to good works is nothing new. It's what makes the world go round. So I cannot help but ask, might there be more in the 'life of righteousness' to which I Peter calls us?

The last verse we heard from the epistle was this: 'you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.' In wondering how Covid-19 might result in us returning to the shepherd and guardian of our souls, I looked again at an email I received when Italy was experiencing the virus's most awful consequences. It was from a Waldensian colleague, serving churches in the far north eastern province of Udine. He was musing on a nineteenth century novel, *I Promessi Sposi*, by Alessandro Manzoni. My friend recalled how the main character lived through a 'natural calamity'. It was the Great Plague of Milan in 1630, which is thought to have claimed up to