



The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 21st April 2024

Call to Worship:

We rejoice in the One who leads us beside still waters,
And gives us refreshment of spirit.
Christ our Shepherd shows us the way we should go,
So that the name of God will be glorified.
Though all manner of evil befall us, we will not be afraid,
For the Great Shepherd is with us.
We are never away from the love and mercy of the Lord,
And the divine presence shall be with us for ever and ever.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, our Shepherding God,
come close to us now
Come near to us as we worship.

Shepherding God,
we need you in our time of anxiety.
We need you in our time of economic uncertainty.
We need you in a time of wars and rumours of wars.
We need you to bind our wounds,
and pour your healing ointment on our heads .
We need the briars and brambles and thorns
pulled out of our fleece and skin.

Shepherding God.
you guide us with your voice,
Help us to listen and follow no matter where your voice leads.
Help us to trust you.

Shepherding God,
protect us from the hired hands
that do not really care for us
and have neglected or abused us in the past.

Shepherding God,
thank you for your son
who lay down his life for those who follow him
and for those who are not in the fold yet..

Lord we pray for those who don't know the shepherd,
whose life circumstances kept them from knowing the good shepherd.

We pray that by our actions, our behavior,
and our reaching out into the community,
they may come to know you.

Shepherding God,
renew us, guide us with your love
and renew us with your peace.

The Lord's Prayer:

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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: John 10:11-18

Hymn 387

Great Shepherd of thy people, hear;
Thy presence now display;
As thou hast given a place for prayer,
So give us hearts to pray.

Within these walls let holy peace,
And love and concord dwell;
Here give the troubled conscience ease,
The wounded spirit heal.

May we in faith receive thy word,
In faith present our prayers;
And in the presence of our Lord
Unburden all our cares.

The feeling heart, the seeing eye,
The humble mind bestow;
And shine upon us from on high,
That we in grace may grow.

Reading: John 10:22-30

Reflection:

The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the most well-known chapters in the Bible. Countless people have memorized it, usually in the King James Version:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul;
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.
Yea, 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.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Many of us recall Sunday-school posters of this favorite psalm superimposed on beautiful painted pictures of Jesus on a grassy hillside, with a lamb over his shoulders, rescuing it from danger. Many children still get great comfort from the image of the kind and gentle Jesus who cares for all God's creatures. This is the Jesus who will stay with a child through a dark night filled with terrors: monsters under the bed and noises at the window. This is the Jesus who stays with adults too, through nights of weeping, and loneliness, and worry, and despair.

And in those times of danger and grief, many people turn to the Twenty-Third Psalm for comfort. At the bedside of people facing surgery or serious illness, reciting the psalm brings peace and hopefulness. At memorial services, it evokes the kind and loving presence of the God who promises an eternal dwelling place in the house of the Lord.

But then, there are the times when events in our lives or in our world throw our peace, our hopefulness, our comfort into doubt - times when the Jesus we remember from our childhood, smiling on that grassy hillside, seems almost irrelevant to the darkness, the war, the hatred of the world.

Perhaps the people crowding around Jesus in the Portico of Solomon were asking similar questions. At the Feast of the Dedication, the feast we now know as Hanukkah, the people remembered how the nation rededicated the temple after a great leader, Judas Maccabeus, defeated the Greek conquerors in 164 BC. The festival remembered the suffering of the Jewish people under the Greek Empire, and rejoiced at their great victory. Against this background, with Roman soldiers hovering and memories of thousands of crucified would-be rebels and other unjust suffering fresh in their minds, people asked Jesus, "Are you the Messiah?" Would Jesus be the new hero who would drive out the Roman invader? Would the nation be free and independent once more?

The people crowding around Jesus want a clear and decisive answer. Instead, he is cryptic and evasive. The people want him to speak with authority about weapons and strategies; instead, he talks about sheep. To their demand that he assume the leadership for which they have been hoping, he answers with a claim of leadership so astounding that many of them pick up stones to kill him on the spot: he claims to be one with God the Father.

This is no gentle Jesus on a green, rolling hillside; this is a fierce, uncompromising Jesus, a Jesus who refuses to meet expectations, a Jesus whose frame of reference is so far removed from that of the people around him that it is a wonder he escapes with his life. And indeed, John tells us that the next time Jesus dares to show his face in Jerusalem, the chief priests cook up a scheme to have him crucified.

How do we reconcile the gentle, kind shepherd Jesus, the one who would go anywhere and risk anything to save even the smallest lamb, with the Jesus who provoked his enemies to violence? And how does this Jesus have anything at all to do with the worries and dangers of our lives?

How can our faith in Jesus help us through a tragedy like the one at Virginia Tech? What can the gentle shepherd do to help?

The wonderful thing about Psalm 23 is just how realistic it is about the darkness of life. Perhaps the picture we get of the Good Shepherd from art and music and childhood memories is an image of pure light and pure sweetness. But the psalm itself knows darkness and fear. Like the writer of the psalm, many Christians have traveled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. They too have known the threat of the unknown. And yet many have also known the comfort of God's presence, walking alongside them through that dark valley.

Comfort does not come from assurances that everything will be all right or from platitudes that try to explain why everything that happens is God's will. Comfort comes from the simple presence of companions who are willing to sit alongside us in our darkest hours, to walk through the darkness with us, to help us make the darkness holy, and to rejoice with us when small glimmers of light finally begin to shine.

That is what our Christian faith can tell us. It tells us that our Lord and Saviour, the great hero who liberates us, is not the God of light alone. Jesus is sovereign over the darkness too, because he too has been enfolded by darkness. Like us, he has grieved over the senseless waste and tragedy of life. Like us, he has agonized over those who suffer. As all of us will eventually, he has entered into the darkness of death. And with all of us, he promises to walk that road so that we do not have to walk it alone. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

The truth we remember this Easter season and every Sunday as we worship is that our Shepherd leads us out of death into life. The Lord who was crucified and who rose again is the same Lord who promises to redeem the world, to relieve its suffering, to restore it to wholeness, to inaugurate a new creation. The risen Lord is the sign of the life that God promises to all of us: life transformed, life redeemed, life restored, life abundant, life joyous and eternal and blessed. God prepares a table for all of us: a table brimful with overflowing cups and overabundant blessings. And Jesus, our Great Shepherd, invites us to come and share with him at the table of blessing.

HYMN 552:

The king of love my Shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
and he is mine for ever.

Where streams of living water flow
my ransomed soul he leadeth,
and where the verdant pastures grow
with food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
but yet in love he sought me,
and on his shoulder gently laid,
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill
with thee, dear Lord, beside me;
thy rod and staff my comfort still,
thy cross before to guide me.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight,
thy unction grace bestoweth;
and O what transport of delight
from thy pure chalice floweth!

And so through all the length of days
thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
within thy house for ever.

Prayer:

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
to care for all that are close to us,
to protect those who are threatened,
to welcome those who are rejected,
to forgive those who are burdened by guilt,
to heal those who are broken and sick,
to share with those who have little or nothing,
to take the time to really know one another
and love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
to spread compassion to those who are far away,
to speak for those who are voiceless,
to defend those who are oppressed and abused,
to work for justice for those who are exploited,
to make peace for those who suffer violence,
to take the time to recognise our connectedness,
and to love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
and to be faithful to calling you gave us
to be shepherds in your name.

We ask for the courage of the Good Shepherd,
who lays down his life for his sheep.

We pray for those prepared to suffer
and even to die for what they believe in.

We pray for those whose lives and rights are sacrificed

in the name of power and greed.

We pray for those who risk themselves
by accompanying others along paths of deep suffering,
through valleys of fear and despair.

We ask for the compassion of the good shepherd
who leads his sheep to safe pasture.

We pray for those who work to feed and shelter and educate
the poor peoples of our world.

We pray for those skilled at nursing and healing
those who are suffering or ill in body, mind or spirit.

We pray for those who care, for the victims of our society,
those unable to cope with life, the neglected, the abused.

We ask for the love of the Good Shepherd
who knows each sheep by name.

We pray for our churches, for leaders and officers,
for preachers and teachers and all engaged in pastoral care.

We pray for those we know,
relatives or friends who are facing difficult times.

We pray for ourselves
that we might hear the call from our Good Shepherd
and follow the way of love.

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Hear our prayers. loving God, which we offer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn 520

For ourselves no longer living, let us live for Christ alone;
of ourselves more strongly giving, go as far as he has gone:
one with God who chose to be one with us to set us free.

If we are to live for others, share, as equals, human worth,
join the round of sisters, brothers, that encircles all the earth!
All the fullness earth affords, is the people's, is the Lord's.

Fighting fear and exploitation is our daily common call;
finding selfhood, building nations, sharing what we have with all.
As the birds that soar in flight, let us rise towards the light.

Let us rise and join the forces that combine to do God's will,
wisely using earth's resources, human energy and skill.
Let us now, by love released, celebrate the future's feast!

Benediction

Let us close our worship now with trust in the good shepherd,
and let us love, not just in words,
but in truth and action.

Let us believe in the name of Jesus Christ,
and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

And may God be by our side, even in valleys of death.

May Christ Jesus be the cornerstone of our life.

And may the Holy Spirit abide in us
....and tend us with love and mercy all the days of our life.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with each one of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more.

Amen