

twelvebaskets



EASTER 4B

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Fourth Sunday After Easter - Year B
21st April 2024



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

518 STF – Father, hear the prayer we offer OR

20 STF – Be still for the presence of the Lord

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

266 STF – All the room was hushed and still OR

367 STF – When I was lost, you came and rescued me

Readings: Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Hymn:

323 STF – I will sing the wondrous story OR

661 STF – Give me the faith that can remove

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

337 STF – There is a higher throne than all this world has known OR

736 STF – In heavenly love abiding

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

350 STF – I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship OR

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling

Blessing

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Call to worship

Holy God, God of all peace and hope,
Come amongst us, transform and reform us as we worship you,
Make yourself known to us in the prayers and worship, the singing and reflection,
That we may learn more of your ways and your calling on our lives,

Amen.¹

Hymn:

518 STF – Father, hear the prayer we offer OR

20 STF – Be still for the presence of the Lord

Opening Prayers

Shepherd God, we, your flock, turn to you today in worship, in thanksgiving and in lament.

You are our Good Shepherd and we praise you for the care you have always shown us.

- From our birth you have called us and guided us – **we worship you**
- In our wanderings, you have found us and nurtured us – **we worship you**
- In our need you have healed us and protected us – **we worship you**
- When we turned away from you, you offered your life for us – **we worship you.**

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, you are our Saviour and we offer you thanks for the gift of salvation.

- Your name brings freedom from all that enslaves us – **thank you Jesus**
- Your name gives hope when we are hopeless – **thank you Jesus**
- Your name speaks peace when we are in the storms of life – **thank you Jesus**
- Your name gives power when we are weak and weary – **thank you Jesus.**

Gracious God,

- We know there have been times in this past week when we have not chosen your freedom – **we are sorry**
- We know that too often we allow despair to overwhelm us – **we are sorry**
- We know that we have chosen to worry rather than receive your peace – **we are sorry**
- We know that we have tried to live in our own strength – **we are sorry.**

We offer all our prayers in the powerful name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
knowing that only in him are we accepted and forgiven.

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

Send us out afresh, we pray, in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Thanks be to God.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

When we think of a shepherd, what do we picture? Do we see an elderly man? Maybe with mutton chops, cascading down from his head, covered in a tweed flat cap? Do they have knee-high welly boots, covered in mud? Are you picturing a small walking stick, flanked by a loyal border collie? Are they shouting in a thick, rural accent "Come by!" and "Awaaaayyyy!", with a series of high-pitched whistles? Are they gently saying "That'll do" at the end of a day?

Of course, I'm describing Farmer Hoggett from Babe, but that's also the image of a shepherd a lot of us have grown up with. A very British idea of farming, with lush, rolling hills of verdant green, the sheep dutifully filing through gates into other fields, and it never rains!

Those that heard Jesus talking of shepherds though would have a very different idea.

A shepherd would travel night and day with the flock, with a few hired hands to help. They would carry a stick to not only help guide the sheep, but to fend off the wolves that would want to pick off the sheep that stray too far from the herd. They would be very athletic, sprinting to intercept the wolves before they take a sheep. They would defend these sheep with their lives because they were their livelihood.

Keep both images of those shepherds in mind and listen to John 10.

(Read John 10: 11-18 in a version you feel comfortable with)

In this passage, I see both the shepherds we've talked about today. I see the shepherd that Jesus would be speaking of; the one who would fight with the wolves to defend the herd, even if it meant death. And yet, I also see the Farmer Hoggett in this; the shepherd that knows each sheep, cares for them, loves them.

In a post-Easter time we know what those listening didn't understand then in what Jesus was saying: He **was** the Good Shepherd, one who expressed the deep love of God through laying his life down for us and calls to us for gentle rest with a gentle "That'll do."

Let us pray.

Gentle and loving God, may we be emboldened to defend each other as a shepherd defends the flock, and that we may all know one another as you know us.

Amen.³

² Opening prayers written by Jill Baker

³ All Age Talk written by Tim Annan-Hood

Hymn:

266 STF – All the room was hushed and still OR

367 STF – When I was lost, you came and rescued me

Readings: Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Hymn:

323 STF – I will sing the wondrous story OR

661 STF – Give me the faith that can remove

Reflections on the readings

[Interspersed in the text are five questions. They can be used to encourage discussion/ feedback in contexts where congregations feel comfortable 'interrupting' the preacher. If you are worshipping in cafe style you could provide copies of the questions on each table.]

In January 2024, a class of theology students at Kibogora Polytechnic, Rwanda was studying the History of Religion. They started the module by trying to define 'religion' and, having agreed that definition, how best to study the phenomenon. They found it helpful to use the framework for discerning what constituted a religion devised by John S. Mbiti, an African scholar. So they studied five religions looking for evidence of beliefs, moral values, officials, shrines and practices.

While studying Christianity (using Mbiti's helpful framework) they were asked to find a word to describe Christian 'officials.' "Shepherd," was one student's immediate response. Her response then sparked some discussion of how that word compared with how they had described the officials of the other religions they had studied. What did it mean to choose that definition of Christian leadership?

Question 1. Do you think "Shepherd" is a good word to describe your Church's leadership? Give reasons for your answer.

Many of those Rwandan student ministers would have had childhood experience of tending their family's livestock. If you drive along a rural road in Rwanda today you will inevitably see cattle and goats grazing the lush grass either side of the road. Invariably the livestock will be accompanied by a child sitting patiently watching the animals and the road, ready to use a switch to ensure that the livestock does not stray into the path of the traffic. (Vehicular transport is the most likely predator of the child's little flock!) On a road that sees little traffic, the bored herds(wo)man may wave at the passing car but that is not to suggest that they take their responsibility to the animals lightly: they know what is required of them.

In the UK, back in 2015, James Rebanks won the Lakeland Book of the Year with his first book, The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake District which became a No. 1 bestseller. It gave urbanites an insight into a very different way of life, being an unvarnished account of what it is to be tied to the land and committed to care for livestock. It made clear how little most of us understand the farming lifestyle or what it takes to be a good shepherd.

Question 2. Do we fail to fully understand what Jesus was saying when he declared "I am the Good Shepherd?" What do you take this phrase to mean?

The metaphor of the Good Shepherd would surely have been readily understood by Jesus' original hearers, not least because theirs was a traditional agrarian culture. It's a context far removed from the urbanised post-industrial society in which most of us live. The Jews self-

defining story began with that of the Patriarchs whose wealth was based in cattle. There are several herdsmen in the Old Testament: Joseph's brothers were taking care of their father's flock when Jacob sent him to find them; David was a shepherd and Psalm 23 is a theological reflection upon God as the (ultimate) shepherd. The prophet Amos was also a shepherd (Amos 1.1), "I am a herdsman and I take care of fig trees," he told Amaziah (7.14). Several of the Jewish festivals celebrate the seasons of the agricultural year...

There are many instances in the gospels too that remind us of the rural context in which Jesus ministered: against that backdrop, Jesus tells of the sower who went out to scatter his seed. There's a parable about a mustard seed and another story set in a Vineyard. It's as if Jesus looks over the heads of the crowds who gather around him, sees others going about their day-to-day business, and then spins a yarn about those who populate the environment. He's a skilled storyteller who holds his listener's attention by crafting his stories around believable characters.

Among that first audience of our particular passage were Pharisees who had investigated and were opposed to Jesus' healing of a blind man on the Sabbath (John 9). Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees for their spiritual blindness. It wasn't a private confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, others were listening too. So, when Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd," what was in the minds of the hearers? The Pharisees could well have been deeply offended and enraged by the teaching of this upstart teacher and healer. Some of his more sympathetic auditors may have thought about their heritage and perhaps the more learned ones among them were trying to recall the scriptural references for Jesus' teaching. However, many of those who'd gathered might have been just waiting for another memorable story.

Question 3. Which of Jesus' stories are most important to you? What role have/do they play in your life?

In the Gospel of John, just before the passage we have read today, there is the Parable of the Shepherd that reveals further information about shepherding in 1st century Palestine (John 10.1-6). Perhaps you have heard descriptions of the tasks of shepherds of that era? Theirs was a physically and mentally demanding role. They were often alone in bleak, isolated settings. To preclude the possibility of falling asleep, thus leaving their sheep unguarded, shepherds would physically act as the doors to the sheepfold so that the sheep would have to step on them in order to escape. Acting as living gates to the fold, they could interpose their own bodies between the sheep and would-be predators.

Whilst identifying himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus pledges his willingness to die for the sheep (John 10.11). Whereas a hired man, when put to the test might run from danger, Jesus would remain. (N.B. The exploration of a *contrast* is often a feature of Jesus' parables: perhaps we should have read from the beginning of John 10!) Here, in our passage, is a *contrast* between a paid employee and someone who has made a life commitment.

Question 4. Is Jesus helping us to understand the difference between a job and a vocation? Can any job become a vocation?

There's a second *contrast* within our passage: that between the sheep Jesus knows and "other sheep that belong to me that are not in this sheepfold" (John 10.16).

Wouldn't it be tempting to make an interpretative leap, assuming that Jesus is our shepherd and we his flock? We would then discuss what responsibility we might have for those not (yet) of the flock. (Cue: A sermon on Evangelism.) Aren't we prone to claim the gospel for ourselves, forgetting to whom it was originally spoken?

We could use our passage as a starting point from which to consider the popular idea that clergy or elected church officers are pastors, "shepherds," representing Christ as shepherd

in caring for the congregation. Then we would explore the relationship between Jesus the Good Shepherd and our (fallible) leaders. (Is it not the case that those who are popularly identified as 'leaders' are all too often those who polarise opinion and divide rather than unite the 'flock?') The Rwandan student who described Christian 'officials' as "shepherds" would love to join that discussion.

Question 5. What kind of shepherds do you want?

Ultimately, though certain human beings may fulfil some of the person specification of a good shepherd only Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the passage reveals who the gospel writer understood Jesus to be.

Let's return our attention to Jesus: Jesus having identified the contrast between the hired man and the good shepherd goes beyond the confines of the imagery of his parable (John 10.1-8) and his proclamation (John 10.11) to warn of his death, giving a glimpse of the role that only he could play, for only he would willingly lay down his life for us in order to take it up again (John 10.17).

Like his healing of the blind man, Jesus' statements caused immediate controversy amongst the original audience...

What response do we make to this teaching?⁴

Hymn:

337 STF – There is a higher throne than all this world has known OR

736 STF – In heavenly love abiding

Prayers of intercession

Here is a suggested simple bidding and response and a framework for topics for prayer that can be adapted.

Leader: O God, our God

Response: **Hear us as we pray**

That we may grow in understanding of our reliance upon and responsibility for natural world of which we are called to be stewards but from which contemporary life may feel distanced..

O God, our God

Hear us as we pray

For shepherd leaders: both the leaders of nations, that they may promote the common good rather than seeking wealth or self-aggrandisement. For those who become leaders in more local contexts that they will serve sacrificially for the well-being of all.

O God, our God

Hear us as we pray

In a world of plenty, for those affected by poverty in this land and worldwide. For all who are struggling to make ends meet as prices rise and their resources dwindle. For those increasingly reliant on foodbanks.

O God, our God

Hear us as we pray

⁴ Reflection written by Wendy Kilworth-Mason

For those seduced by celebrity endorsements or addicted to 'retail therapy.' For any whose false values and aspirations reveal that they are afflicted by affluence.

O God, our God

Hear us as we pray

For those who suffer: people unknown to us whose plight is televised and brought home to us in the news reports of war, famine and pestilence. Grant us true compassion and the determination to work for peace, justice and equity

O God, our God

Hear us as we pray

For our families, friends and neighbours, both of and not yet of the flock, that in their all needs they may know that you care for them

For ourselves...and in stillness let us add our prayers for ourselves and those around us...

[Stillness]

O God, our God

Hear us as we pray

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

Oh generous and bounteous God,
God of spring-time and harvest,
God of all abundance,

Help us to remember your abundant love for us and even when things and resources and energy feel scarce, to lean into an abundance way of thinking, that might see every person's potential fulfilled, everywhere around the world.

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

350 STF – I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship OR

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling

Blessing

May you know the Christ at work in your life – may you come to see the Spirit flowing through you, may you feel the transformative love at work in your life.

And may the grace and peace of God go before you, within you, around you and through you,

Amen.⁷

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Wendy Kilworth-Mason

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker