

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
ZOOM Service Sunday 25th. April 2021, Easter4B

Introduction and Prayer – Martin

Good morning, wherever you are. It's good to speak to you again. We are not all gathered in the same building, but we worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all.

Today we read about, and think about, Jesus the Good Shepherd

A Prayer

Let us celebrate the fullness of life that Jesus has won for us, and, in thanks and praise, place all that we are, and all that we long to be, into his hands. Amen.

Hymn 710 I had a dream a man once said

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer:

(Today I am using the Collect of the day, and a prayer by Bruce Sanguin)

Let us Pray:

God of peace,
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep,
through the blood of an eternal covenant, make us perfect in goodness
so that we may do your will; and create in us what is pleasing to you;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

.....
Tender God,
we yield to your gentle guidance.
Like a shepherd, you provide all that we need:
you know when we should lie down and rest, and when we should rise up and be on the move.
Help us to trust the rhythms of the spirit;
lead us away from compulsive action and the false peace of apathy.

You restore our souls.
We gaze into still waters and see ourselves clearly now;
reflections of your image looking back with love.

You lead us on the paths that are right for us
and for this planet.
We trust your guidance.
Even in the darkest valleys and most treacherous passes, the ground beneath us is firm,
and our confidence is great that you are with us.

You, Great Shepherd, the ground of our being, do not desert us.
Our cup overflows with gratitude.
May our lives be filled with compassion and goodness:
this is all you ask in return.
Amen.

Let us pray in the words Jesus taught us:
*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 debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

Readings: Anne is going to read for us today:

1st Reading: 1 John 3:16-24; (New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Hymn: Psalm 23

2nd Reading: John 10:11-18; NRSVA.

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Message:

In Orkney we know about shepherds and what they do.

I expect, like me, you picture a shepherd as a man – or a woman – with one or two energetic collies, gathering sheep, driving them from place to place, and looking after them when they get into trouble or at lambing time, clipping time and so on.

In Jesus's time, the shepherd didn't drive or herd the sheep. The sheep knew him, recognised his voice, trusted him, and followed him like friends and companions.

The shepherd was absolutely responsible for the sheep. If a wild animal killed a sheep, he had to bring back the remains and prove that it wasn't his fault. There are references in the Bible to shepherds risking their lives to protect the sheep from a lion, a wolf or a bear, or from rustlers.

The true shepherd was born to the job, out with the flock as soon as he was old enough, and he never hesitated to risk his life for the sheep. At night, when the sheep were gathered into a fold – a fank – for shelter or protection, the shepherd lay down across the entrance. *He was the gate.*

Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the bad, the faithful with the unfaithful. The hired shepherd was there primarily for the money, with no real commitment to the job, whereas the person who works for love thinks mainly of the people he is trying to serve. Jesus was the good shepherd who loved his sheep so much that, for their benefit, he would risk – and one day lay down – his life.

The flock represents the Church of Christ. Like the flock, the Church is in danger of attack from the outside, from the critics and scoffers, and those who ridicule religious observance.

The Church also faces trouble from inside, perhaps from false shepherds, leaders who see their calling as a career and not as a means of service based on the example of Christ, but also from well-meaning Christian people who oppose change of any kind – the "aye been" faction.

Or from the danger of exclusiveness, the idea that some folk are especially privileged, or specially chosen – the elect – who don't accept that the love of God, and the privileges that Jesus offers, are open to *everybody*.

Jesus repeatedly condemned the Scribes and Pharisees for ignoring everybody's views but their own. We see the same attitude in fanatical religious extremism among certain groups in our world today. As Christians we need hearts and minds genuinely open and receptive to change, to scientific discovery, to other people's views. The Church, like everything else, has to move on. God didn't stop revealing himself 2000 years ago.

My notes tell me I spoke to you on this subject back in 2018. What changes since then! Church buildings are beginning to open up for services on a very limited basis, but there is concern about further waves of Covid, and of restrictions of some kind continuing for a long time.

There will be changes in Orkney Presbytery, and, with so many vacancies for ministers, changes in the way that the church will operate. Change is coming whether we like it or not.

Jesus's primary purpose was to bring his message to his own nation, the Jews – but then to the whole world. He says:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

The other sheep that do not belong to this fold have to be brought in. Somebody needs to bring them in. In times past, the main missionary outreach of the Church was toward foreign mission work, but in our time and place, the priority of every one of us is the people of our own country who do not know, or do not care, about the message of Christ. We are the voice and the hands of Christ in this place. It is up to us to help Jesus make the world one flock, with him as the shepherd.

Jesus saw his entire life as an act of obedience to God. He was prepared to carry out his task, whatever the cost. His unique relationship to God did not permit him to do what he liked: he had to do what God liked. He was never in any doubt that his ministry would cost him his life, and that he would lay down his life of his own accord.

Jesus's message speaks to the problems and challenges facing all peoples of all times. He told us that he came that we might have life in all its fullness. He told us that the Kingdom of God is among us.

The Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Heaven – is not merely, not only, an other-worldly place we go to when we die, or after the "End Times". Through belief in Jesus, it is an all-embracing relationship with the God in whom we live and move and have our being, that begins *in this life*, but continues in full anticipation of another life to come.

The author of the Letter of John – maybe the same John, maybe not – asks:

'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?'

'Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action', he says.

No empty words! We have to put our faith into action!

James tells us: (*James 2*).

'Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead'.

Jesus brought, and brings, a vision of one flock and one shepherd, a society where the love of God is extended to all; a world characterised by justice and equality and love.

We all have a part to play in making it a reality.

We have to live in the world as though we really do believe that Jesus, the good shepherd who lays down his life to save us, *is* the Way of God.

We have to live together, as one flock, with one shepherd, in the faith that this is our purpose in the world and in the universe.

In the voice of the Holy Spirit, if we have ears to hear, we can still hear the voice of the good shepherd, teaching us to be good shepherds ourselves.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

Hymn JP 21 Father I place into your hands

Prayer for Others and Blessing:

This world is a vast terrain of green pastures and dark valleys,

placid streams and stormy seas; where one flock is in sunlight, another in shadow.

We bring before the Good Shepherd all who pass through dark valleys today.
May they feel his presence, and the safe-keeping of his love.
When they cannot help or defend themselves,
may they know the comfort and power of his rod and staff.
Even amid the darkness of despair, may his voice reach them
to lead them by quiet waters, and enfold them in safety.

We give thanks for the green pastures of life; for food and banquets shared;
for the clear water of refreshment and cleansing.
We give thanks for those who walk, and have walked, beside us,
guiding us, and leading us home;
for those who have protected us and kept us safe.

We pray for people who have never known safety or peace,
who suffer through war or terrorism or oppression,
in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, Africa and many other places,
or through prejudice based on race or creed or colour;
the George Floyds, Stephen Lawrences, Sheku Bayohs of the world;
the migrants and refugees.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world: for those who have lost direction or purpose;
for politicians concerned only to hang on to power and influence;
leaders of nations, who forget to serve the common good;
for those who follow the fashions of today at the expense of tomorrow;
those swept along by the crowd on tides of prejudice and easy judgements.

We pray for those who seek escape from reality in alcohol or substance abuse;
all who are led astray, away from safety and well-being.

We bring before the Good Shepherd those scattered by the wolves of violence,
abuse, bigotry, persecution;
people harried by the pressures of life, swamped by their responsibilities to others;
all who feel abandoned by families and friends,
or excluded from the sheepfold of church or society

We pray for all the people afflicted in any way by the Pandemic;
those ill, and those who care for them; all who wait and worry;
those in the darkness of bereavement.

In quietness we bring before the Good Shepherd those concerns that we carry with us today.

Pause

We ask in the name of Jesus. Amen.

In the days ahead,
may you stay safe in the ways of Christ;
may Jesus, the Good Shepherd,
unite us, inspire us, renew us,
strengthen us and guide us
to draw others into his love.
And may the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you,
now and always. Amen.