

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH,
Handout for Sunday 03.05.20; Easter4A
[Morning Service 11.15]**

Introduction:

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we think of other Christian people all over the world, and especially family and friends who are separated from us. I invite you to use this service in whatever way is best for you. You may like to look up the hymns and read – or sing them.
God bless you all.

Gathering Words and Prayer

Today we look at what it takes to create firm foundations for a Christian community. We look at a story from one of the earliest Christian communities and consider the foundations that were laid so that the Church we know today might be built.

We pause for a few moments to remember that we are in the presence of God.

We come to you, O God, conscious of our failures and weaknesses,
yet in anticipation for what you offer to us.

We come to you in hope, for we know you will give us life in all its fulness. Amen.

Call to worship:

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our fellowship, we join with the whole church, in this country and across the world.

Jesus says, 'I am the gate.'

Come, and be loved.

Come, and receive peace.

Come, and find life.

Let us worship God:

Hymn (1): 405 We sing the praise of him who died

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Lord God

You are our Saviour and king,

our Master and our friend,

our Shepherd and our guide.

Wherever we go, you are with us.

Wherever we stray, you seek us out.

Whenever we call, you hear us.

You are our promise and our hope,

our place of rest and peace,

our security and our sureness.

Whoever we are, you accept us.

Whatever we do, you love us.

Whenever we fall, you lift us up.

Lord God,

Separated by the circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic,

in our separate places,

in our various lives and situations

in our different concerns and different dreams,
yet we come as one, as a people of shared faith in the God who shared all.

We praise you, Lord God,
risen from the dead to fulfil your promise to all creation;
we praise you for the gift of your Spirit
to be our companion and guide.
We praise you that you have chosen us as your people
to build your kingdom here on earth.

Gracious God
our path in life does not always lead us into quiet, calm places,
places of caring and compassion for others.
Our journey often takes us off the beaten track,
and into the difficult terrain of selfishness and anger.
Our progress is often slowed by fear and anxiety.

Yet, Lord, you remain at our side to comfort and provide,
reminding us of your promise that all is forgiven for all time.
We praise You, Lord,
that you bless us anew each day with your grace and goodness;
that you open doors to fresh opportunities;
you lead us by the hand to a place we can call home.

Take us from where we are, so that,
refreshed in our journey with you and with one another,
we may see you more clearly, love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
In Jesus' name we ask, and in his words we pray, saying:
Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in 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.

Hymn (2): 549 How deep the Father's love for us

Readings:

Bible Readings:

Psalm 23: (NRSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Acts 2: 42-47: (New Century Version)

They spent their time learning the apostles' teaching, sharing, breaking bread, and praying together.

The Believers Share

The apostles were doing many miracles and signs, and everyone felt great respect for God. All the believers were together and shared everything. They would sell their land and the things they owned and then divide the money and give it to anyone who needed it. The believers met together in the Temple every day. They ate together in their homes, happy to share their food with joyful hearts. They praised God and were liked by all the people. Every day the Lord added those who were being saved to the group of believers.

Hymn (3): 557 O love that wilt not let me go

Gospel Reading; John 10:1-1 (New International Version)

The good shepherd and his sheep.

Jesus said:

'Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.' Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Message:

Today we have two of my favourite passages from the Bible: the 23rd Psalm, and the excerpt from John's Gospel. There's a lot about sheep in these readings.

I remember a poem I heard a long time ago:

A farmer told me long ago,
he hated sheep—said I, "Why so?"
"All sheep are woolly bleaters,
time-consuming turnip-eaters,
whose one ambition is to try
to find a different way to die.

All my working life I've tried
to stop this ovine suicide,
but living isn't in their nature.
A sheep's a Kamikaze creature."

Sheep are not the most intelligent of creatures, but they are not entirely stupid either. They know that humans don't all look alike, and research has confirmed that sheep can indeed recognize and remember human faces and voices.

Sheep are not stupid – they just think like sheep. They need to be looked after, and that's where the shepherd comes in, and there is a lot in today's readings about shepherds too.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to live in the country, especially where there are lots of sheep, are familiar with shepherds, or we think we are. In this country we think of a man – or a woman – with one or two energetic, tireless collies, walking miles over hills and rough ground in all weathers, looking after hundreds of sheep. Making sure that they have enough food and water, that they don't stray or get into trouble, attending to them when they are sick, helping them at lambing time. Herding, shearing, dosing, and so on.

We are accustomed to seeing sheep herded, or driven, or made to go in directions they don't want to go, and to do things they don't want to do. The farmer or the shepherd has their welfare uppermost in his mind – for therein lies his profit – but that is not always obvious to the sheep.

Do we start to see anything familiar here? Why the Bible parables refer to *us* as sheep?

In Jesus's time, and in many parts of the world today, the sheep were kept mainly for wool, not for meat, so the picture of the shepherd was different from the one we know. The shepherd didn't drive his sheep – he led them: the sheep followed him. The outcome may have been the same, but the relationship was entirely different. The sheep trusted the shepherd. They looked to the shepherd not only to find them food and water and shelter –

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters; he leads me in right paths.*

Consciously or unconsciously, the sheep looked to the shepherd for protection: protection from wild animals, and from thieves and bandits. The shepherd does for the sheep what they can't do for themselves. The sheep did – do – recognise the voice and the appearance of the shepherd.

This had a lot of implications for the shepherd too. The shepherd was never off-duty. In a very arid, rugged country with no fences, and with wolves and other wild animals, as well as bandits and robbers, he had to be consciously on the lookout. He was often in physical danger. We should remember too that, because of their occupation, shepherds were unable to observe all the minute details of the Jewish Law, and so were regarded as unclean. They were on the lowest level of society.

The metaphor that dominates our readings today is immensely powerful. The theme is safety and security. God is the Shepherd. We are the sheep. But we must remember at this time that there are many, many people who do not feel that the world is a safe place, people daily in fear of their lives through war, or oppression, or poverty, or insecurity – even before the Coronavirus pandemic.

The 23rd Psalm, the Shepherd Psalm, is probably the best known and best-loved of the psalms. It talks to us about the tender love of the Good Shepherd for us. It shows the utter dependence on God that we - the sheep - have. God is the one who knows where is best for us to be: God is the one who knows where we will find nourishment, and safety - even if these places do not look safe or happy to us, even as we walk through the darkest valley. God is the one who protects us from danger and leads us, even urges us on, through the less pleasant parts of life.

The Psalm is about God and us, but more about God. We find the same imagery in Chapter 10 of John's Gospel. It has been called a Christian version of Psalm 23.

It is full of mixed metaphors - maybe John got carried away in his enthusiasm. Jesus describes himself as both shepherd and gate. The thieves and bandits try to enter by climbing the walls of the sheep-fold - we might call it a fank or a bucht - and they stand at the door and try to call the sheep out. The sheep-fank is a place of safety. The fank of Jesus' time had an entrance, but no gate. When the sheep were inside, the shepherd lay down across the opening. Jesus says, "*I am the gate for the sheep.*" Jesus came to open the way to God. He is the door through which we can enter into a relationship with God.

The shepherd is the safe person to follow. The sheep - that's us - know his voice. There will be distractions. There will be those who will try to entice us away, or even force us to cease following, but we must follow the shepherd. Those who came before - the thieves and robbers - are not the prophets, but what somebody called the *fundamentalist terrorists of their day*, the people who believed that the Kingdom of God could come through violence, whereas Jesus continually emphasises that the only way that leads to God is the way of love.

Acts 2 shows how the vision of a few people in the early Christian Church developed. It is an inspiring and challenging story of how the apostles were moved by the Holy Spirit to hold all things in common, to share their possessions, to care for those in need and eat together full of rejoicing. Jesus had shown them a bigger picture of what life *could* be like when they looked beyond their own concerns and let themselves be transformed by love.

The message of John 10:10 emphasises 'Having life in all its fullness'. Acts shows us a new community where life is affirmed, not denied, and where people flourish.

And things are happening. Over the last ten years or so there has been a lot of talk, but not much action, about 'The Church Without Walls'. The idea that the church is not buildings - the church is people. The Lockdown forced on us by the Covid-19 pandemic has made us find different ways of helping and supporting the people who make up the church. Many leaders are providing worship through the internet. At local level people are keeping in touch with relatives and friends, and especially the elderly and infirm and housebound, by telephone.

We need also to hold in our thoughts and our prayers those who long for the food and water, the freedom and the safety and security that we take for granted.

The Coronavirus outbreak threatens the health of our neighbours near and far. Now as it spreads across the world's poorest countries it puts at great risk people living in poverty, people already facing a lack of water, food and healthcare, some homeless, some living with underlying health issues such as HIV. These people urgently need assistance.

Sunday 10th May begins Christian Aid week. Christian Aid works with some of the world's communities most at risk in some 37 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin

America and the Caribbean. At the present time they are working urgently to limit the impact of coronavirus in some of the most vulnerable communities around the world by providing essential soap, water and handwashing training, by ensuring urgent health messages get through to help keep people safe. Christian Aid works through the networks of church partners and faith-based organisations to reach the most vulnerable at this critical time.

In testing times like these we realise that we are all in this together, ourselves, and people around the world. Coronavirus impacts all of us. But love unites us all. Christian Aid needs our prayers – and our money too.

Our reading from John's gospel is uplifting and encouraging. It shows us the safety and the security that comes with the risen Christ, and it ends with the delight of the fullness of life which Christ brings us. Never forget Jesus's promise:

"I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness."

Life in all its fullness.

The Greek means a superabundance. Life in all its fullness. But we have to play our part in making it a reality. It is only when we live with Jesus Christ that life becomes really worth living. It is only in him that we begin to live in the fullest sense of the word.

That is what is on offer.

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria: to God alone be the glory.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 14 The Lord's my shepherd. (The best-known and best-loved tune is Crimond, but it has come to be associated with funerals and sad times, and I tend to use one of the others).

Dedication of Offering:

Gracious God,
especially in this Easter season
there are no words deep enough to thank you for all your goodness,
no deeds great enough to thank you for all your love,
no gifts costly enough to thank you for your gift in Jesus Christ.

Yet we long to express our gratitude for all you have done for us.
So we bring to you our offerings, of money, and of ourselves,
through your blessing they may help open the way to visions of a better world for all.
Amen.

Prayers of Intercession:

Lord,
You are our shepherd.
We thank you that you give us
everything we need;
that through your Word.
you offer us rest and refreshment,
and keep us on the straight and narrow
when we are prone to stray.
We thank you that in our times of doubt and anxiety

we can trust that you watch out for us.

We pray for other people,
for in the world at large
there are many who hunger;
many even in our own country dependent on food-banks;
many struggling to survive.
We pray for the poor, the exploited,
for people who are homeless or displaced.

We pray at this time for all the people throughout the world
who are affected in any way by the Coronavirus pandemic.
We pray for those who are ill and hovering between life and death,
and for the doctors and nurses and all who tend them,
even at real risk of becoming infected.
We pray for people unable to visit loved ones who are ill,
and all who grieve for those who have died.
We pray for scientists and all who work to develop vaccines and medicines,
and for those in government seeking to find the best ways of managing the disease.

We pray for the many who are fearful for themselves and for others;
for all who are confined to their own homes,
and for people whose businesses and sources of income have disappeared.

We pause and turn our minds to the people we carry in our thoughts at this time,
and to our own special concerns

Through our thoughts and our prayers, may we walk alongside them in their worry and
distress, their pain and suffering, their joys and hopes.

Lord God,
through all their varied joys and struggles
shepherd all your people on their different journeys.
Assure them, and us, that, even though we walk through the darkest valley,
we need fear no evil; for you are with us,
your rod and your staff— they comfort us;
and remind us of Jesus's words:
I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

In his name we pray. Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) 533 Will you come and follow me

Closing Words and Benediction:

You are sought: seek peace.
You are loved: love justice.
You are protected: protect the weak.
You are safe: save the lost.
You are chosen: choose life.
And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with us, and remain with us,
now and always. Amen.

Doxology:

May God's blessing surround you each day,
As you trust Him and walk in his way,
May his presence within guard and keep you from sin,
Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.