

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – May 3 2020 ('Easter 4')**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the third Sunday after Easter, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Margaret and Elliot Barker for joining in the preparation of this week's edition.

### **Call to Worship:**

In Psalm 100 we read these words:

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come before him with joyful songs.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he who made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

### **Prayers**

We begin our worship in prayer. Let us pray.

In a world whose normal has been turned upside down, Lord we pray for grace to pause and worship you.

Not in a normal way, not all at the same time, not in a dedicated building with musician and minister, chancel and cross. Not in the company of church members and visitors, our friends and fellow workers in the body of Christ. At least not in their physical company.

But nevertheless sharing a focus and a purpose with millions on millions of Christians around the world, some who never see a church organ, a pulpit or lectern because they have had constraints on their worship for years – their normal has never been ours.

As we reflect on what it really means to worship you, help us to take advantage of what does remain to us, and always will – your love for your creation and your people, the gift of your son, his life and teaching, the Good News of his triumph over death at Easter.

Forgive us when we forget what is important and yearn for the normal.

We offer these prayers in Jesus' name and gather all our prayers together in the prayer he taught us:

### **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. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

**Music**<sup>i</sup> – *All we, like sheep, have gone astray.* (excerpt, based on Isaiah 53.6)  
Chorus from *Messiah* by G F Handel, in a recording by the choir of Christ Church, Oxford and the Academy of Ancient Music.

## **Scripture<sup>ii</sup>: Psalm 23**

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, <sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

### **Reflection (1)**

This week we make a little swerve away from the narrative of the post-Easter appearances of Jesus, though Ascensiontide and Pentecost are peeping over the horizon. But our Gospel speaks of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Not the only passage with this theme, and as our Old Testament reading from Psalms reminds us, the metaphor of God portrayed as a shepherd was alive and well centuries before Christ came along.

Our family is not afraid of the occasional joke against itself, and I hope Erica will forgive me telling the world that in response to a question in an RE lesson she once identified the source of a well-known biblical passage as 'Handel's *Messiah*' rather than the relevant book in the New Testament. But I take it as proof of her family's musical tastes, and it is absolutely true that there are some phrases and passages that take us straight to *Messiah* and to me Isaiah Chapter 53, verse 6 is one of them. In the King James Version this starts:

*All we like sheep...*

This work is often sung at Christmas, and if the choir is sounding a bit jolly then our family also muses on how some casual listener might think 'all we like sheep' is just a variant on 'we all like figgy pudding'.

But of course in context this is part of Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant, and acknowledges how – yet again – the behaviour of God's people is like sheep, not thinking of each other, not thinking of God the shepherd.

*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way;*

So we are like sheep. OK. Apt to stray, apt to follow our noses, our own preferences and routes through life. Selfish. But part of the message then that seems prophetic of Jesus and the Gospel is on the end, both of the *Messiah* chorus and the Isaiah verse:

*we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. In my favourite modern translation the only word that changes is 'hath' – 'has'. For the word 'iniquity' does justice to the deep seated

wrongness that humanity is capable of displaying. It might emerge as lack of care; it might emerge as selfishness. It might emerge, sadly, as violence and abuse. But in Jesus, in the one who we so easily identify as Isaiah's suffering servant, God shows how far he is willing to come to meet us where we are, forgive us, and show us where we can be.

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**Scripture:** John 10.1-10

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup>The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. <sup>3</sup>The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

<sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice." <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

<sup>7</sup>Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.

<sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

## **Reflection (2)**

In our Gospel reading today we heard Jesus say he was a gate. It is a little phrase that might not strike any chords with us, and isn't the most memorable thing in the world. Within the Gospel of John alone you will find more resonant words that Jesus used to describe himself.

I am the bread of life  
I am the light of the world.  
I am the Good Shepherd (a little later in this very chapter)  
I am the resurrection and the life  
The Way, the Truth and the Life  
The True Vine

Luckily we don't attempt to bring all these illustrations together in one image. How could we represent someone who all at the same time themselves represents a shepherd, a loaf of bread, a light and a vine?

It wouldn't look human.

But Jesus was totally human – that is again and again the whole point. The Word made flesh, dwelling among us.

And he was addressing the issues of the day for the human beings of the day – his fellow human beings.

That's our challenge too – so ought we to dwell on the shepherd imagery? Ought we to dwell on ideas of lamps, bread and vines? We have lights. We eat bread – any number of variants on it. Some of us have vines; I can see ours from here, dormant at the moment but lush come late summer and tending to obscure most other plants at the foot of the garden. Ought we to dwell on the old images?

Yes we should – for a number of reasons.

First of all, ancient as they may be, these images are the closest we get to Jesus. The experts go through their textual criticism and deduce that each of the Gospels was written years after Jesus was on earth as a man; each of them was written for a different community of early Christians; each represents a different point of view. But even if it is diluted and edited, the material in the Gospels is what we have and therefore what we should use.

This material is given us by posterity. I believe God intends us to have it and to use it.

So shepherds, lights under bushels, vines and loaves it is.

Secondly, if these illustrations were distinctly meaningful to the original group that heard Jesus talk, it ought to make his essential meaning more clear if we unpack what the images meant to them. The shepherd held a place in the society of Palestine of two thousand years ago that he never will in Britain again. We light candles at times of celebration or in fits of pyromania – sometimes both, but unless we choose the spartan life, we don't rely on oil lamps for light. We flick a switch. And most of us are far enough away from self-sufficiency and agricultural labour that growing our own fruit – on the vine – is totally optional.

But all of these things were totally familiar to Jesus' first audience. And that's why unpacking the original meaning is a challenge to us. Jesus didn't need to go much further than to say "I am the good shepherd" before a whole raft of implications of that statement would be clear to those around him.

And surely we stay with our old images because we do not have anything better with which to replace them. We need to do a bit of delving and word-archaeology to discern what it is that Jesus meant when he talked about shepherds and gates and vines and bread and lamps, but we can understand these images much more than the poorest of God's people in the world today would understand the surroundings and trappings of the richest. [That's us, by the way].

If the images in the Bible, in the Gospel, are very basic ones, so much the better. This is a universal faith. Let's not try to substitute images that are not themselves universal, or at least straightforward to comprehend, right across the spectrum of people that God would want to reach today.

The aspect of shepherding that Jesus brings us in our passage is the sheep-fold, the place that the sheep are confined until the shepherd comes. And the shepherd is authorised to take them out. The shepherd is recognised – by the watchman and by the sheep. The shepherd becomes the way out. The way out from the fold to something better.

The Way and the Truth and the Life.

Jesus is the Way – he is the Way out of one place and into another. Out of one state and into another. Put simply, he is a gate.

The sheep live in danger. The sheep need a fold. The sheep need guidance. They need protection. And they – we – have it. In Jesus, the Good Shepherd and the gate of the sheep.

Amen

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Around our prayers for the church and the world we hear the Taizé Community Choir singing *ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est*. (Where there is charity and love, God is there) [As on the album, Sounds of Taizé]

We pray...

Lord God we want to respond to you in love. Jesus left us the commandment to love you and to love our neighbours. Help us to interpret and apply your rules in these times.

*Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est*

We pray for your world. A world where nations and communities and individuals have been forced to look at themselves and their behaviours to try to determine the best next steps, as well as how to stay safe. Be with those making decisions at every level; grant them and their advisors wisdom. May we not simply follow our own preferences but act together for the good of all.

*Ubi caritas...*

We pray for your church. A church in which normality has vanished and new ways are being found to worship. Be with those who don't have access to modern communications or computer technology. Be with those looking for fresh ideas week by week and new ways to express old truths; grant them wisdom. May we not simply follow our own preferences but channel your love and the Gospel of Christ.

*Ubi caritas...*

We pray for the human family. A family under constraint to remain isolated where its instinct is to congregate. A family in which anxieties are harder to share, grief is harder to console and even love harder to express. Be with those who find it hardest to bear the distancing. Be with those tempted to break rules even if it jeopardises others and grant them wisdom. May we not simply follow our own preferences but discern where the right path lies to walk through the coming days in safety.

*Ubi caritas...*

And in all of this, Lord, may our inspiration and motive be to share your love. Love so great that Jesus your Son was given to give us purpose, hope and life.

In his name                      Amen

**Song**            *The Lord's my shepherd*; Psalm 23 adapted and sung by Stuart Townend.  
This was found on an album, *The World's Favourite Hymns*

**Blessing** (based on words from Hebrews 13)

May the 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 God;

and may the blessing of God Almighty; Father Son and Holy Spirit be with us and those  
we love today and for ever.

Amen

Our closing music is from another oratorio by Handel – an uplifting incidental  
instrumental passage from *Solomon* that you might recognise.

**Music:**            *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba, Symphony* from *Solomon* by G F  
Handel, performed by the Academy of Ancient Music, Christopher Hogwood.

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<sup>i</sup> All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music  
Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition.