

**Dorset South & West WRITTEN SERVICE 30th April 2023 by Pamela Woodland
In God's loving care**

Opening words: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me down to lie in pastures green; he leadeth me the quiet waters by.

Hymn 13 Praise my soul the King of Heaven

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven; To his feet thy tribute bring.

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like thee his praise should sing?

Praise him! Praise him! Praise the everlasting King!

Praise him for his grace and favour to our fathers in distress;

Praise him, still the same for ever, slow to chide, and swift to bless.

Praise him! Praise him! Glorious in his faithfulness.

Father-like, he tends and spares us; well our feeble frame he knows;

In his hands he gently bears us, rescues us from all our foes.

Praise him! Praise him! Widely as his mercy flows.

Prayers

A prayer of St Francis of Assisi

You are holy, Lord, the only God, your deeds are wonderful.

You are strong, you are great, you are the most high, you are almighty.

You, Holy Father, are King of heaven and earth.

You are Three and One, Lord God, all good.

You are good, all good, supreme good, Lord God, living and true.

You are love, you are wisdom. You are humility, you are endurance.

You are rest, you are peace.

You are joy and gladness, you are justice and moderation.

You are all our riches, and you suffice for us

You are beauty, you are gentleness.

You are our protector, you are our guardian and defender.

You are courage, you are our haven and hope.

You are our faith, our great consolation.

You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord,

God almighty, merciful Saviour. Amen.

O Father, your voice has called us, you have placed your name on our lips and your work in our hands. We are your church, your pilgrim people. We ask you to open up for us a future that is new.

Make us poor and make us simple, the better to know your gospel and to follow Jesus. We ask your forgiveness for our past faults. For the pride which has often driven us to seek power. Forgive us if sometimes we have not been worthy of your trust.
(Silence)

To those who confess their sins and are determined to live a new life, Jesus says “Your sins are forgiven.” Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

Gospel Reading : John 10 v 1 – 11

“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. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. 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. 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 recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He 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. I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD. THE GOOD SHEPHERD LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SHEEP.”

In God’s loving care

This reading from John’s gospel - the story of Jesus and his flock – gives, not only a warning about the evil in the world but also the comfort that a good shepherd can bring. This is later confirmed in verses 27 and 28 of John’s gospel “*My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand.*”

In Jesus’ time the people he was talking to would have understood about sheep and shepherds, they may even have had similar situations themselves when thieves and robbers tried to take their sheep, but they did not appear to understand what he was trying to teach them. And in today’s world, we know of modernday thieves who want to steal, kill and destroy – perhaps not physically but mentally they try to distract us from the path that God has laid for us. However, by continuing to love God and accepting the promises made by Jesus of life everlasting with him, we have the comfort and assurance that Jesus was conveying to his listeners with the story of the good shepherd.

Jesus is likening God’s care to that of a shepherd to his sheep. We are all his sheep – he counts

us to make sure no one is missing. If one strays he finds it and brings it back rejoicing as we read in Matthew 18 v 13 *“When he finds it, I tell you, he feels far happier over this one sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not get lost. In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost.”*

This made me think of the earlier hymn “Praise my soul the King of Heaven” In verse 3 we sing *“Father-like, he tends and spares us, Well our feeble frame he knows; In his hands he gently bear us, rescues us from all our foes”* We all have down times, perhaps we are unwell and feel that we really do have a feeble frame, but we can rest assured that God knows and is holding us in his hands. We are in God’s loving care whilst here on earth – we are his sheep, he knows us and we follow him.

Psalm 23 is often used at funerals, either as a reading or a hymn and it helps bring true comfort to the bereaved. 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 when small glimmers of light finally begin to shine.

At the heart of it, 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. He entered into the darkness of death and he promises to walk that road so that we do not have to walk it alone.

From Revelation 7 v 16 we have the comfort of knowing that he will be with us always, in this world and the next.

*Never again will they hunger; Never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon them, Nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd;
He will lead them to springs of living water.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

The ultimate truth of our Christian faith, the truth we remember this Easter season and every Sunday as we celebrate the Lord’s Resurrection, 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 work, to relieve its suffering, to restore it to wholeness, and to inaugurate a new creation. This 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.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving Shepherd of your sheep, we pray for those who hunger for love; May they lie down in green pastures of your care *Silence*

We pray for those who thirst for peace; may they drink of you and find rest. *Silence*

We pray for those whose spirits are weary' may they be revived by you. *Silence*

Loving Shepherd of your sheep, we remember before you those walking through valleys of deepest darkness: those who are ill; those who have been bereaved;
those overshadowed by guilt or depression; those who are lonely or afraid.

We ask that they might know that you are with them and fear no harm. We ask that they might know the comfort of your guiding, protecting and saving love.

Loving Shepherd of your sheep, you have provided us with all that we need. You have blessed us richly. We ask for the grace and wisdom to respond to your love and goodness

By putting our faith in you. We ask for the grace and courage to follow you along the path of self-giving love all the days of our lives.

In the name of him who keeps us safe, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Hymn: The King of love my shepherd is

The king of love my Shepherd is, Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his and he is mind 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.

Blessing: May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst us and remain with us always.