

DS&W Circuit Written Service 26th November 2023 by Revd Steph Jenner

Call to Worship: Psalm 95: 1 – 3, 7a

O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the LORD is a great God and a great King above all gods. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.

Hymn StF 658

A charge to keep I have:

a God to glorify;

a never-dying soul to save,

and fit it for the sky;

To serve the present age,

my calling to fulfil;

O may it all my powers engage

to do my Master's will!

Arm me with jealous care,

as in your sight to live;

and O your servant, Lord, prepare

a strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,

and on yourself rely,

so shall I not my trust betray,

nor love within me die.

Charles Wesley

Prayer of Praise (Paul's Prayer from Ephesians 1: 15 – 23)

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Prayer of Confession (use the to take a time of silence to think)

We take a moment to think about what we have done as individuals, groups, and communities, where we need to seek forgiveness from others, from God, and where we may need to forgive ourselves.... place our thoughts into God's hands.... discern if there is any action required.... resolve to do what is necessary.... and find peace and calm in forgiveness. Amen.

Lord's Prayer (please use whichever version in whatever language you find is best for you)

Ezekiel 34: 11 – 24

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet and drink what you have fouled with your feet? Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged, and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I the LORD have spoken.

Hymn StF 716

There are no strangers to God's love,
yet we have privatised God's grace.
Bounded by nationhood and lies,
in fear we shrouded love's own face.
Acknowledging our sin and greed
we come confessing common need.

These are our neighbours and our friends,
the ones who run in fear from war,
who dread abuse by power or state,
or seek the means to be less poor;
these are the ones we have denied,
as in each one the Christ has cried.

When people seeking sanctuary
come to this place and need our aid,
then in Christ's name let's offer care;
through this our debt of love is paid.
God's grace is free, this grace receive,
let actions show what we believe.

Andrew Pratt

Matthew 25: 31 – 46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

Reflection

Our above reading from Matthew's Gospel may well be familiar to us – separating the sheep from the goats is an often used phrase – but it echoes also the much earlier Ezekiel passage (in which we can find phrases similar to Psalm 23 – the Lord is my shepherd) that we may not be quite so familiar with. Jesus tells us of a clear division, based on actions, and is quite straightforward in his explanation and direction, so that even we today can at once see where we fit in, and what we need to do if we want to be sheep, not goats.

Ezekiel covers many more circumstances of what God, as shepherd, will do for the flock. Firstly they will be gathered from all the places, and into all the other flocks, they have strayed and brought back into good pasture. But once they are together and in a good place they will be attended to as well. They will be made well and strengthened if they are ill or weak, if there are still some missing, they will be found as well (remember Jesus talking about seeking the one lost sheep?) and once they are all present and correct God will judge them, again by their actions. If they butt their way through, trample of the good pasture and foul the waters for other animals, they will be removed. And it's not the sheep and the goats being separated, but it is sheep and sheep. And then we have a new prince – David – who will adjudicate who is worthy to remain in the flock and who is cast out.

You would hope that Jesus's audience would know about this, after all David was one of their greatest kings and they harked back to that time, but, as ever, time passes, and they forget to heed the warnings. They assume that as they are all children of Abraham, then they are automatically in God's flock, whatever they do, however they treat others, their own (sheep) or other animals (including goats and sheep 'not like them' in their own flocks).

It's a trap we fall into today easily as well. We assume we're part of the 'in crowd' and therefore we're alright, we're chosen, a once and forever done thing. But we're not, no-one every is. We have to continue to work, grow, and adapt to take our place in God's flock. Not only to not stray ourselves, but to not cause others to stray either.

And the Jesus takes us further, he speaks emphatically, and plainly. We may say we are his followers, but if we don't treat others as if they were Jesus himself, we have fallen short, and must do better. Plus, not just the usual charitable efforts of giving food and drink and clothing, but actually making people welcome, helping them when they are ill (physically, mentally, and emotionally I assume) and visiting them in prison – that is not abandoning them, even if they have done great wrong. They are not for us to judge, that is God's role.

One of my favourite recent sayings is 'err on the side of caution, love everyone and God will sort us out later'.

From our readings I think we can take two thoughts: (1) look to ourselves, make sure we are doing all the correct things and are following God's instructions (2) look to others and make sure that we are not causing them harm or difficulties, but are actively making sure they are alright and have everything they need too.

Basically 'love God and keep the commandments' and 'love your neighbour as yourself'. It has been said throughout human religious history, I get upset at how often we forget, make excuses, or wilfully neglect to live this way.

We are coming to Advent, we expect Jesus to return. Let's prepare ourselves and each other as if he were coming back as each and every one of us.

Prayers of Thanksgiving

For all your gifts and graces, Loving God, we bring our thanks and praises. We cannot sometimes understand how you love us so much, but then we read what your followers wrote of their experiences with you we begin to realise your delight and despair in humanity, but how you continue to lead us and teach us, guide us and show us the way, until our lives reflect Christ's as best we can. Your infinite patience with our trying, your unending forgiveness with our mistakes, your constant presence in our lives, your journey with us throughout all our lives – all these are so remarkable for such a troubled human race, that our thanks are never enough, but give us, we pray, the strength to continue to bring our thanksgiving. Amen.

Hymn StF 672

Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?

We want to serve you, to answer your call.
Where do you lead us and ask us to follow?
What should we do in our service to all?

'Go to the hungry, to those who have nothing;
go where the farmlands are empty and bare.
I broke the bread for the people around me;
out of my plenty, think what you can share.

'Go to the homeless, to those who have nowhere;
go where my people sleep out in the rain.
I had no comforts but what others gave me;
offer them shelter, give ease to their pain.

'Go to the outcast, to those who have no-one;
go where my sheep are rejected and lost.
I dined with sinners and reached out to lepers;
go and do likewise, and don't count the cost.'

Where will we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?

We are your servants who answer your call.
You go before us, and there we will follow,
taking our cross in the service of all.

Allan Charles Dickinson

Prayers of Intercession (use the to take a time of silence to think)

Gracious God, we pray for the church that we may be open to the gifts of your grace...

We pray for the countries of the world that your Spirit may lead all the people to live in peace...

We pray for the people of our communities that our love for one another may be a witness to the love of Christ...

We pray for those who live in poverty or distress, that you will send them help and comfort...

We remember those who died and we pray that we, with them, share the joys of heaven...

We ask these through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn StF 415

The Church of Christ, in every age
Beset by change but Spirit-led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on riding from the dead.

Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they dies.

Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.

For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood,
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word

Fred Pratt Green

Blessing

May God give us comfort and peace, light, and joy, in this world and the next; and may the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among us and remain with us always. Amen.

