



The Lord's My Shepherd - 3rd May 2020 Transcript

Hello everyone. Welcome to worship once again. Weirdly separate and yet strangely together. To begin our worship today, I thought I'd try out a new song on you. It's one I began writing about 18 months ago, and have recently tweaked into its current form, in which it has just appeared on the Singing The Faith Website. It's a song which reminds us all of all the things that God is and does, thinking through God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, ending with a reminder that our God is three in one. The title is "Adonai", which means My Great Lord - an ancient Hebrew name for God. The tune's very simple, so I hope you'll join in with me.

Song: Adonai

*Adonai, eternal, almighty, King of glory,
all Wisdom, astounding, exalted, God of all things,
immortal, all-knowing, all-loving, understanding,
all-seeing, believing, accepting, liberating,
the author, designer, sustainer, ever-present God.*

*The Alpha, beginning, inception, root of all life,
incarnate, among us, within us, Word now spoken,
Immanuel, peace-bringing, releasing, man of sorrows,
Redeemer, deliverer, anointed King of Heaven,
Omega, our ending, our meaning, all-embracing God.*

*Inspirer, comforter, truth-bringer, Holy Spirit,
unfailing, protecting, our shield, and intercessor,
all-trusting, releasing, empowering, non-coercing,
the Counsellor, expectant, ever - illuminating.
Together in Oneness, one endless Trinitarian God.*

Clare Stainsby

And now a prayer, let us pray

Loving Lord, our God, Adonai, our great Lord.

As we sing words that remind us of who you are, we centre our thoughts and our worship on you. You have been all of these things and many more for this world since it began, and for your people throughout the ages. We sometimes forget that we are learning and experiencing and understanding and sharing in the same God who was there for people in every century, too many to number. We know that you know us, and love us; that our tiny lives matter to you, but we also need to remember that we share you with the entire human race, past,



present and future. And yet, you are not diminished in any way by being shared among so many - you are everything that you are to every single person, without stinting and without diluting. As we remember just how amazing that is, we also take this opportunity to thank you, for all that you have done for us in Jesus, and all that you continue to do by your living Holy Spirit. We are not alone, and your love and peace surround us each day. You understand our thoughts and feelings, our frustrations and our joys, and you accept us just as we are. As these uncertain days continue, and as the world watches and waits to see what will happen next, we thank you that we are secure in you, and that nothing in all of creation can separate us from you, and from your love. We offer our prayers to you, sharing together in the Lord's prayer.

*Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.*

One of the familiar sights of this time of year, is that of a field full of peaceful grazing sheep, and among them many new lambs, running and playing, frisking and frolicking in the sunshine. It's a sight that is everywhere in the fields around my home village of Great Ayton in North Yorkshire. I know that because when I lived there, everywhere I went, everytime I left the village, in whatever direction, there were sheep. And through the wonders of Facebook, I'm seeing it now, as today's locals post the snaps of their daily walks in the spring countryside. We don't have too many lambs and sheep in our part of Irlam sadly, but I know they are not so far away. And Jesus's homeland was similar. Sheep were an important commodity to the people of the Galilee region. So when Jesus used the imagery of sheep and shepherds, everyone was used to seeing those sights and therefore knew what he was talking about. The Old Testament is very similar, it's also full of sheep and shepherd imagery. Today I have chosen to use two readings, but not have them read separately. Instead, I've chosen to weave them together. One is the very familiar Psalm 23, and the other is some of the verses from John Chapter 10. So thank you Rachael and Phil.

Reading: Psalm 23 / John 10

Voice 1: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

Voice 2: I am the good shepherd. The sheep listen to my voice. I call my sheep by name and lead them out. I go ahead of them, and they follow because they know my voice.

Voice 1: He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside

Salford Methodist Circuit



quiet waters, he restores my soul.

Voice 2: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Voice 1: He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Voice 2: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Voice 1: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Voice 2: I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Voice 1: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Voice 2: I have come in order that they might have life - life in all its fullness.

Voice 1: Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Although Jesus used the imagery of sheep and shepherds, his topic as recorded in John 10, was nothing to do with sheep farming.

Any more than the writer of Psalm 23 was explaining how shepherds behave, Nor for that matter, is any of it about how it felt to be a sheep!

Both were taking the familiar matters of everyday experience, and encouraging new thinking about God. The Psalmist is saying, "God is like the very best kind of shepherd taking care of his sheep". And Jesus goes a step further, and says, "I am that good shepherd". In other words, "I am your God, here with you in person, and this is how I am for you."

But let's just think about sheep for a moment.

Have you ever looked at a flock of sheep, and thought they all look pretty much the same. They all seem to have the same expression on their faces - one of peaceful acceptance of life. They all seem to be committed to eating grass, even when their lambs are butting them and expecting to feed. Occasionally they might lift their heads and emit familiar sheep noises, as they look for those lambs that are not right there beside them. Perhaps something may startle one of the sheep, and that will cause a ripple effect of action among the flock.

Perhaps the shepherd may appear with his dog, and then, as a body, they will move in the direction the shepherd chooses.

Of course there's more to a sheep's life than this - I apologise to all sheep farmers for over-simplifying the life of a sheep! And there is of course more for



sheep than their spring time existence. Sometimes it rains, or snows; sometimes the grass is sparse and bitter; sometimes they need dipping and shearing. It's just not always springtime!

Whether it's true or not, there's something about sheep that gives the impression that they are all much the same - just mindless followers, doing as each other do, and doing as they are directed to do without really having a thought of their own. So I wonder how do you feel about being associated with sheep? I'm not sure I want to be regarded as some silly manipulated animal, mindlessly following the crowd, any more than I fancy being pulled out of a snow drift, or dipped or fleeced.

I suspect that while there may be some truth in the analogy of sheep in the Bible, it's not the whole story, nor is it the part of the picture we should dwell on. Though I don't think it hurts us from time to time to ask ourselves if we are mindlessly following the crowd, without a thought to why. Let's not forget that, as Isaiah put it, "all we like sheep have gone astray." While we have far more intelligence and capacity to make decisions than sheep, we still get it wrong, frequently. We definitely need a shepherd.

John tells us that Jesus told the crowd in Galilee, "I am the Good Shepherd. I am the one whose primary purpose is to be there for the sheep of my flock. I am the one who knows my sheep by name. And they recognise my voice and respond to me. I lead them out, and go ahead of them and they follow, because they know my voice." It's clear to me that part of the Good Shepherd's role is to ensure that his sheep know him, recognise him and follow him, rather than randomly following each other, or waywardly following their own path. Sometimes I think people see the church as a bunch of people mindlessly following a pattern of life without giving it another thought, turning up for church on Sunday, and sticking together because there's somehow safety being part of a flock. Is that how the church is? Now, when we are all so scattered, and being together at a particular time in a particular building is impossible, is this also a time for us to ask ourselves, do we know the voice of the one we follow? And are we ready to hear that voice call us in new directions? Is there perhaps something a little bit mindless about our normal rhythm of life, that is illuminated when that rhythm is no longer possible, causing us to seek the deeper purposes behind our patterns of life, and discover a new depth to following, that is neither mindless nor routine? I'm certain there will be nothing mindless about our celebrations when we can be together again - it will be pure joy! But also, I hope, full of all that we have learned through these weeks of isolation, about listening and trusting and following into new life and hope.

Jesus goes on in John 10 to talk about being the gate for the sheep. You might want to read the whole passage in John 10, at some point, and hear all that he has to say. In the first century, it was the practice for the shepherd to protect his flock by lying in the doorway of his sheep fold, as the front line of defence.



There was no gate across the entrance - the shepherd himself was the gate. We know a gate is a barrier, but it is also one that can be opened to allow for movement. Jesus is not a barrier, but an entrance to opportunity - as it says in verse 10: "I have come that they may have life, and have to the full." Fullness of life, abundant life! Jesus is not a barrier to any of life's opportunities. I think the church is sometimes seen as a place where this and that and the other are not allowed; where there are endless rules to follow, and if you fail to follow, you will be punished. How utterly wrong that is! Jesus is not telling us, "do as I say or I'm pushing you out in the cold." Quite the opposite. He is saying, "I am the one who will give you the opportunities to have the best life possible. I will be open to you going out and coming in. I will be the first line of protection for you, but I will never permanently barricade you in with rules and regulations, or the threat of punishment. I am the way that leads to a life that is full of possibilities." How often do we make our churches places where we can be safely barricaded in, protected from the world around us? But that misses the point - of Jesus being the gateway to new possibilities. Safety and protection are one thing, but while the sheep fold may be safe, the opportunities are found beyond its walls. We are definitely, of course, beyond the walls of the church at present. Can we see this as a time of new possibility, new opportunities, a time when we can know life in all its fullness, in spite of the restrictions upon us? Can we see this as a time of learning, or preparation, and of energising for all that lies ahead?

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That makes sense. We have recently observed Jesus laying down his life for the people of this world, as he submitted to death on a cross. He did that for us, but he goes on say, "I don't just do it for the flock who already know me. There are others who are not of this sheep pen, but I lay down my life for them too. My flock is by no means exclusive. It is open to all." Jesus, the good shepherd, lays down his life for all the world, past, present and still to come. I wonder how many people in this world are accessing the things of God, during this strange time, when the world is so different? How many are seeking to find the one behind the whole mystery of life? How many, who would never think of stepping into a church have found praying a part of their new rhythm of life? How many have placed a rainbow, an ancient symbol of hope and promise in God, in their window? How many are asking questions they've never had the time to ask before? I wonder if, when this time is over, some will come to Christ's church seeking understanding? Or if some might come with gratitude for the crisis being passed. Or if some might come to find healing and solace in their loss? How can we as churches be active in offering opportunities for people to connect with the Good Shepherd of all? We've all known the strangeness of this time. I wonder how it might change the church for the future? I wonder how this time is preparing us for new opportunities that may be ahead? I cannot help thinking that if once this is all over we just slip back into exactly what we were doing before, we will be missing opportunities.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. We continue to celebrate that Jesus is alive



and with us in it all. The Good Shepherd is a lovely image for us, as we struggle with where life is leading us just now. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows us by name, and encourages us to hear his voice. Jesus is the good shepherd who is there at the entrance of all things, offering us protection, but also the very real possibility of life in all its fullness. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

We believe he did that on Good Friday and we believe that on the third day he rose again. Therefore - the Good Shepherd who lays down his life does so to bring us life for us, and that is the message at the heart of our faith. Jesus the Good Shepherd is our Risen Saviour, and he offers us life in abundance, life in abundance to all people. We find our security in him; we find our needs met through him, and we find our hope in him, now and always.

Let's sing of hope and assurance as we sing the hymn In Heavenly Love Abiding

Song: In Heavenly Love Abiding

*In heavenly love abiding,
no change my heart shall fear;
and safe is such confiding,
for nothing changes here:
the storm may roar without me,
my heart may low be laid;
but God is round about me,
and can I be dismayed?*

*Wherever he may guide me,
no want shall turn me back;
my Shepherd is beside me,
and nothing can I lack:
his wisdom ever waketh,
his sight is never dim;
he knows the way he taketh,
and I will walk with him.*

*Green pastures are before me,
which yet I have not seen;
bright skies will soon be o'er me,
where darkest clouds have been;
my hope I cannot measure,
my path to life is free;
my Saviour has my treasure,
and he will walk with me.*

Anna Laetitia Waring (1823 - 1910)

Salford Methodist Circuit



The hymn we just sang was written by Anna Laetitia Waring, a prolific 19th century hymn writer from South Wales. I was once told that she wrote "In Heavenly Love Abiding" after a significant bereavement, which had left her paralysed in her distress. But after some time, she turned to the words of Psalm 23 and wrote her own version from out of her recent experiences. I think that something very important about Psalm 23 is that it speaks with absolute assurance of God's loving presence; a reminder we all need from time to time. But I also think that we turn to that Psalm at particularly difficult times in our lives, not because we share the Psalmist's absolute assurance, but that we yearn for that assurance. Anna Waring clearly yearned for peace that her sadness had taken away from her. But it was to Psalm 23 that she looked in her grief, and it drew her to a place from which she could pen words that have moved people ever since. I think the importance of Psalm 23 is that it doesn't tell us how we should be, and we shouldn't ever feel guilty when we can't be in that moment, in that place of certainty and assurance. But it does remind us that God is with us, and it can help to draw us back to a place of confidence and assurance. With those things in mind I decided to write my own version for now. It may not speak of your experience, nor does it speak of mine on some days. But it helps to remind me of where I need to focus my attention and my trust.

*The Lord is my companion in social isolation. I am never alone.
He gives me rest in the comfort of my own home.
He leads me along familiar pathways as I take my daily exercise.
And he restores my peace.
He leads me forwards, day by day through this strange existence.
Even though death and sadness is all around me,
I am not afraid, because you are with me.
You hold my hand, you steady my anxious thoughts,
You remind me, it's one day at a time.
I am well fed, in spite of all the turmoil. I am blessed in an abundance of ways.
Surely you will be with me,
Surely your love, patience and peace will surrounded me
Throughout this time of uncertainty and far beyond.
I am with you, and you are with me always to the end of time.*

Let's finish by singing another version of that Psalm, as a prayer that God will continue to draw us into a place of trust, as the Good Shepherd continues to share our road, and the road that is being travelled by every person in this world right now. Let's Stuart Townend's version of The Lord's my Shepherd.

Song: The Lord's My Shepherd

*The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
he makes me lie in pastures green,
he leads me by the still, still waters,*

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his goodness restores my soul.

*And I will trust in you alone,
and I will trust in you alone,
for your endless mercy follows me,
your goodness will lead me home.*

*He guides my ways in righteousness,
and he anoints my head with oil;
and my cup - it overflows with joy,
I feast on his pure delights.*

*And I will trust in you alone,
and I will trust in you alone,
for your endless mercy follows me,
your goodness will lead me home.*

*And though I walk the darkest path -
I will not fear the evil one,
for you are with me, and your rod and staff
are the comfort I need to know.*

*And I will trust in you alone,
and I will trust in you alone,
for your endless mercy follows me,
your goodness will lead me home.*

Stuart Townend (b.1963)

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