

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 25 April 2021. 4th Sunday of Easter

Music to start: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4tPkX0MG0>

The Lord's My Shepherd (Psalm 23) by Stuart Townend © 1996 Thankyou Music (Admin. by EMI Christian Music Publishing)

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday as the lectionary readings always reflect Jesus as our Good Shepherd. Our prayers and hymns will reflect this theme, though the sermon will focus on the lectionary reading from Acts. Our call to worship is partly based on Psalm 23.

Call to Worship (Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24)

Day by day, God leads us:
to the deep, deep pools of peace,
to the green, lush lawns of grace.
Day by day, Jesus calls us:
to pour out ourselves in service,
to anoint the stranger with hope.
Day by day, the Holy Spirit shows us:
the community we could be,
the family we are called to become.

Thom Schuman

HYMN Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (R&S 74) recorded by Thora last year

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!
come ye who hear, brother and sisters draw near;
praise him in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
bears thee on eagle's wings, and through all troubles sustaineth:
has thou not seen all that is needful hath been
granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper they work and defend thee!
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee:
ponder anew all the Almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath come now with praises before him!
Let the amen sound from his people again:
gladly for aye we adore him!

Opening Prayer (based on Psalm 23)

Generous God and Giver of all things, we rest in your loving and tender care; and we are revived, restored and renewed by your strength and encouragement. You go before us in life, leading us in pathways that are secure without the confusion of becoming lost, aware only that we always need to follow you; and so we trust in your guidance and wisdom.

As human beings, we know there will be times of stress, when our body or mind lets us down; we know there will dark times too, when life seems to be nothing but struggle; and it is in those times especially, that we rely on your Presence deep within us to guide and bless us. Grace-Giving God, you provide us with the tools we need for the tasks we face, and for this we give you our trust and our thanks.

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Life-Giving God, you put out the 'Welcome' mat for us as we gather to worship you. You nourish our souls and bodies through your goodness and tender mercies; you heal our life's wounds; and your generous love fills us to overflowing. You give us an honoured place at your table, and invite us to stay with you as your guest forever. You have promised that your unfailing love will stay with us always, and for this, we give you our thanks. **Amen.**

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Offering

You are reminded to send in your gifts for the work of the church by cheque or bank transfer.

Holy One, receive our gifts by your grace.

Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Reading: John 10:11-18
Acts 4:5-12

We continue our journey through the book of Acts, though the message of Acts is far more challenging than the nice fluffy shepherd imagery, so you will all probably wish I'd gone with the shepherd theme - in fact the commentary writer Willie James Jennings, introduces chapter 4 of Acts with the heading 'the Criminal-Disciple Emerges'! But more of that later. Today's story follows on from last Sunday's reading, in which Peter, with John at his side, preaches outside the temple to a group of the people who gathered to marvel at the healing of a man who could not walk. The first four verses of Acts 4 provide essential information – **read them.** This tells us that the Sadducees and their allies within the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy are flexing their muscles and arrest the two apostles. Displays of power and coercion like this are what rulers do when they don't know what else to do. (I'm sure we can think of current examples such as the situation in Myanmar, or the numerous deaths of black men at the hands of the police in the USA).

The leaders are provoked by both the content and the effects of Peter's preaching: it's about resurrection and 5000 people are persuaded by what they've seen and heard and 'believed'. The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife or resurrection of the dead. Back in Luke's Gospel, they, along with the other temple-based elites, were already concerned about the impact Jesus and his message were having on large crowds. They considered both the teaching and its popularity very dangerous to their authority. These are the leaders of the temple and the Jewish nobles whom Rome entrusted with ruling and ensuring the peace in Judea. With the high priest at the top of the pyramid. They are the tiny percentage of the population that possessed an enormous amount of power. For the most part, they are the same people who Luke says cooperated with Pilate to do away with Jesus. It is the conflict that began between Jesus and the Jewish leaders that persists now as the apostles take up the work of preaching to the crowds. Acts signals that Jesus'

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followers inherit and continue every aspect of Jesus' ministry - healing, preaching, serving, AND struggling against the people who have the power to discredit and imprison them. And let us not forget that we too are followers of Jesus.

So, the next day, the leaders and rulers assemble to question Peter and John. Peter's message is direct. He quickly turns attention away from himself and toward Jesus. It is the name of Jesus which conveys the power of Jesus, the one crucified and raised from the dead. Peter quotes Psalm 118 about the cornerstone being rejected. The early church saw a hint of the resurrection in the psalmist's poetry about a discarded stone becoming a cornerstone - the most important stone for the structural integrity of a building. It is also significant that the psalm describes the crucial stone as being rejected by the builders, the experts. Peter essentially tells the religious and political equivalents of the master builders that they are incompetent.

The leaders are the builders – the advantaged in the world, those who get to judge the innocent. The followers of Jesus are the common people, the judged. The struggle against those in power marked the life and death of Jesus and now it marks the apostles. The illusion for us as followers of Christ is that we can escape that struggle, that we can be liked, tolerated or ignored by those who wield power in the world. If we are truly following the path of Jesus, we are in the frontline of that confrontation between judges and judged, powerful and ordinary, we are as Jennings says, the criminal disciples. The disciples of Jesus were proclaiming liberation from oppression. Violence and death no longer hold the ultimate power for Jesus Christ is risen. For some of those in power, like the Sadducees and priests, their words were heresy – only God held power, not Jesus of Nazareth, for the police and military of the empire their words are sedition – only Caesar held power, not some upstart carpenter's son. The apostles touched a nerve, so they were arrested and put in custody. Jennings says, "Christians of the modern West have never really grasped our deep connection to [this criminality]. We should always understand ourselves as...secular critics who unrelentingly call into question the gods of this age, that is, the prevailing social, cultural, political, economic, and academic logics that support or are at ease with the status quo of grotesquely differentiated wealth and poverty, uneven access to the necessary resources for life and health, and forms of sublimely stubborn oppression masked inside social conventions." I hope you didn't think you were coming to church just for some moving prayers and a nice bit of singing!

Peter and John are being judged by the powerful. Those with the power, the rulers and priests and master builders have education and social advantage. Peter, John and the other apostles are uneducated and ordinary, with no social standing. But as Peter speaks,

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the power begins to shift – Jesus of Nazareth, who you crucified is risen, and that turns the world upside down. Peter healed the lame man in the name of Jesus. The elites do not have the power to heal, only God does. The elites cannot raise the dead, only God can. The stone that they rejected has become the cornerstone, the crucial rock on which the whole kingdom of God will be built.

Peter's words anticipate where the larger story told in Acts 4 will end - the power of God to embarrass and belittle those who think they hold power over human society. If God has made the crucified, risen, ascended, and empowered Jesus "both Lord and Messiah" then all Caesars, High Priests and the gods we human beings construct are exposed as powerless pretenders. The point is not a debate about the details of physical raising of the dead, but that God claims the world as God's own. God, through Jesus Christ provides new life and a new way of life. Jesus' inauguration of God's kingdom continues undeterred through his followers, no matter who or what might stand in the way of it. Jesus' message cannot be stopped. The leaders released Peter and John but forbade them from proclaiming Jesus. They ignored that demand and kept proclaiming and following Jesus - healing, preaching, serving and fighting against the powers that be. Let us go and do likewise!

HYMN We have a gospel to proclaim (tune *Fulda* at R&S 613) recorded by Thora

We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.

Tell of his death at Calvary,
Hated by those he came to save;
In lonely suffering on the cross:
For all he loved, his life he gave.

Tell of the glorious Easter morn,
Empty the tomb, for he was free;
He broke the pow'r of death and hell
That we might share his victory.

Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his Church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel-message we proclaim;
We sing his glory, tell his worth.

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Prayers of Intercession (from Psalm 23)

Gracious God, you care for me; I need nothing more.
Hear the cry of those who are hungry;
hungry for justice, and dignity, hungry for freedom, and love.
You lead me into a haven of peace and rest.
Hear the cry of those who are alone;
those who grieve a relationship broken by death or human failing,

those who live in the isolation of a hospital room, a prison cell,
a frail body, a confused mind.

You breathe new life into me and lead me in new ways.

God whose breath is life itself,
we pray for a just and caring use of your creation;
a fair sharing of its abundance, an ethical searching of its mysteries.

You are with me, and comfort me,
even when the darkness of the world looms large.

We pray for those who seek the truth;
those who cannot speak, and those who cannot be heard,
that the light of your Word
may shine in the darkness which overshadows their lives.

In the face of those who trouble me
you provide for me, and pour out your blessings.

Hear the cry of those trampled by racial or religious intolerance,
disoriented by homelessness, defeated by unemployment;

God of justice and compassion you are with me always
and have promised to sustain me all my life.

Enlarge our vision of life, and make us bold in our hope, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
we cry to you saying:

Lord's Prayer

HYMN The King of love my Shepherd is (R&S 552) recorded by Thora

The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
And he is mine for ever.

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.

Where streams of living water flow
My ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow
With food celestial feedeth.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight;
Thy unction, grace bestoweth:
And O what transport of delight
From thy pure chalice floweth!

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.

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 (Copyright © 2003 Nathan Nettleton)

Go now with your trust in the good shepherd,
and let us love, not just in words,
but in truth and action.

Believe in the name of Jesus Christ,
and love one another, just as he has commanded us.
And may God be at your side, even in valleys of death.

May Christ Jesus be the cornerstone of your life.

And may the Holy Spirit abide in you and tend you with love and mercy all the days of your life.

Music to end: Let Us Build a House where love can dwell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTdxFRfEoMs> Copyright information within the video