

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year A

Fourth Sunday of Easter – 30 April 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Bill Taylor, Interim Moderator, Palmerston Place Church, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday of Easter.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the [Sanctuary First website](#).

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

“Christ the Shepherd and Guardian of our Souls”, as Peter puts it, is a traditional theme for the fourth Sunday of Easter. This Sunday follows others that focus on the resurrection appearances of Jesus. This year of the lectionary cycle does not include John 21:15-25, but it is hard to read today’s bible passages without recalling the reinstatement of Peter and Christ’s call to pastoral care: “Feed my sheep”. In case we thought this was a ‘housekeeping’ day for the Church, attending to the flock, we remember Jesus also said: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” (John 10:16) and we sense the impulse to mission, making known the height and depth, the length and breadth of Christ’s love for all. The connecting theme which we can see in all four of our readings today is the quality of care that is offered to people in a variety of settings. We find a pastoral community in the early Church, learning to care and making resources available to any in need (Acts 2:42-47); the Shepherd of the shepherds whose refreshing presence restores the soul and resources those facing many kinds of challenge including enemies (Psalm 23); rousing words to those experiencing persecution for their faith, pointing them to Christ whose journey to the heart of suffering brings healing (1 Peter 2:19-25); and the passage from John’s Gospel, referencing the practice of shepherds at the time, focuses on Jesus as the gate. There is a description of *how* Jesus cares for the sheep – He is no stranger to them. Jesus opens the door to the abundant life of God’s Kingdom.

This Sunday is the Sunday prior to the Coronation of King Charles III, when following biblical tradition, the King will be anointed with oil by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Prayers will be said for the King and for Camilla, the Queen Consort; prayers of intercession for this Sunday include their Majesties and all whose office or position influences the course of the nation.

As I approach these passages, as well as looking for connections, I’m looking for the less usual, less frequently quoted verses from some highly familiar portions of scripture (e.g. Psalm 23). This may be quirky on my part, but I’m hoping to find something fresh and new, at least to me. I don’t imagine there’s anything that can be said about a 3,000 year old text (Psalm 23) that hasn’t been said before! These things are subjective, of course, but it’s always good to remember that since we last approached a familiar passage, much will have changed in the world into which we read Scripture and even for ourselves – our perceptions and attitudes will not be the same as they were when last we came this way three years ago. So it’s helpful to ask ‘what’s new here for me, for us?’ Outstanding themes such as the quality of care, people in need, recognising suffering and finding the way to God speak to the situations in which we and those about us live. I’m searching for ‘the word for today’ that speaks to our time and the people we share it with, both close to home or further

afield. Many services are now online as well as in-person, providing greater opportunities to celebrate the fellowship that connects us.

Acts 2:42-47

I find it always helpful to check the context, reading the verses before and after. Verse 41 tells us how, in response to Peter's Pentecost sermon, many were baptised and about three thousand were added to the new movement. We learn that this rapidly growing, vibrant young Church is a radical community that embraces a simple lifestyle. Luke itemises what made up their life together. They devoted themselves to four things:

- The Apostle's teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of Bread
- Prayer

The Apostle's teaching

An apostle was someone who had been a companion of Jesus and a witness to His resurrection. This was the focus of the early Church's teaching: Jesus and His resurrection, following which comes the gift of the Spirit so that Jesus' followers can proclaim that now is the time to call upon the Lord and share the life of God's Kingdom.

Fellowship (*koinonia*)

The new community enjoys the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who inspires their community life. They meet together in the temple courts and in one another's homes. The word for fellowship, used 22 times in the New Testament is 'koinonia'. Koinonia is more than what comes as a result of going to the same meeting together, it's a genuine connection, a bond of trust and love. Paul puts it this way to the Philippians (2:1-2): "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing [koinonia] in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." The fellowship of the young Church is enhanced by the clarity they have about their vision and purpose.

In this fellowship the walls of division and prejudice have been broken down: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

The fellowship was a vital component of their life together yet, even in the time of the New Testament there were significant changes, so that we find the writer to the Hebrews felt

the need to exhort their readers, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:25)

Perhaps as a result of the Reformation, which emphasised the individual believer’s access to God, we have a need in our day to recover the importance of koinonia, celebrating the presence of the Spirit both within and between people. In the beginning those who gathered as Church were not only sustained by their faith in God but by their connections with others. Those yet to join their fellowship could tell they were Christians by their love.

Today’s society has a strong awareness of the individual and the importance of personal autonomy. ‘Spirituality’ is often the word of choice when there are discussions about belief. For sure each one of us is unique and the Scriptures themselves tell us that we are called by name. Yet this passage reminds us that knowing Jesus is also about being part of a community, a fellowship, encouraging others in faith as well as finding it for ourselves. One of the best reasons for going to church is to encourage others to go to church. Post-Covid, with the growth of online church it is good to know that koinonia can be sustained through video streaming and catch-up church, yet many would agree there is a deeper connectedness in-person, when we can nurture relationships and community life more fully.

The Church that comes to life with the gift of the Spirit is, with the Spirit’s help, to be a model of life in God’s Kingdom, a community that shares its radical values and holds up hope to the world. As such, Church is not a club set up to meet the needs of its members; it’s not a cult, a secret society closed to others. It is the community of the open secret that all are loved and precious in God’s sight.

The breaking of bread

Hospitality is noted here as a central Christian virtue, eating together in one another’s homes and providing for those in need. From the outset, ‘breaking of bread’ meant celebrating the Lord’s Supper, which they did conscious that the Risen Jesus was with them, just as He had been when the two travellers on the road pressed their companion to stay on and they recognised Jesus when He broke the bread.

An expression of brokenness very often makes a stronger bond. The risen Jesus Himself showed others His wounds. There’s something here about how as Church we go about sharing the message. Some questions to consider or discuss: Does it seem sometimes that we speak as though we have it all joined up, we’ve got things pretty much sorted and that we’ve worked out most of the right answers? Is it perhaps when we are prepared to be

vulnerable, to acknowledge our brokenness, that we make a connection with others who also are vulnerable?

The bread shared here includes the resources of the community. These resources included an individual's private property, and in a similar passage to this at the end of Chapter 4, great store is put in the practice of sharing whatsoever people had so that none would be without. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32). And in the following chapter, in the account of Ananias and Sapphira, who kept some of their property for themselves, there is a very dramatic and sudden conclusion for them.

The early Church was nothing if not a radical community as they sought to model the life of God's Kingdom. Two thousand years on are we still that radical community?

Prayer

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (v42)

The members of this community knew well that none of this countercultural, counterintuitive community could be sustained by itself. They were keen to know Jesus more, listening, seeking, looking for what God would do next, making ready to join in.

They supported one another in prayer. How important, we might ask, is it to know others are praying for you, how important is it to pray for our sisters and brothers?

It's clear that there was more to this than 'going to church.' Being part of the early Christian community was about life together. What, you might ask, does sharing a common life look like for your church?

Notice how they broke bread from house to house, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. Do we eat our food in that way? The saying of grace is a valuable exercise, allowing us each time we eat to pause, appreciate the moment and thank God for generosity. Implicit are references to Jesus as the Bread of Life, the source of the community's life, the heart of the fellowship.

After the restrictions of Covid-19, congregations are again discovering the value of shared meals to raise money for Christian Aid and other charities. A number of churches offer food

and warmth to their communities on a regular basis, reaching out with both practical and spiritual help.

You might like to have a Café Church day, or an opportunity to celebrate the Lord's Supper whilst sitting at long tables? The Lang Board remains a feature of a few Presbyterian churches, a table to the side of the Kirk to which the congregation move after the sermon to celebrate the sacrament, where they can serve one another.

Psalm 23

There are numerous things that might be said about 'The Lord's my Shepherd,' a theme taken up by Jesus in another of His 'I am' sayings: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). In Scripture, the motif of the shepherd is used to describe God, national rulers and prophets, not forgetting shepherds themselves, whose reputation, like that of the rulers and the prophets, could be chequered. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, in contrast to others. It is hard to read Psalm 23, without being conscious of how Jesus references this psalm; it is one that was likely to have been written 1,000 years earlier by David, who from days spent looking after the family's flocks, became, as king, the shepherd of his people. As David sought to guide the nation he looked to God to be his guide.

You might want to focus on Table Fellowship.

"You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies" (v5)

Fast food hadn't been invented when David wrote this psalm! When a guest was coming for dinner hours were spent preparing; when the meal was eaten people lingered, enjoying one another's company and conversation. The Lord has a place specially prepared at the Table where we can linger in God's company, wonder afresh at the abundance of God's grace, and find our souls refreshed.

In Scotland green pastures are plentiful, not hard to imagine; but David's poem was written from the Negev Desert, one of the planet's most arid, dry, stony and harsh places. The grass there grows in isolated tufts and depends upon the morning dew to survive. The pasture in the Negev is not plentiful, but there's enough for each day, providing the flock keeps moving with the shepherd's guidance. In a place of hardship, David's poem is a statement of faith, of trust. Perhaps here is a helpful depiction of the life of faith? There's enough for today, the daily bread of the Lord's Prayer. We may not yet see what's for the day after but

because God is our Shepherd we know we will lack nothing. The Good Shepherd's care sees us through the darkest valleys. God's goodness and love are our companions "and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." (v6b) Hope of the good that is to come helps keep David going, in the barren places, and the hard times. The boy who herded sheep would rise to shepherd the nation. His Shepherd sees him through many challenges, even when faced by enemies or when he acts as his own worst enemy. Amidst the contemporary challenges of our day: a post-pandemic world; war in Ukraine and other conflicts; the cost of living crisis; the increased stresses that affect our mental health, to name a few – here is solace and strength to sustain and embolden every child of God.

There are echoes of the forgiving Father in Jesus' story about the prodigal son who returned home warily to find his Father so glad to see him that he threw a party. "You prepare a table before me," David declares, but then there is this strange phrase, "in the presence of my enemies." We know that David had many enemies in his life, from Saul, the previous King who saw David as a threat, to the armies of the Philistines, to his son Absalom who led a rebellion against David who then had to flee to preserve his life. In those days a fugitive could be shown hospitality in the tent of someone willing to provide refuge and those in pursuit might look on but they would not enter. We are offered a picture of how, when we are faced with things that challenge or even threaten us, we can find help to plan how to go forward, resting in an awareness of God's grace and kindness.

It is incumbent upon us to protect those who are vulnerable. The shepherd's rod and staff were for lifting the fallen, nudging them along sheep tracks – "the right paths" – and for warding off predators. But the banquet, in truth, is for enemies too – enemies become friends, for this is a Table of Reconciliation. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with friends including Martin Niemöller and Franz Hildebrandt, opposed Nazism in Germany. Dietrich, who spoke about "costly grace," was arrested by the Gestapo and executed on a charge of treason on 9 April 1945. In his short book on the Psalms, Bonhoeffer pointed out that "Christ prayed on the cross for his enemies and taught us to do the same."

In the well-loved paraphrase of this psalm, 'The King of Love my Shepherd is' we find these words:

"Thou spread'st a table in my sight;
thy unction grace bestoweth."

Many might wonder what 'unction' is! It's not a word often used, it is the action of anointing with oil or ointment. This is the oil referred to in verse 5: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

There is a sense of the luxuriance here, especially as it is coupled with a cup that overflows. There are reminders here of Psalm 133:1-2

“How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.”

On 6 May this year, King Charles III will be anointed with oil at his coronation, following biblical tradition when monarchs were anointed, as David was when Samuel identified him to be the next King. ‘Christ’ (the Greek form of Messiah, meaning ‘anointed one’) was a title given to Jesus and also, in time, to His followers. Baptism celebrates the anointing of the Holy Spirit, which is the gift of God to every Christian, and calls us to join in the work that God’s Anointed, Jesus the Good Shepherd, is doing in our world.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18-19)

It is of note that the ancient city of Antioch, where the People of the Way were first called Christians (Acts 11:26), is close to the modern city of Antakya, which was heavily damaged by the earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria on 6 February this year.

1 Peter 2:19-25

Peter’s first letter is written at a time of growing opposition to the early Church. Persecution is a recurring context throughout the epistle, which is written to a large, scattered group of Christians across the north of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, a nation, with Syria, well acquainted with suffering today. Peter makes an appeal to the suffering of Christ as an inspiration to those enduring suffering. Like Jesus, His followers may be called to suffer because of doing right. Pliny, Roman Governor in the region 110/111 CE, “faced with vast numbers of Christians in his province, asks whether age, sex or recantation is to be



allowed for in prescribing punishment: and further if the name of Christian (*nomen ipsum*) is sufficient reason for punishment.” (The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Intervarsity Press, Tyndale, 1986). Peter, who is generally considered to be the author of the first letter attributed to his name, acts as a pastor to the scattered flock, assuring Christians they walk where Christ has walked. Peter assures those who have been abused, who have suffered, that there is “one who judges justly” (v23) and retaliation is not advised. The doing of justice, living for righteousness (v24) will not come without cost; Peter is preparing those to whom he writes for this. Echoing the Song of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isaiah 53:5) Peter speaks of how sins are borne by Jesus on the cross and that “by his wounds you have been healed” (v24), offering hope of being made whole. The wounded healer understands suffering, and in Christ’s empathy and compassion, there is healing.

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)”

With these additional notes from Isaiah, reference is made to sheep and shepherd motifs, offering a connection to the living hope Peter has (1 Peter 1:3) because of his encounter with the Risen Lord by the Sea of Galilee. Three times Peter had denied Jesus, three times the Risen Lord gave Peter the opportunity to affirm that he loves Him. Each time Peter affirms his love, Jesus entrusts him with the care of the flock: “Feed my lambs”; “Tend my sheep”; “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-19).

[John 10:1-10](#)

The next verse (11) describes Jesus as the Good Shepherd, willing to lay down His life for the sheep, but today’s lectionary directs our attention to verses 1-10, perhaps to the detail of just how good this shepherd is and to the great crescendo of this section: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

There’s description about the daily business of herding sheep. The sheep hear the herder’s voice. Such is the care, that each is known individually; they may be one of many, part of a collective, but to this shepherd each one matters, each is unique. Being known by name in the Bible implies an appreciation of the character of another, an understanding of their personality. The shepherd leads them out and goes ahead of them, so whatever the flock encounters, their shepherd will be there before they arrive, sizing up the lie of the land and guiding them to good pasture. The shepherd’s leadership is predicated on a relationship of

care and nurture. The sheep follow because they know the shepherd, they respond to the tone of his voice and trust where the shepherd will lead them.

The passage provides evidence that the disciples didn't catch on to what Jesus was saying (v6) – not for the first time! Jesus is patient with them and tries a different tack: “I am the gate for the sheep” (v7). The words ‘I am’ are common to seven sayings in John (possibly eight if John 8: 58 is included: “Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’”) This is the third of the ‘I am’ sayings and it is repeated (vv7, 9), which adds emphasis. By using the ‘I am’ phrase, Jesus uses the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Jesus leaves His listeners in no doubt about His identity, that “the Father and I are one” (John 10:30), that in Him, God has come among us. In all of the ‘I am’ sayings this is the given: by coming to Jesus we come to God. Jesus Himself provides access to God, Jesus is the gate, the door, the one through whom we connect with God and God's constant love. A sheepfold would typically have been a patch of ground surrounded by a stone circular wall which would offer protection to the sheep from the elements and to some extent predators, but there was a gap in the circle, the way in and out of the fold. No gate or moveable fence was there, for this was where the shepherd sat or lay down at night, the shepherd literally was the gate. “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” (v9) Despite mention of strangers, thieves and bandits, there is deep security with the shepherd at the gate, so that with confidence and liberty the sheep can come in and go out and find pasture. Jesus references the Psalms again, on this occasion Psalm 121:8, “the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.” Assurance is given that the God who watches over us, day and night, neither slumbers nor sleeps. The shepherd, the gate, is alive to the needs of all the sheep.

Aware of the shepherd's oversight, the sheep will not follow a stranger – they do not recognise that voice, they will not be led astray by thieves and bandits. We sense the appeal Jesus makes to His listeners to give no time or attention to those things that might rob us of our wellbeing. The passage concludes with something akin to the choice presented by Moses to the Israelites as they renewed the covenant at the close of 40 years wandering in the desert. “This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19) Notwithstanding some disastrous indecision and destructive behaviour, God invited them to actively, intentionally, choose life. Here, at verse 10, Jesus says something similar: Don't allow your life to dissipate by giving time and attention to those things that can never satisfy and may lead to emptiness or harm. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (v10) ‘Choose life! Choose me!’

Sermon ideas

There may be some debate about leadership styles (you could invite responses to an open question about what's considered best). Some leaders prefer to lead from behind and others from the front. In the Gospel passage today, Jesus speaks about the shepherd who goes ahead. "When he has brought out all his own," (from the sheepfold) "he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." (v4)

If you travel by road you will likely come across signs indicating 'Roadworks Ahead', not usually an occasion for joy! We sometimes worry about what lies ahead, what's to come. Maybe we have an exam to sit, or a driving test, an interview, or a difficult conversation to have with someone. Maybe we worry about how to pay the next bill and make ends meet. Perhaps we are anxious about where the world is headed and wonder what the future will hold. In the life of many churches there are adjustments taking place and we can feel unsure about what the future will look like for congregations. Today's readings offer us assurance, for whatever else happens on the journey we can be sure there are 'God-works Ahead'. The God who is present in this moment has promised to be with us in the next. God goes ahead of us, so we know that where we are going is already familiar to Jesus. Recall the words of the angel to the two Marys on Easter Day after they have seen the empty tomb: "Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'" (Matthew 28:7) Going ahead of you, the Shepherd who goes before His flock. If we are sometimes daunted by what lies ahead, we can remind ourselves that 'ahead' is where Jesus is, the Spirit is there to give us the words to speak and to help. Knowing Jesus is there already, before we arrive on the scene, makes a difference.

You might like to spend some time thinking about what it means to know the Shepherd's voice and to be able to discern the voice of God from other voices. How do we recognise the voice of Jesus? When we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, when choices are difficult, does it help to ask, 'what would Jesus do?' Looking to the Gospels we see how Jesus acts and we can ask ourselves how does this choice or that measure up to how Jesus acts. Sometimes it helps to imagine you have made the decision and live with that for a few days, then imagine you have made a different decision for the next few days, to sense as deeply as possible what you feel would be a good choice, prayerfully asking for God's direction. Then the time comes to act in faith, knowing God is at work in what lies ahead. In Jesus' figure of speech the sheep follow because they know the shepherd and trust where the shepherd will lead. The better we know Jesus the more confident we can be in our living and doing, in our actions in support of our neighbours, and especially those who are in need.

In the world there are unknown voices, and thieves and bandits; in Jesus' figure of speech, these represent malevolent interests. There is the recognition of evil, yet the sheep can live with great security, they can go in and out of the fold and find pasture, with "the shepherd and guardian of our souls" (1 Peter 2:25) at the gate, ever ready to welcome them home.

How might we be a confident Church, engaging with those around us, coming and going and making known the person-centred care of the Shepherd who has come to bring abundant life for all? There are many to whom we are called to go – the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, those without clothing, people unwell and people in prison, to cite those mentioned in Matthew 25:34-40 – knowing Christ goes ahead of us in the meetings and conversations we will have.

'Fling wide the gates' is the title of John Stainer's musical depiction of Christ's Procession to Calvary (words by William John Sparrow Simpson) in his choral work 'The Crucifixion'. There's more than a hint of Psalm 24:7 (&9)

"Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in."

The good news is that in a world troubled, worried about what lies ahead, Jesus opens the way to God, He is the Gate, by trusting Jesus, access is open to the life of God's Kingdom, of which we are given a foretaste now and invited to join with God in what God is doing to bring the day when justice and peace shall reign, war will be studied no more and there will be healing for the nations.

In many ways today's passages lend themselves to a Service of Holy Communion; you may like to think about different ways to set up how people gather around the Lord's Table. Standing in a circle might resonate with a sheepfold, or you may care to arrange tables at which all could be seated.

Café Church lends itself to today's theme, where around tables, with tea, coffee or juice, people could be offered some time to chat about a short message on the theme or to respond to discussion starters.

Different thoughts can buzz in discussion, which I guess is one of the ways I find myself preparing in advance of a sermon or meditation.

If you know a shepherd, you might like to interview them about their work.

Prayers

Some of the prayers below invite congregational participation or a response. The Call to Worship is the antiphonal reading of Psalm 100. The prayers are designed to pick up aspects of the theme and with reflective language make it possible for participants to engage. Prayers of Intercession make mention of the Coronation of King Charles III and pray for those with responsibilities which affect the lives of many. There is also a time of silence to enable people to express personal prayers.

Many people light a candle when saying a prayer, and you might like to do this either at the beginning of the service or when it is time for the prayers of intercession.

If you were having a Café Church you might like to follow a more informal pattern of prayer. At the time of intercessions, for example, people might be asked to write prayers on a piece of paper (maybe in the shape of a leaf) which could then be attached to a prayer tree. With permission, selected prayers could be shared, then drawn together, perhaps by saying the Lord's Prayer.

Gathering prayer / Call to worship

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into God's presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

**It is God that made us, and we are His;
we are God's people, and the sheep of His pasture.**

Enter the gates with thanksgiving,
and God's courts with praise.
Give thanks to God, bless His name.

**For the Lord is good;
God's steadfast love endures for ever,
and His faithfulness to all generations.**



Confession / Repentance

Collect from the Book of Common Order (said together)

**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 You;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Good Shepherd Jesus,
Your love opens the gate to life that all may go in.
Create within us Lord, a desire to do justice,
to love mercy and to walk humbly with You.

There have been times when we have wandered from Your way
and not listened to Your voice,
easily led and taken with others.
Yet we believe You are the Gate
and that whoever enters by You, Jesus, will be saved,
and will come in and go out and find pasture.

Refresh and renew us in Your presence, we pray.
Open our ears and our hearts
to hear Your call anew in this time of worship today.
May we find in Your embrace forgiveness and joy
as our lives are re-purposed in Your service.
To the glory of Your name. Amen

Thanksgiving / Gratitude

Gracious God, who calls us to be Your flock,
we thank You for the care of the Good Shepherd
who nourishes our spirits, provides for our need,
and loves with a love that overflows.

You meet us in every day,
joyfully we welcome You and thank You for Your presence



with all Your sisters and brothers.
We offer to You all that we are in glad thanksgiving
that by the gifts You have given Your Church
there may be light in the darkness,
offering hope of life in its fullness,
to the glory of Your name.

Prayer for others / Intercession

The prayers of intercession have a line of response. When you hear the words 'Lord, in Your mercy' you are invited to say: *'Graciously hear us'*.

Holy Spirit, who moves within and among us,
around us and ahead,
we thank You for the fellowship we have in You.
You are the bond between us,
who breathes into the life of our community
that perfect unity of love that is one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Inspire us, we humbly pray,
that in the life that we share together as a community of faith, as Church,
people may know themselves loved as Jesus loves.

Lord, in Your mercy
Graciously hear us.

May we be communities of reconciliation,
seeking restorative justice, building bridges,
making connections, reaching out to others,
to the glory of Your holy name.
Especially we pray for people in challenging places;
in countries recovering from earthquake,
in places where there is war,
in situations where people have been hurt by the actions of others,
and where relationships are fractured.
God of peace,
may the love with which the Good Shepherd tends all the flock,
restore the image of God in us all.

Lord, in Your mercy
Graciously hear us.



Gracious God,
after whom every family on earth and heaven takes its name,
we thank You for deep relationships,
for opportunities to give and to receive,
to listen and hear what another is saying,
to serve one another and celebrate every kindness.
In moments of silence we bring to You now our thoughts and prayers
for those whom we, like the disciples, bring to Jesus today
that he might bless them.

Silence

Lord, in Your mercy
Graciously hear us.

On this the Sunday before the Coronation of King Charles III
we pray for His Majesty the King and for Camilla, the Queen Consort.
May Your Spirit be with them as they are affirmed in their responsibilities;
grant them joy and may many be encouraged by their interest and concern.
We pray for all whose office and responsibilities affect the lives of many,
for those who represent their country's interests,
that in all they do they may be mindful of the wellbeing of every child of God.

Lord, in Your mercy
Graciously hear us.

Jesus, Crucified, Risen and Ascended Lord,
You intercede for us before the throne of God,
thanks be to You!
Holy Spirit You, help us to pray in sounds too deep for words,
thanks be to You!
Creator of life, You call us to life anew;
thanks be to You!
These prayers we offer to the one in whom we live and move and have our being,
to whom be all glory and praise. Amen

Blessing / Closing prayer
Go forth into the world in peace;

be of good courage;
hold fast that which is good;
render to no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak;
help the afflicted;
honour everyone;
love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;
and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
be amongst you and remain with you always.
Amen. *(Authorship unknown)*

References

“The Psalms, Prayer Book of the Bible”, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, SLG Press, 1989
“The Psalms Volume 1”, G.A.F. Knight, The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press
“The Illustrated Bible Dictionary,” Intervarsity Press, Tyndale, 1986
“Book of Common Order”, 1994, Saint Andrew Press

Acknowledgement

An idea about ‘I am the Gate’ from a sermon by Cat Rawlinson-Watkins, Church of Scotland Ministry Candidate, preached at Palmerston Place Church, Edinburgh on 15th January 2023.

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

- A playlist of suggested songs for Easter can be found online:
<https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/inspire-me/playlist/easter>
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.



- CH4 14, 15 & 16 – “The Lord’s my Shepherd” – (Psalm 23) Why not try a less familiar tune? This can work well as a way of discovering new meaning. Good idea to practice the tune first if it’s wholly unknown!
- CH4 18 & 19 – “The earth belongs to God alone” and “Ye gates lift up your heads on high” – (Psalm 24). Traditional and rousing, these words can be sung outwith communion, but (19 especially) are associated with the procession of the elements of bread and wine to the Table in a formal celebration.
- CH4 237 – “Look forward in faith” – The ultimate hope-full hymn, “the world is in God’s care.”
- CH4 279 – “Make way, make way for Christ the King” – This hymn details some of the tasks of Jesus as Messiah, as noted in the section on Psalm 23.
- CH4 436 – “Christ triumphant, ever reigning” – Verse 3 chimes with the passage from 1 Peter, “Suffering servant, scorned, ill-treated, victim crucified! Death is through the cross defeated, sinners justified.”
- CH4 459 – “Crown him with many crowns” – We are in Easter! “Crown him the Lord of life!”
- CH4 462 – “The King of love my shepherd is” – The well-loved paraphrase of Psalm 23 with the line ‘thy unction grace bestoweth’. You could offer a prize for anyone who knows the meaning of that rarely used word!
- CH4 577 – “Christ be beside me” – No matter your preferred style of leadership these ancient words have you covered! “Christ be beside me, Christ be before me, Christ be behind me, King of my heart.”
- CH4 694 – “Brother sister, let me serve you” – A beautiful hymn for communion, highlighting the fellowship aspect, which can be sung at other times. It explores many aspects of the life of a caring community.
- Mission Praise 708 – “To God be the glory” – The last line of the first verse reads “and opened the life gate that all may go in”, offering a joyful link with the passage from John 10.

- Mission Praise (MP) 1008 – “The Lord’s my shepherd” – Stuart Townend’s version, with the chorus and descant that invites trust in the shepherd.

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different “Spiritual Styles”?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?



- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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