

Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry worship for individuals or families

Sunday 22nd November 2020 at 10:30 am

Call to Worship

My shepherd will supply my need: Jehovah is His name;
in pastures fresh He makes me feed, beside the living stream.
He brings my wandering spirit back when I forsake His ways,
and leads me, for His mercy's sake, in paths of truth and grace.

Hymn R&S 114 Let all the world in every corner sing

Let all the world in every corner sing: "My God and King!"
The heavens are not too high, His praise may thither fly;
The earth is not too low, His praises there may grow.
Let all the world in every corner sing: "My God and King!"

Let all the world in every corner sing: "My God and King!"
The church with psalms must shout: no door can keep them out.
But, more than all, the heart must bear the longest part.
Let all the world in every corner sing: "My God and King!"

Prayer of Approach

Yours is the earth and all in it. The valleys, mountains, seas and spray; the land, the pastures, the trees and fauna. All around us, we see stories of your bounty, your exuberant goodness, your flourishing provision which comes from the rain and the sun which causes the earth to give forth good fruit.

We find joy, to be your people: living, working, resting, and supporting.
We thank you for the gifts of living, and for these gifts of bounty all around us.
We come to you, people who are hungry, people who are thirsty, strangers, imprisoned, exposed, knowing that you have come to us, too, in these same guises.

In our brokenness, welcome us. And open up our defences as we come to you,
Let us enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and God's courts with praise,
Giving thanks to God, blessing God's name.
Let us give thanks to God for God's goodness, for God's steadfast love which endures for ever,
For God's faithfulness to all generations. Let us give thanks for all the gifts we receive ...

We come seeking forgiveness; and it is from that place of love and welcome, O God,
that we confess all our wrong doing, all the things we neglected to do, the ways we didn't love
each other as we might, the words which we have said that cause hurt and our actions which let
us down again. Forgive us God. Let your Spirit enfold us as we come to worship. Amen



Readings

Ezekiel 34: 11-16 (20 – 24) – prophecies of hope and restoration

Psalm 100 - make a joyful noise unto the Lord!

Matthew 25: 31-46 – the parable where the shepherd has the task of separating the sheep from the goats

Reflection: *Goats Get a Bad Press* - by Martin Lambourne (Shiregreen)

There are few references to goats in the New Testament. The one which springs to mind is this one in Matthew's gospel which is our lectionary reading for today. It always strikes me as being a bit hard on goats to be equated with those who have shown no compassion for others and therefore to Jesus himself.

I suppose it should come as no surprise, therefore, that I can think of no hymns containing goats as a central motif. In fact the only songs I know which feature goats are *The Lonely Goatherd* puppet show song from the Sound of Music and a Welsh song, *Oes Gafr Eto?*, (Counting the Goats) which I once sang at an end of conference concert on the island of Bali! You can listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyCzaciMtl5>

It isn't as though goats were not valued in ancient society. They were frequently referred to from Genesis to Deuteronomy as part of the flocks of sheep and goats as well as being used for weaving their hair into fabrics, cooking them to entertain guests and offering them as sacrifices.

Jenny and I were frequently provided with goat stew on our tour of Kenyan churches some years back and I know one of our ministerial team is fond of goat curry. Some farmers use a goat as the leader of their flocks of sheep. They are considered to be more intelligent than sheep and can be trained to respond to the farmers' calls to feeding time and the sheep will follow them as the leader of the flock.

For all that, there is only one other memorable reference to goats in the Bible and it is one we still refer to when identifying people who have been seen as scapegoats even in modern times. The scapegoat appears in Leviticus and is the focal point of the ceremony of Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement.

Holman Hunt's picture of the Scapegoat is an evocative rendering of the bleakness surrounding the goat selected by the people of Israel on which all of the people's sins were symbolically placed before the poor creature was driven out into the wilderness. Hunt went to Palestine to research the setting for his work and pictures the goat amid the crusty saltiness of the Dead Sea with the mountains of Edom in the background.

The Old Testament passage for today, from Ezekiel, has an interesting depiction of sheep practising a bit of bullying – or even scapegoating? He details "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, 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. 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".

There have always been those who have been the butt of other people stronger or apparently superior to themselves. It could be suggested that it started in the Garden of Eden when Adam tried to dodge God's anger by blaming his downfall on Eve. Sadly, women are sadly still the main targets for their male partners' vented frustration and anger as indicated by the rise in domestic violence during Lockdown.

Scapegoating has, over the centuries, targeted those of another tribe, caste, religion, colour, sexual orientation, football team. There have even been attempts to blame Covid-19 on the Chinese, the spread of it on students and young adults generally – and even Dominic Cummings.

Every culture and nationality has pet scapegoats. The Irish are the butt of many jokes here in the UK. Some Germans see the Turks in a similar light. In my own childhood, we played cowboys and Indians in the street. The cowboys always won unless the great Apache chief, Geronimo, was

playing! However, in the early fifties, Germans had become the post-war scapegoats of choice. And we still have examples of First Nation peoples being marginalised, not only the native Indians of America, but in Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

How often are immigrants blamed for stealing our jobs? Often jobs, such as fruit and vegetable picking, which are too much like hard work for an unemployed Briton. Black Lives Matter is evidence of the continuing putting down of those who are visibly different from white people and somehow seen as inferior. This month, we have remembered again the terrible scapegoating of Jewish people by Nazi Germany in the twentieth century.

For me, one of the tragedies of the twenty first century is the scapegoating of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government, with its Settlement programme destroying the homesteads of the native occupants and the erection of walls around towns like Bethlehem. I could go on, but we need to see the way out of this negative mind-set by looking again at Jesus' words in our Gospel reading.

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Didn't God intend all of us to be members of God's family? If that is the case, what we do – or don't do – to the oppressed in Gaza, the exiled Rohingya, the refugees in Calais and the homeless in Britain – is the measure of our true relationship with Jesus.

We are asked to see all of mankind as our neighbours, without prejudice and with bucket loads of compassion. Elsewhere Jesus said, 'others will know you are my followers by your love for one another. James echoed that sentiment in his letter, reminding his readers that you will be known by the fruits of your works as Christians. If this coming Christmas holds any hope of a new and better normal for 2021, it will be encompassed by the angels' message of good news to all. Yes, all. So, let's go and bear fruit – fruit that shall last, beyond a pandemic.

Hymn for Reflection - Psalm 23

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie in pastures green;
He leadeth me the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again;
and me to walk doth make within the paths of righteousness,
even for his own Name's sake.

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
yet will I fear no ill; for thou art with me;
and thy rod and staff me comfort still.

My table thou hast furnished
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint, and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me;
and in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be.

Prayers of Intercession

We pray for the coming of God's kingdom. You sent your Son to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives and salvation to your people: anoint us with your Spirit; wake us up to work in His name. Loving God

God, as we consider your word for us today, in the midst of a world that doesn't seem so very different from the world in which Your prophets spoke, as we prepare to welcome your Son to a world still in need of all that You bring – food for the hungry, clothing for the needy, justice for the oppressed, healing for those who are hurting, peace for those caught up in war – God, we hold on to hope and joy for those are your promises to us and we ask for your peace to rule in our lives. We pray for those whose faith is wearing thin, whose patience is strained by the length of their waiting, for those whose eyes are tired of watching for the dawn.

Send us to bring help to the poor and freedom to the oppressed, we remember

Send us to speak out and proclaim your justice in the world, we speak out for

Send us to tell the world the good news of your healing love, we share ..

Send us to those who mourn, to bring joy and gladness instead of grief, we remember those named today...

Send us to proclaim that the time is here for you to save your people.

We bring you all our prayers and conclude with the prayer you taught your disciples:

Our Father

Hymn

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people

Light for the world to see.

Chorus

Christ, be our light!

Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in Your church gathered today.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has pow'r to save us.

Make us your living voice.

Chorus

Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others

Shared until all are fed.

Chorus

Blessing

Jesus, we go, knowing you are our true King, our Shepherd and our Lord and Saviour.

May we carry this knowledge with us, equipped by your Spirit

to live lives full of praise and service to you?

The blessing of God, Father, Son and Spirit

be with us and remain with us all now and forever - **Amen.**