

This short act of worship has been produced for you. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church and pray for them as they pray for you.

**Call to Worship:**

O God, you summon the day to dawn,  
You teach the morning to waken the earth.

**Great is your name. Great is your love.**

For you the valleys shall sing for joy,  
The trees of the field shall clap their hands.

**Great is your name. Great is your love.**

For you the monarchs of the earth shall bow,  
The poor and persecuted shall shout for joy.

**Great is your name. Great is your love.**

Your love and mercy shall last for ever,  
Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise.

**Great is your name. Great is your love.**

**Amen. Alleluia!**

**Opening Hymn: *The Lord's My Shepherd (Townend)***

***Singing the Faith 481***

*Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXPPzuCJMCs>

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

Stuart Townend (b.1963)

***Prayers of Confession and Assurance***

God of life, and love, and light,  
who brought Jesus back from death, the great shepherd of  
your sheep,  
we thank you for your care for us.  
For your love, which gives us life, and sits beside us in our  
sorrow.  
For your grace, which inspires our living and upholds us when  
we die.  
For your goodness, by which we learn what abundance of life  
is.  
For your mercy, which inspires our witness to the Risen Jesus.  
For your compassion, which fashions this world into your  
Kingdom.

We know you by these things.  
And we claim them now, asking for forgiveness:  
for when our love has been measured and weak;  
for when we have neglected to live in the flow of your grace,  
preferring our own meagre resources;  
for our refusal to embrace the fullness of life in your Kingdom;  
for our hard-heartedness in our life together;  
for our failure to allow you to enlarge our hearts and increase  
our vision.

Forgive us, loving God. Renew us. Restore us.  
May others recognise us more and more as the sheep of your  
fold, the flock of your keeping, by the beauty of our life, and  
the integrity of our discipleship.

*(We keep a moment's quiet)*

This is God's gracious word to us:  
"Your sins are forgiven".

**Thanks be to God! Amen. Alleluia!**

***The Reading: John 10:1-10***

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold  
by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.  
The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.  
The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his  
voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.  
When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them,  
and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will  
not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they  
do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of  
speech with them, but they did not understand what he was  
saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’.

### ***Reflection on the Reading***

Like many of you, I’ve been trying to find the blessings of this strange and challenging period of lockdown: trying to be more attentive, more open, more prayerful, and perhaps a bit less frenetic, less anxious about the ‘next thing’ to do, less superficial in the way I pass each day. Well, it’s a work in progress! But one blessing of these last weeks has been the birds who come to our garden here in Oakwood. Our provision for them has increased over time: from sunflower kernels for the goldfinches, to mealworms for the nesting blackbirds, to suet balls for the great tits and blue tits. The robins, sparrows and pigeons seem to eat anything! Their presence has been a source of surprising comfort to me. I’ve felt less lonely, and more conscious of and connected to the ongoing life of God’s whole creation, around me, and alongside me.

As a child, I envied my grandad’s ability to identify a bird simply by hearing its song. Born and raised in rural Suffolk, and having worked outside for much of his life, he was very familiar with their voices. So, he’d catch a snippet of birdsong, and immediately be able to name the species of the singer. I always wanted a similar knowledge, but never managed to gain it: until now. Time spent, sitting still outside, watching our visitors come to feed, and listening to them sing, has taught me a lot. They have lots to say: and I’m learning to recognise their voices. I know a blackbird from a blue tit now, a robin from a goldfinch, by its voice alone. And it gives me enormous joy.

Hearing a familiar, recognised voice can be of enormous comfort and help. I’ve also found myself, these last weeks, speaking to a family member or dear friend, amid all our physical distancing, and saying “it’s so *good* to hear your voice!” The voice of a loved one, a dear friend, amid isolation and fear, can do so much to re-orient and re-anchor us in what matters: security, the safety of being loved, a space in which pretence is not needed and we are known and cherished, the immeasurable blessing of being with someone who knows us through and through, who values us, in whose presence there needn’t be pretence or anxiety or holding back.

Our reading today is much about this too. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd: even an urbanite like me knows that, from watching *Countryfile*. In the ancient Middle East, they were kept overnight, several flocks together, in large stone pens attached to remote dwellings. In the morning, the shepherds called for their own: and they gathered into separate flocks again, to spend the day. They knew their shepherd's voice: and amid all the dangers of the day – isolation, predators, wandering into danger, the possibility of sheep rustlers operating nearby – the shepherd's voice was a source of great comfort, and of all their security. With him, they were safe. With him, life was clear, and secure. It was pasture, and feeding, and abundance, and fulfilment, at least in sheep-ly terms.

Jesus, in speaking of himself as shepherd, and of us as sheep, emphasises that we will know him by his voice. What might he mean? Well, it might be helpful to hold that together with his other, rather more puzzling image in this passage: that he is also the 'gate for the sheep'. Elsewhere, of course, he talks of the 'narrow gate' by which we enter the Kingdom of God. In other words, we don't simply stumble into his 'flock'. There's something quite deliberate and chosen about belonging with him, a recognition that what he does, and the place to which he calls us, is something we want to embrace, and somewhere we want to be.

And Jesus also repeatedly speaks of the "thieves" and "bandits", those who steal the sheep for their own ends and don't have the welfare of the flock as their concern. Who does he mean? Well, we need to be very careful not to relate it too closely to the Jewish leaders to whom Jesus is speaking: we are all Abraham's children, and Jesus himself was Jewish. It would be more helpful to recall that those words, "thief" and "bandit" are words John uses in his Gospel for those whose vision of God's rule, those whose voice, we might contrast rather starkly with Jesus's. Barabbas, for instance, who thought that by fomenting a great armed rebellion, a bloody, brutal insurrection against earthly rulers, he could force God's hand and ensure that he became the oppressor himself, rather than realising peace for everyone. Or Judas, who may have thought that he could make some material gain out of his connection with Jesus, rather than playing his part in the coming of God's reign on earth.

Nor should we forget that we hear these words in the Easter season. We hear them with the benefit of that hindsight. Jesus's authority as our shepherd comes from his example to us. We can trust his voice. We can believe him. He has shown us a way to enter into true human fulfilment that is based, not on violent uprising, not on selfish gain, not on self-aggrandisement and placing our own ego at the centre of the universe. Jesus demonstrates, in his life, his death, and by his resurrection, the

way of love, of self-giving, of dependence on God's resources of grace, not on our own resources or agendas. As Kathleen reminded us on Easter Sunday, we hear the voice of the Risen Christ clearly, only by also remembering his life and his death as well. Jesus shows us that this way, his way, is the only thing that can ever change the world, and bring in God's Kingdom. He shows us the folly and the failure of all other human paths to fulfilment. His voice is challenging, for all the strength it gives us. The gate seems narrow. But it leads to the path of abundant life, for all. And we can trust him, because he has entered into it before us, and will now go with us.

Some of you know that the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero inspires me in this. As Archbishop of San Salvador in a time of brutal violence and terrible injustice, he heard the voice of Jesus, very clearly, calling him to enter the narrow gate into the way of God's Kingdom, and follow his Shepherd. He opposed violence with love; he stood alongside the marginalised and persecuted and spoke with and for them; he challenged the might of a ruthless oppressing power; he worked tirelessly to demand justice and seek peace and the healing of deep divisions in his country. In all this, and amid all it demanded of him and the toll it took on him, he stayed close to the voice of Jesus, who gave him strength and comfort and purpose. Romero conformed his life more and more to the pattern of Jesus, laying

himself down for God's children and their fulfilment. He knew that Jesus was at work in him, and that he would die because of his ministry, but that that would not be the end of God's purposes for his life, or for God's Kingdom. The Salvadoran regime murdered Romero, 40 years ago, as he celebrated the Communion in a hospital chapel. But, as he foresaw, he lived on, in his people's quest for peace and justice, and in his country's ongoing pursuit of healing. "Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force that will overcome the world", he said. His is an Easter story.

Perhaps there is space for us, in this strange season of homebound life, to reacquaint ourselves with the voice of our risen Jesus. The voice which comes to us with authority, but often asking us to take a rather different path to fulfilment than the world might offer, because he has shown already that it is the only way to true abundance: the path of self-giving. The path of the cross. The path of the Shepherd who has laid down his life for the sheep. His voice will re-orient us, in these challenging days, and remind us, to quote one of our hymns, of "what love and power and peace can fill a life that trusts in you".

Or, as another of our hymns, by Charles Wesley, puts it:  
Open, Lord, my inward ear,  
and bid my heart rejoice;

bid my quiet spirit hear  
your comfortable voice;  
never in the whirlwind found,  
or where earthquakes rock the place,  
still and silent is the sound,  
the whisper of your grace.

You did undertake for me,  
for me to death were sold;  
wisdom in a mystery  
of bleeding love unfold;  
teach the lesson of your cross:  
let me die, with you to reign;  
all things let me count but loss,  
so I may you regain.

Amen.

### ***A Time of Prayer***

God of abundant life,  
we pray for the life of this world.  
To its fearful insecurity, bring your joyous resurrection.  
To its scandalous injustice, bring your liberating power.  
To its warring factions, bring your reconciling peace.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.

God of abundant life,  
we pray for the life of your Church.  
Amid anxiety, may we bear witness to your hope.  
Amid loneliness, may we offer the presence of Christ.  
Amid isolation, may we be heralds of your new community.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.

God of abundant life,  
we pray for the life of our communities, families, and those we  
love.  
Be with those who are sick and suffering, and with those who  
care for them.  
Be with those who are dying, and with those who sit with and  
pray for them.  
Be with those who have died, and with those who mourn  
them.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.

God of abundant life,  
we pray for our own lives.  
Come to our fear as comfort and trust.

Come to our longing as fulfilment and joy.  
Come to our emptiness as solace and grace.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.

We ask these, and all our prayers, in the name of Jesus,  
the Good Shepherd of the sheep,  
asking that we may hear his voice,  
know his presence,  
and trust in his care,  
as we enter by that way and through that gate which leads to  
everlasting peace.  
Amen.

*You may find this song, '[There Was Jesus](#)', by Zach Williams  
and Dolly Parton, a helpful meditation on hearing Jesus's voice,  
and knowing his presence, in all life's circumstances.*

### **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.

Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.

### **Closing Hymn: This Joyful Eastertide**

#### **Singing the Faith 314**

*Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPR\\_UqjCnfw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPR_UqjCnfw)

This joyful Eastertide,  
What need is there for grieving?  
Cast all your cares aside  
and be not unbelieving:  
*Come, share our Easter joy  
that death could not imprison,  
nor any power destroy,  
our Christ, who is arisen!*

No work for him is vain,  
no faith in him mistaken,  
for Easter makes it plain  
his kingdom is not shaken:

Then put your trust in Christ,  
in waking and in sleeping.  
His grace on earth sufficed;  
he'll never quit his keeping:

*Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)*

***Closing Prayer and Blessing***

Almighty God,  
through the rising of your Son from the grave,  
you broke the power of the grave,  
you broke the power of death  
and condemned death itself to die.

As we celebrate this great triumph  
may we also make it the model for our living.