

The Good Shepherd

1st Hymn by Henry Francis Lyte 1793-1847 (T John Goss 1800-80)

1. Praise, my soul, the King of heaven, to His feet thy tribute bring,
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like thee His praise should sing?
Praise Him! Praise Him! (rpt)
Praise the everlasting King.
2. Praise Him for His grace and favour to our fathers in distress,
Praise Him still the same forever, slow to chide and swift to bless:
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Glorious in His faithfulness.
3. Father-like He tends and spares us; well our feeble frame He knows,
In His hands He gently bears us, rescues us from all our foes:
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Widely as His mercy flows.
4. Angels in the height, adore Him, ye behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon bow down before Him, dwellers all in time and space,
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Praise with us the God of grace. Amen.

Readings:

- Psalm 23
- John 10:1-18

Prayers of praise and intercession:

Dear Heavenly Father, we have gazed upon your astonishing plan of mercy and grace this Easter time, in which, you took action against our wilful and hostile behaviour as humanity, against you and your holy plan for our lives. It was such an anti-intuitive action you took; human response would dictate that you carry out your judgment upon us! You did carry out judgment, only that judgment due to us, was taken and suffered by your innocent and holy Son, the only One who could satisfy your righteous demands. So we heard again how He died our death, in our place, and on our behalf. Thank you our Father for that love which stretches our understanding beyond our limits! Some of us sang "There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin..."

Today we look out on a world in which men wage war against men, and murder and all other sorts of bad behaviour are carried out against each other. We pray for that world, Father, that by means which only you know, and only your holy Spirit can execute, that word of the great all-sufficient sacrifice for our sin will travel to the ends of the earth, that all may hear, and wonder, and repent, and come to you with grateful thanks, that you might heal them. We ask for Christ's great gift of peace to abide in our hearts today, and fill our hearts with grateful praise, that we might serve you aright, and live to the praise of your glory.

And we ask our prayers in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

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2nd hymn by *Frederick William Faber 1814-63 (T J Stainer 1840-1901)*

1. Souls of men why will ye scatter like a crowd of frightened sheep?
foolish hearts why will ye wander from a heart so true and deep.
2. Was there ever kindest shepherd half so gentle, half so sweet
as the Saviour who would have us come and gather round His feet?
3. There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice which is more than liberty.
4. There is plentiful redemption in the blood which has been shed;
There is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.
5. For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind,
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
6. If our love were but more simple, we should take Him at His word,
and our lives would be all sunshine in the sweetness of our Lord.

Message: The Good Shepherd.

Shepherds and their sheep were a common theme in Israel - they were a common presence through their history, from the time of Abraham onwards.

Sheep were an essential part of living in Israel - they moved when the people moved, they were essential for garments and for food. They had a symbiotic relationship with each other. From the time of the Exodus onwards God made it known to them that He was their Shepherd. Moses was also called their "shepherd". David their greatest King, who was also a prophet, poet, musician, called later the "sweet Psalmist of Israel" called God his Shepherd in probably the best-known psalm in history - in fact the best-known poetry in the current Western world (if you have been to a funeral in recent weeks you probably heard it read or sung!) Many other of his psalms speak of His shepherding also.

The shepherds of Israel had responsible jobs. They had to lead their sheep, find grass and water in a dry and rocky landscape, protect them from dangers including wild beasts, stop them from straying, and sleep with them at night (they had no dogs or fences!) If they found a natural enclosed space, they could herd them into it for the night, even sleeping at the entrance as a guard and protector - like a door. They were constantly "on duty", armed with a *scrip* a skin bag containing his food (e.g. bread, olives, cheese, dried fruit), a *sling* - a light weight simple device which could be used as a deterrent e.g. lobbing a stone beyond the sheep to warn them. They would have had plenty of time to practise! They also had a *staff* - a wooden club, and a loop at his belt to hang it from. This was a better weapon against a fierce animal. And a *rod*, the later classical shepherd's crook with which he could pull a sheep back from a danger (archbishops still carry one!) And the shepherd's relationship with his sheep was much closer than anything we see. So their shepherds were much more pastoral than ours! (*pastor* means first of all "a shepherd" - Webster dictionary).

There were significant dangers in the job - wolves and other wild animals could attack and needed to be fought off. And thieves might not only steal a lamb, but

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beat up a shepherd! So Jesus likened himself to their Shepherd, their door or gate, to safeguard them, and also he called himself the Good Shepherd, one who would lay down his life for his sheep, as against a "false shepherd", doing a job for pay, and who did not really care about the sheep - such would run if danger threatened. He does not here name the false shepherds, but in the previous chapter Jesus healed the "man born blind" during which he had an altercation with the Pharisees who could not perceive the miracle he had performed, only saw a "sabbath-breaker" as far as they were concerned! Perhaps these were the false shepherds Jesus was referring to.

It may be that Jesus was also thinking of Ezekiel 34 where God censures the false prophets who were leading astray his people, and promises that he will set up "my servant David" who will feed his sheep and shepherd them when their own shepherds, in the day, were misleading them. He could not have been literally speaking of David as this was about 600 years later than David. Rather Ezekiel was probably speaking of the Messiah himself, "great David's greater Son" who was still hundreds of years away. But Jesus was truly "in sync" with his Father on the serious-ness of false shepherds. (I fear today for "ministers of the word" who appear to withdraw from their task as shepherds of Christ's flock, and apparently become apostate. They are likely to face a severe judgment on the "last day"!)

It is also possible that Jesus was thinking about Ezekiel 34 when he joined two disciples on the road to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. On that occasion he was not recognised, partly by the direct action of God to "keep their eyes from recognising him", in order that he could "interpret to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself"! How wonderful it would have been to hear that interpretation of all of those things. Their own description of that lesson from the Stranger would have been so good to hear. And how quickly did they return once they knew the identity of the stranger who had joined them on that road. Never would the joy of the disciples be greater than when they were hearing from these two disciples and realising the significance of the story of that walk. All their sorrow would have turned to immense joy, as so many of the things Jesus had said to them before the crucifixion sank in.

It was Luke who said in his gospel in chapter 9 that "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem". This was not even half-way through his gospel; but from then on the events described were all the things that happened on the course towards Jerusalem. In John's account the next chapter deals with what happened at Bethany, two miles from Jerusalem, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. That was no "resuscitation"! His body was undergoing necrosis at that time - his tissues were beginning to rot! Martha, ever practical, pointed out the obvious, well put in the KJV when she said "Lord, by this time, he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days"! So this incursion into death was more like a process of "creation" than a "recovery." Here was the Creator at work, in accord with the author of the letter to the Hebrews, who spoke of the "Son...through whom he (God) created the world." Here Jesus was surely well on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus had told Martha "Did I not tell you that if you would believe you will see the glory of God". And Martha surely did, and must have been astonished by this example of the resurrection of her brother!

So both Luke and John spend over half of their gospels on Jesus' final approach to Jerusalem to fulfil his reason for coming to this earth! And John tells of the reaction of the

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crowds and of the chief priests and the Pharisees to this most astonishing of all the miracles of Jesus. They were almost despairing "if we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation!" That sounds highly unlikely - I think we know why they were so incensed. It is hard for us to understand how these authorities of the Jews could NOT see how astonishing was this miracle, and conclude who Jesus was! Can we over-emphasise the danger of having a set agenda? It completely blinds one to a reasonable conclusion from undeniable facts!

Rather it caused Caiaphas to prophesy, with no apparent understanding of his blindness to the truth, that "you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish". He had in mind only the killing of Jesus in a way that would not cause an uproar.

So the "good Shepherd" was now well on his way to fulfilling his purposes and those of his Father, destined to occur in Jerusalem. He said "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again." He was walking according to the plan of his Father, determined that the Father's will be accomplished to the letter. And so it was!

Amen.

3rd hymn by Isaac Watts (T Rockingham E. Miller 1731-1807)

1. When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.
2. Forbid it Lord that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God;
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.
3. See from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down,
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown.
4. Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

Benediction:

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all.

Amen.