

### 3 May 2020: The Fourth Sunday of Easter

*The celebration of Easter continues in our isolated households. Yet bound together in the risen Christ we are not alone. In early centuries the isolated and persecuted Christians of Rome depicted on the walls of the catacombs the Good Shepherd, who gives life in all its abundance. And hearing today's gospel reading, the Church across the world celebrates the same faith and prays to the same Shepherd ...*



Alleluia! Christ is risen!  
**He is risen indeed, alleluia!**

In baptism we died with Christ, so that as Christ was raised from the dead, we might walk in newness of life. Let us receive new life from him as we confess our sins in penitence and faith ...

Lord Jesus, you raise us to new life: Lord have mercy.  
**Lord have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, you forgive us our sins: Christ have mercy.  
**Christ have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, you feed us with the living bread: Lord have mercy.  
**Lord have mercy.**

*Prayer of absolution*

*Silent prayer, followed by the collect for the day:*

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:  
raise us, who trust in him, from the death of sin to the life of  
righteousness,  
that we may seek those things which are above,  
where he reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

*A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:*

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

### **Thanks be to God.**

*Psalm 23, with the response,*

#### **The Lord is full of compassion and love.**

The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters. **R**

He shall refresh my soul

and guide me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. **R**

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.  
Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. **R**

*Gospel acclamation:*

Alleluia, alleluia! I am the good shepherd, says the Lord:  
the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

**Alleluia!**

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John:

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

Jesus said to his disciples, '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.

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, O Christ!**

*Life is pretty constrained for most of us just now. Some of us may feel frustrated, some be lamenting. Though if you complain, you might be told, in the scornful and rather ugly phrase, to 'get a life'.*

*'Get a life', climb out of your dullness, make a mark in the world. 'Life' there is not a gift, it's an acquisition, something you 'get'.*

*Rather more positively, Jesus says he has come that we **may have life, and have it abundantly**. This is life as sheer gift, not a labour or an acquisition. Abundant life, that we're invited simply to receive and enjoy.*

*But Jesus has some rivals in this field. There are many other more tangible offers of abundant living around. Find a grander house and climb up that ladder. Fill it with the latest gadgets and the finest furniture. Get the lottery ticket that will make you a millionaire. Book that fantastic cruise. Abundance beckons: grab it while you can, before somebody else wins the prize ...*

*But all ancient wisdom, including that of the Bible, mocks this self-seeking and pleasure-seeking as false abundance, indeed ultimately unsatisfying. Not just ancient wisdom: it's well documented today how even billionaires with their mansions and their yachts grow dissatisfied, for they know there are others around with even more billions, and they could have more still.*

*Personal or family wealth is a false, deceitful kind of abundance. It's certainly not what Jesus is promising – despite the attempts of some evangelists to persuade us that faith in the gospel will make you rich.*

*Perhaps that promise of 'abundant life' is a bit obscure. Well, turn instead to today's first reading. A vivid picture of abundant living from the very first Christian community in Jerusalem. 'They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts', rejoicing and praising God. And they had no personal wealth at all: 'all who believed were together and had all things in common', selling their goods to support the poor.*

*Here's a profoundly joyful picture of abundant living. It is in effect a communist society, the members united not by a party or a state but by trust*

in their Messiah Jesus. That unity and joy and trust are depicted too in some of those beautiful early Christian mosaics of the flock of contented sheep nurtured by their mother earth and overseen by their good shepherd ...



What does it mean to call Jesus our good shepherd? The shepherd is trusted by the sheep, he says himself in his parable. 'He calls his own sheep by name' – as each of us received our Christian name at the font. And then, 'he leads them out' – out into the world, where there is pasture and food and freedom. The sheep follow because they know his voice. The good shepherd is our leader, who walks through the world ahead of us and shows us the way.

But, confusingly, Jesus also says **'I am the gate for the sheep'**. This doesn't sound so comforting: less like leading us out and more like locking us in. Is this the ultimate lockdown, Jesus the gate shutting us up in the sheepfold? Is that what his leadership is for? Is that what the Church is, a stockade to stop us straying?

Well, a sheepfold, or a lockdown, is about safety, being guarded from the wolves, or the temptations, or the viruses, that threaten our lives. The shepherd's duty is to protect the sheep. But that's not an end in itself. Rather, the safety is for the sake of the freedom. The gate is exit as well as entrance: so Jesus says, 'they will come in and go out and find pasture'. Pasture, the fruit of the earth, abundant living.

Perhaps such abundance sounds a bit fanciful just now. For many, work is hard and dangerous; for many others, the gate is mainly closed and our only 'pasture' a brief daily exercise. But the good shepherd, the giver of abundant life, has himself led the way through danger and dearth and derision; more,

*through imprisonment and condemnation and death. 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'*

*We cannot yet gather to celebrate his sacrifice again in bread and wine, like those first Christians in Jerusalem. But we can still share in communion spiritually, as I invite you to do in a moment after our prayers. Our desiring and our hoping, our trusting and our walking, firmly fixed on the shepherd who leads us into both safety and freedom. We don't need to 'get a life'; simply, receive it and live it and enjoy it in all the abundance showered on us by our leader, who is risen from death and will never die again. Alleluia!*

*Prayer for the world:*

- for all who follow Jesus the Good Shepherd, especially those isolated or persecuted – for their safety and their freedom;
- for all enclosed in home, hospital or prison – for restoration to abundant living;
- for those who are lonely, and all from whom we are separated;
- for key workers and all on whom we depend for daily needs;
- for all in distress or in sickness, especially sufferers from Covid-19;
- for the dying, the bereaved and the departed, especially John Stott – for our rejoicing together in Christ crucified and risen ...

Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven ...**

*An act of Spiritual Communion:*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, I ask you to come spiritually into my heart. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen. *after the Prayer of St Richard of Chichester*

*Post-Communion Prayer and Blessing:*

Merciful Father, you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd,  
and in his love for us to lay down his life and rise again:  
keep us always under his protection, and give us grace to follow in his steps;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,  
that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the  
eternal covenant, make us perfect in every good work to do his  
will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight;  
and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy  
Spirit, be with us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

Let us go in the peace of Christ, alleluia, alleluia!

**Thanks be to God, alleluia, alleluia!**