

# THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

3rd May 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Welcome to this week's *Sunday Supplement*. For those who are able, a service of Holy Communion is available on our YouTube channel.

## To get in touch:

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## SUNDAY WORSHIP

You can use the Act of Spiritual Communion on page 4 for your Sunday worship, or watch our service on YouTube, as follows:

<https://youtu.be/O7njEkgB8Z4>

You might like to have the Act of Spiritual Communion to hand, to use the Prayer of St Richard of Chichester during the Communion.

Thank you once again to our growing cast of readers and intercessors who have contributed audio to the service. I warmly invite others to do so: it is really very easy if you have a smartphone that has a voice recording app (as most do, by default).

Daily Morning Prayer (audio only, except Mondays) and, on Sunday, Holy Communion can be found on our YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMSD6j4ngi9rCe7kzY66Xfw>

## READINGS & COLLECT

Acts 2:42-end  
Psalm 23  
1 Peter 2:19-end  
John 10:1-10

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.**

## SUNDAY MESSAGE

*Also available as the sermon in our video service.*

As you read or listened to the Gospel reading today, you were probably put in mind of the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. There's certainly plenty about shepherds in today's readings. But hold on a moment: the phrase "I am the Good Shepherd" is not in this passage. It's the next verse: John 10, verse 11. We haven't quite got there yet.

Before Jesus gets to the promise of shepherding us forever, he has some other things to set out first. Not how we merit or earn the promise of the good shepherd which he is about to make, because God's grace is not earned or deserved. It is freely given. What Jesus talks about first is how we become sheep of his flock; how we join the club; how we accept God, and the grace he offers. And we find that it is all about following and believing – in other words, the route to entry is that we accept God's acceptance of us.

This teaching comes through the particular images of the passage. While the shepherd is still somewhat in the background, it is the gatekeeper and, even more so, the gate which is to the fore. The entry requirement, if you like. It is passing through the gate which is the route to being part of the flock, both for sheep and also for would-be shepherds.

To get through the gate, you don't need to pay your way, or have secret knowledge. There isn't a price, and there isn't a password. You don't have to qualify to be a member of this club: you have to want to join it, and you have to walk in. Jesus has chosen the image of the sheepfold. I'm reminded of a pub, or in fact of the Church of England, sometimes described as a club established for the benefit of its non-members. There is more to that light-hearted line than we might imagine, so always remember it.

The sheep are loved by the shepherd simply because they are sheep, for themselves. If they want to be in the flock, all they need to do is to enter the sheepfold. You are 'in with' the Good Shepherd, because you *choose* to be 'in with' the good shepherd. Enter through the gate, through wanting to believe in Jesus, through wanting to

follow Jesus. Jesus, as he says twice in this passage, is the gate, the way in to the flock.

Before Jesus gets to the fact that he is the good shepherd, he also needs to warn us that he is not the *only* shepherd. He alone is *guaranteed* to be good, but there are other shepherds, more or less good and bad, coming before and coming after Jesus. The sheep are to recognise those who enter by the gate: in other words, those who come in the name of Lord, in Jesus' name and in obedience to Jesus' commands. Jesus is telling us how to recognise those to whom we should give heed. These people are humble; they are prepared to admit that they might be wrong; they are doing their best to love both God and neighbour; they are feeding the hungry and visiting those who are sick and in prison. As a minister, it's hard not to feel a few twinges of guilt reading these words, but be warned: Jesus is addressing everyone, because we should all be addressing others in His name.

Jesus is also showing us what it means to be the sheep. If we enter by the gate which is Christ and follow only good shepherds, the result is twofold. We gain entry to the safety of the sheepfold, the Kingdom of Heaven and the promises of forgiveness and eternal life. We also get to go out into pasture, into the world, and enjoy its abundance assured of our ultimate safety.

Not every false shepherd is wrong in every respect, and not every good shepherd is right in every respect. We do not have a perfect vision of the virtue of God, so we cannot hope to recognise virtue precisely in others.

Not every false shepherd is malicious, a devil seeking to lead us into temptation; much less intending to do so. If we stray too far towards thinking that the universe is a great battle between good and evil, we fall into the heresy of dualism.

There is only God. Nothing is greater than God. God created all things and there is nothing that was not created by God. Everything that was created by God is good. Against this, there is only sin, a failure to follow God's Way. We must choose either the sheepfold, or the dark night. Most people find that the darkness isn't so funny when they are in it, and some will be attracted back to the sheepfold on their own terms: over the wall rather than the gate.

God's way is not self-denial for its own sake. It is not virtue, at least as we are capable of conceiving it. God's way is sacrificial love. We see this in the life of Christ. We see it also in the statement with which today's Gospel closes, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." That, I think, is the pasture which Jesus

promises, outside the sheepfold. I have heard Christians use that statement to argue that God wishes us to enjoy ourselves, to have fun, to do what we enjoy doing; to enjoy the possessions, the opportunities, the relationships which our lives offer. I believe all that is correct. God did not call us simply to live life as minimally as possible (although we are coming to learn the virtues of minimal living). At the same time, Jesus did not come so that I could have abundant life, or so that you could have it. He came so that all the sheep might have pasture, might have abundant life. Therein lies the danger of cultivating virtue, or cultivating pleasure, because unless everyone else has the same share in it, our virtue is nothing and our pleasure is sin.

Here we find ourselves at the Book of Acts. The society of believers described in today's passage may not have been perfect, and it may not have lasted, but it was a society that shared. It modelled very strikingly the justice of God. They weren't united in having nothing; they were united in what they had. We are not told that anyone reduced themselves to penury, simply that they gave up their possessions and distributed things according to need. They practised sacrificial love. In a small way, they suffered, or were metaphorically injured, in order to bring healing to others. That is exactly the way in which today's reading from First Peter summarises the Way of Christ. Suffering loss is sometimes necessary. By all means, have what you have (if you have it honestly), but you *may* need to give it up.

During the period AD249 to 262, a dreadful plague ravaged the ancient world. From the accounts we have, it is hard to tell what it was. It may have been smallpox or influenza, or perhaps a haemorrhagic viral fever like Ebola. Bishop St Cyprian of Carthage has the dubious owner of it being sometimes named after him, because he described some of its more horrific symptoms.

St Dionysius the Great, Bishop of Alexandria, also mentions it, in his Twelfth Epistle. The disease, he says, by no means left Christians untouched:

*"Certainly very many of our brethren, while, in their exceeding love and brotherly-kindness, they did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril, and ministered to them assiduously, and treated them for their healing in Christ, died from time to time most joyfully along with them, lading themselves with pains derived from others, and drawing upon themselves their neighbours' diseases, and willingly taking over to their own persons the burden of the sufferings of those around them. And many who had thus cured others of their sicknesses, and restored them to strength, died themselves, having transferred to their own bodies the death*

*that lay upon these ... But among the heathen all was the very reverse. For they thrust aside any who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied, and treated them with utter contempt when they died, steadily avoiding any kind of communication and intercourse with death; which, however, it was not easy for them altogether to escape, in spite of the many precautions they employed."*

(Dionysius of Alexandria, Epistle XII)

The Alexandrian Christians sacrificed their own pleasure, their own health and (in many cases) their lives, to help others. Had they possessed our scientific knowledge, they would have had an even greater challenge. They would have realised that, by their contact with those who were sick, they risked becoming a vector of the infection to others. But our healthcare professionals demonstrate daily that it is possible to labour sacrificially among contagious infection, without necessarily contributing to its spread. The principle of the Alexandrian Christians is good in every age, even if the way in which we are called to make our sacrifice changes.

Within their own knowledge, the Alexandrian Christians followed the way of Christ described, albeit very differently, by First Peter and the Book of Acts. They followed the way of self-sacrificing love. The risk of taking precisely their course today shows how unsafe it is to reduce the Way of Christ to a particular supposed virtue: our knowledge and understanding of virtue is too imperfect. The Alexandrians heroically attended the sick, regardless of risk. They were right by the standards of their day; they would not have been quite right by the standards of today. The earliest Christians in the book of Acts seem to have reduced sacrificial love to a sort of communal sharing, perhaps a sort of socialism. It wasn't enduring, because all attempts to reduce the perfect sacrificial love of God to a particular human virtue are bound to fall short somewhere.

Nevertheless, the underlying Way of Christ is clear. We are called to the best kind of self-sacrifice that we can discern, in order that the abundance of life that we enjoy might be shared with all. With the benefit of hindsight, we can find fault with both the Christians of Acts 2 and the Christians of Alexandria. However, we cannot help but admire them for trying. They chose to enter the sheepfold, and they chose to enter by the Gate.

## NOTICES

### **Fraudulent emails**

During the lockdown, attempted fraud has been on the rise. As we use email and online communications more, online fraud has inevitably risen also. Linda Dean yesterday received an email which purported to come from me, although in fact it was from a fake account impersonating me. The message was simple and slightly suspicious, but only sought a reply – it did not ask Linda to click on anything, send money or any of the more notorious fraudulent devices. Please be very careful and aware of potential fraud by email at the moment!

### **Bank Holiday 8<sup>th</sup> May – PLEASE CONTRIBUTE**

On Friday, I will be releasing a Service of Remembrance via YouTube, for all our family and friends who served during the Second World War, in whatever capacity.

I have emailed separately to invite you to contribute a photograph and details, audio clip or short video (max 15 seconds) remembering a loved one. Please get in touch if you are willing to do this and need a bit of technical support.

### **Christian Aid Week: 10-16 May**

There will be more information nearer the time, but suffice to say for now that there will be opportunities to pray and worship in support of Christian Aid Week. Watch this space.

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/christian-aid-week/coronavirus-guidance>

### **Community support group**

If you need help that you can't get elsewhere, no matter what your age or circumstances, you can email [duddoncommunity@outlook.com](mailto:duddoncommunity@outlook.com) In Kirkby, you can phone Stephen Tudway (01229) 715259 or Linda Dean (01229) 889630. In Broughton and the valleys you can phone Stephen Tudway (01229) 715259 or Selwyn Wright (01229) 716797. We will be pleased to point one of our volunteers in your direction.

## CLOSING PRAYER

*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.*

# AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

*You may wish to set aside a space for prayer in front of a cross and/or candle, in a part of the house which is calm and comfortable and perhaps decorated for Easter.*

*The Act of Spiritual Communion is best used at the time of normal church services, or as a personal response after listening to a broadcast or livestreamed service.*

*Guidance appears in italics. You may wish to say aloud the words in bold type.*

## Introduction

*Begin by making the sign of the cross and thinking of those who might otherwise be sitting around you in church.*



**In the name of the Father,  
And of the Son,  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.**

## Reflection

*Let us return to the Lord our God and say to him:*

**Father,  
we have sinned against heaven and against you.  
We are not worthy to be called your children.  
We turn to you again.  
Have mercy on us,  
bring us back to yourself  
as those who once were dead  
but now have life through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

*May God our Father forgive us our sins, and bring us to the fellowship of his table with his saints for ever. Amen.*

## The Word of God

*Read one or more passages of scripture, perhaps the readings set for the day. Today's readings can be found listed earlier in this Sunday Supplement. You may wish to read the sermon.*

## Prayer

*Begin with the Collect. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to the needs of the world, our community, family and friends and to the prayers you ought to offer for them.*

*Spend time in silence to reflect on the issues raised in the readings or the sermon. How might they be applied in your life?*

*End with the Lord's Prayer:*

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

**Our Father in heaven...**

## Prayer for Communion

*This prayer may also be used at the appropriate point while watching a live or recorded service of Holy Communion.*

**Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,  
for all the benefits you have given me,  
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)*

## Closing prayers

**Eternal God, our beginning and our end,  
accompany us in this day's journey. Dawn on  
our darkness, open our eyes to praise you for  
your creation and to see the work you set  
before us today. Take us and use us to bring to  
others the new life you give in Jesus Christ our  
Lord.**

*Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'*

**The Lord bless us, and preserve us from all evil,  
and keep us in eternal life. Amen.**