

## Weekly Worship – Online Worship

### Fourth Sunday of Lent – Sunday 22 March

#### Introduction

Hello everyone, from the Church of Scotland and our national worship team. We find ourselves in unusual and unsettling times. Our lives have changed in ways we could not have imagined just weeks ago, including how we meet as a church and worship God. This is a time of physical distancing, but of social and spiritual solidarity.

During the time when our congregations are not able to hold services in person, we will be providing a short act of worship online each Sunday, led by a range of people from across the Church of Scotland. We are grateful to Doug Gay and Jo Love, who have helped shape the first of these at very short notice.

This worship is open to all. Whether you call yourself a church member, a believer, an agnostic or a spiritual searcher. You are welcome here. We hope that sharing together will be a blessing to you in these days of challenge and uncertainty. There are moments where you can join in at home, speaking or singing the words out loud or inside. You might also like to light a candle before we begin as a sign of setting this time aside for something special.

In our worship today, we are focusing on one of the best known passages in the Bible – the 23rd psalm. We join together now with people across Scotland and around the world in reflecting on this scripture, and we begin by acknowledging that we are in God's presence.

## Call to worship

To the green pastures,  
to the still waters,  
**led by God, we come.**

Lacking nothing,  
finding everything,  
**to rest in God, we come.**

Anointed by love,  
restored in our souls,  
**to dwell in God's house, we come.**

We may not be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to sing together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship. We sing together in prayer for the Church in Scotland and in all the world to be a place of welcome and love.

## Song – CH4 198 “Let us build a house where love can dwell”

Let us build a house where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
how hearts learn to forgive;  
built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:  
All are welcome,  
all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak,  
and words are strong and true,  
where all God's children dare to seek  
to dream God's reign anew.  
Here the cross shall stand as witness  
and as symbol of God's grace;  
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:

All are welcome,  
all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach  
beyond the wood and stone  
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,  
and live the Word they've known.  
Here the outcast and the stranger  
bear the image of God's face;  
let us bring an end to fear and danger:  
All are welcome,  
all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named,  
their songs and visions heard  
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed  
as words within the Word.  
Built of tears and cries and laughter,  
prayers of faith and songs of grace,  
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:  
All are welcome,  
all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

## Prayer

Now we pray:

God of all the world,  
We come this morning to praise you – trusting in your promise  
that when we draw near to you, you draw near to us.

This is your world, you are its maker and you love it unreservedly.

We praise you that by your Spirit – you are everywhere present on the earth.  
Closer than breath, nearer to us than even those dearest to us.  
Near enough to hear and to help and to heal.

We give thanks that even if we are distant from one another physically we are united by your Spirit.

Lord Jesus Christ, we worship you this morning as God with us.

We celebrate you as the Light of the World.

We give thanks that you are the Good Shepherd – who loves his sheep and knows them by name

We ask you to open our hearts this morning.

Help us to hear your voice,

help us to know that it is really you who is speaking and that this truly is a word for us.

And on this day when we remember and give thanks for our mothers, we give thanks too, that you are the one that loves us with a mother's strength and a father's tenderness.

Hear us as we join to pray together in the prayer which our Lord has taught us to pray:

**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.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

## **Video from St Paul's Parish Church**

We're now going to hear from St Paul's Parish Church, a Priority Areas congregation in Glasgow, about how they are responding to support their community during this time.

## Psalm 23, from “Psalms Redux”

Let us listen for the word of God, in the poetry of our faith ancestors, retold in these contemporary words.

This I know:  
My life is in your hands.  
I have nothing to fear.

I stop,  
breathe,  
listen.

Beneath the whirl of what is  
is a deep down quiet place.  
You beckon me to tarry there.

This is the place  
where unnamed hungers  
are fed, the place  
of clear water,  
refreshment.

My senses stilled,  
I sink in and drink deeply,  
at home  
in timeless territory.

In peril, I remember:  
Death’s dark vale holds no menace.  
I lean into you;  
your eternal presence comforts me.  
I am held tenderly.

In the midst of all that troubles,  
that threatens and diminishes,  
you set abundance before me.  
You lift my head; my vision clears.  
The blessing cup overflows.

This I know:

You are my home and my hope,  
my strength and my solace,  
and so shall you ever be.

[Thank you to Canterbury Press for the use of 'Psalm 23 Redux' taken from 'Psalms Redux: Poems and Prayers' by Carla Grosch-Miller]

## Reflection

When times are hard, when days are dark, when people are afraid. For many centuries it has been a deep instinct for folk in Scotland to turn to the 23rd Psalm. This is no ordinary text. For so many of us and for so many of our parents and grandparents – this has been the text which has gone with us on our last journey.

Written two and half thousand years ago, it amounts to just over one hundred words in English – but long after many of us moved from villages and farms to live in towns and cities, this short worship song – with its strong, simple, rural images – has carved out a place in the spiritual landscape of Scotland.

Today, God is still speaking to us through these words – words which some of us know by heart and which others – while we couldn't repeat them from memory – well, when we hear them we feel as though perhaps we have always known them.

The other night, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was being interviewed on the television and Emily Maitlis asked him about the Coronavirus pandemic. In his reply, he said he felt that this was a time of revelation – even for those who were agnostics or atheists, who would say they had no religion. And when pressed, he spoke of the revelation of our interdependence, of our need for one another. It's hard not to agree that we are being shown – painfully – what we are made of, what and who we love and what we are living for.

When all is well and life seems easy, it may be tempting to dismiss the 23rd Psalm as sentimental or trite. But reading it today it shows itself to be made of stronger stuff. Yes it is an affirmation of trust in God – the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want for loo roll, or tinned goods, or hand sanitiser. I shall trust enough not to hoard them from my neighbour. I will sleep – or at least try to. I will stop endlessly checking social media – and for a while, find a place of stillness.

And of course the reason we have taken it with us on so many of us on our last journeys, is that this Psalm talks about fear, and about evil, and about those times – like the times we are living through now, and even more so it seems, the times which lie ahead of us – when the journey of our lives is overshadowed by death. By naming them, it acknowledges their reality and their power. Because there is a real tension here: if God really is Our Shepherd, why are things like this allowed to happen? Why do we have to walk in this valley of pain and illness and hearts which are broken by loss?

Neither Judaism nor Christianity nor any other religion or philosophy have any easy answers to the problem of suffering. And because of that we cannot make our faith into an opiate that masks our pain. The only faith worth having is an honest one – one which can ask the hard questions when it is overshadowed by a pandemic. And that is the faith which lies behind this Psalm – one which recognises the painful and fearful realities of life, but which nonetheless invites us to trust in God, to hold on to the goodness and mercy of God – who can hold our lives even through death, who has built a house where we can live in love forever.

What the Psalm bears witness to, the Gospel does also. Jesus the Good Shepherd – who loves enough to give his life – and who, in his risen power, is able to take up his life again and to lift up our lives – into eternal life, life beyond death, life in the house of the Lord, forever.

We have some painfully hard journeys to make together over the next few weeks and months. And for some among us, that will include the last journey they make on earth. We are going to need this Psalm – this faith – this God – this Good Shepherd, when our hearts are sore, when our faith is shaken, when we struggle to understand. May God give us grace to say – to say and to sing – ‘I will trust in you always. For your endless mercy follows me, your goodness will lead me home’.

## Psalm 23 – Stuart Townend

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 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.

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.

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.

## **Blessing**

We bring our time together to a close with a prayer inspired by St Patrick's Breastplate.

When to love our neighbours we have to keep a distance from them

**Christ be with us**

When we are afraid of getting sick

**Christ within us**

When we worry about whether we have what we need to live

**Christ behind us**

When we are afraid of the future

**Christ before us**

When we feel alone or isolated

**Christ beside us**

When we feel lost

**Christ to win us**

When we lose those we love

**Christ to comfort and restore us**

When we sink in despair

**Christ beneath us**

When we look for hope and help

**Christ above us**

When we are alone

**Christ in quiet**

When we are at risk

**Christ in danger**

When we think of our families and friends

**Christ in hearts of all that love us**

As we listen to those around us  
**Christ in mouth of friend and stranger**

In the week ahead may you know peace.  
And the blessing of God the Holy Trinity  
rest upon you and remain with you  
This day and for evermore  
**Amen**