

# Sunday service



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> April  
The Fourth Sunday  
of Easter  
The Revd Nicola  
Furley-Smith



Andrea Lightfoot | [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com)

**Opening Music**     *Fugue in G Minor*

by Johann Sebastian Bach (organ of The Spire Church, Farnham – 2020)

## Introduction

Hello, my name is Nicola Furley-Smith and I am the Deputy General Secretary for Ministries. Our service today comes from Purley United Reformed Church.

## Call to Worship

Come and worship the living God, whose goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives. Come and worship the living God who gathers us to his side, as a shepherd gently gathers in the flock. In the name of Jesus: come and worship, for all are welcome here!

### Hymn *The King of Love, my Shepherd Is*

Henry Williams Baker (1821-1877) Public Domain sung by the 7pm Choir of St. Francis de Sales Church in Ajax, Ontario, Canada and used with their kind permission

The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness fails me never;  
I nothing lack if I am His  
and He is mine for ever.

2 Where streams of  
living water flow  
to rest my soul He leads me,  
and where the  
verdant pastures grow  
with heavenly food He feeds me.

3 Perverse and foolish  
I have strayed,  
and yet, in love, He sought me,  
and on His shoulder gently laid,  
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

4 In death's dark vale I fear no ill  
with You, dear Lord, beside me;  
Your rod and staff my comfort still,  
Your cross before to guide me.

5 You spread a table in my sight;  
Your saving grace bestowing;  
and O what joy  
and true delight  
from Your pure chalice flowing!

6 And so through all  
my length of days  
Your goodness fails me never:  
Good Shepherd, may  
I sing your praise  
within Your house for ever.

## Prayer of Adoration

God, who is like a good shepherd, we are your people.  
You count each one of us as your own.  
You call us brothers and sisters of Christ.  
You know us by name and by nature.  
Shepherding God, we worship you.

God, who is like a good shepherd, we are your people.  
In Christ you have gone ahead that we might follow.  
In Christ you have opened springs of living water  
that we might be refreshed.  
In Christ you have conquered death that we might live without fear.  
Shepherding God, we worship you.  
God, who is like a good shepherd, we are your people.  
We know your voice, the voice that draws us closer,  
the voice that sends us out, the voice that injustice cannot silence,  
the voice that sets the prisoner free.  
Shepherding God, we worship you. Amen.

### **Prayer of Confession**

God, who is like a good shepherd, we are your people,  
and we have wandered far from your presence.  
We have turned our ears from your voice and listened to other voices –  
the voice of greed, the voice of selfishness,  
the voices of arrogance and pride.  
You have offered us abundance of life,  
but we have settled for so much less. Forgive us.

*Silence*

### **Assurance of Pardon**

Our God is like a good shepherd,  
never giving up on those who are lost,  
always ready to welcome the wanderer home.  
Hear these words and take them to heart.  
For you were going astray like sheep,  
but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.  
Alleluia! Praise be to the living God! Amen.

## **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.  
Amen.**

### **Reading** *1 Peter 2: 19-25*

For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

### **Reading** *St John 10:1-10*

Jesus said: '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.

## **Hymn**     *I lift my eyes to the quiet hills*

Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926-2024) from Psalm 121 © Oxford University Press OneLicence No. # A-734713 Sung by the Revd Paul Robinson and used with his kind permission.

1 I lift my eyes  
to the quiet hills  
in the press of a busy day;  
as green hills stand  
in a dusty land  
so God is my strength and stay.

2 I lift my eyes  
to the quiet hills  
to a calm that is mine to share;  
secure and still  
in the Father's will  
and kept by the Father's care.

3 I lift my eyes  
to the quiet hills  
with a prayer as I turn to sleep;  
by day, by night,  
through the dark and light  
my Shepherd will guard his sheep.

4 I lift my eyes  
to the quiet hills  
and my heart to the Father's throne;  
in all my ways  
to the end of days  
the Lord will preserve his own.

## **Prayer of illumination**

O Lord, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

## **Sermon**

It was a boiling hot afternoon. In a dry and dusty patch of land on a remote bit of Samos my eye began to focus on an enormous green, canvas

umbrella with a red, wooden handle. Beneath it, was a tall, thin man. And enjoying its expansive shade were a dozen or fifteen sheep of the mottled variety so difficult to distinguish as sheep from goats. The sunburnt shepherd was, at the same time, the fold and the door for his flock. Just then as one sheep got up and strayed, the shepherd called out and the sheep returned.

It is a way of life small enough, close enough, communal enough that everyone knows which sheep are theirs and which belong to someone else. And the sheep miraculously—know to whom they belong.

That world is far more familiar to Jesus than it is to us. Because when Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd,” or “I am the gate for the sheep,” we hear it as a metaphor—maybe even a cosy pastoral scene. But to his original audience these were images loaded with meaning: loyalty, trust, community, responsibility, and the utter necessity of a shepherd whose care you could count on.

The passage we hear today—John 10:1–10—comes right after a long debate in John chapter 9. Jesus has healed a man born blind, and the community is in uproar. “Who is he?” “Can he be trusted?” “Is he truly from God?”

There is division, suspicion, and uncertainty.

Sound familiar?

And so Jesus paints two pictures for them—two figures of speech: first, the shepherd; second, the gate. Neither image is meant to stand alone; together they help people understand what he brings and who he is.

But, as John tells us in verse 6, “they did not understand.” And if we’re honest, we sometimes don’t either.

In the first part of the passage, Jesus describes a shepherd who enters the

sheepfold openly, rightly, honestly. The shepherd does not climb over the wall. The shepherd does not sneak in when no one is looking. The shepherd does not deceive or manipulate. They come through the gate, as they should. They call the sheep by name, and they follow. Now notice this: the shepherd goes before the sheep. They don't send them out alone. They don't push them from behind. They don't open the gate and leave them to fend for themselves.

They lead. They take the first risk. They show the first step. And they trust the one whose voice they know. There is a fundamental truth here: Sheep fare best together, not picked off one by one. The Christian life is not a solo enterprise. We learn the voice of the Shepherd — slowly, falteringly — together. We recognise God's leading — over time, in community together. We are safest when we stay within earshot of others. Jesus knows we struggle to trust. He knows we hear competing voices — some gentle, some flattering, some manipulative. And so he tells us plainly: There is a shepherd whose only desire is your flourishing. There is a voice that seeks not to take from you, but to give life to you.

When the people didn't understand the first image, Jesus tries again. "I am the gate for the sheep." "I am the door." This isn't a contradiction to being the shepherd; it is an amplification. The gate is not a barrier — it is a passageway. As in my scene in Samos, it is the safe place through which the sheep can come in and go out and find pasture.

Pasture means life.

Nourishment. Security. Freedom. Abundance. "I came," says Jesus, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." In other words:

The way you enter into flourishing life — life shaped by God's goodness, life that frees you and feeds you—is through Christ.

Not through striving. Not through self-promotion. Not through climbing walls. Not through proving your worth. But through the One who stands

openly, honestly —like the shepherd who does not hide. The contrast is stark.

There are the thieves and bandits—those who diminish the flock, sow anxiety, and prey upon the vulnerable. And there is Jesus—the one whose leadership is transparent, whose invitation is simple, and whose care is trustworthy. That contrast is a gift to us.

It helps us discern who is worthy of our trust. I believe one of the most comforting truths in this passage is this: Understanding comes and goes. Hearing Jesus' voice is not always easy—even for those closest to him.

We do not always know what God is saying. We are not always clear which voice is his. And yet:

Jesus does not abandon his sheep.

His sheep do not ultimately abandon him.

They may wander, but he will call again.

They may hesitate, but he goes before them still.

This is where 1 Peter 2:19–25 speaks with such grace. Peter reminds us of Christ's patient endurance, his willingness to absorb violence and not return it, his healing wounds, his shepherding compassion. And then comes the line that ties all our readings together: "You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." Not a shepherd who scolds. Not a shepherd who demands perfection. But the guardian of your soul. The keeper of your life. The protector of your wellbeing. This shepherd does not shame us for straying; he brings us home.

We live in a world where even computers generate letters, phone calls, and emails addressing us by name. They claim to know us. They want to gain something from us. They mimic intimacy in order to manipulate. And so when Jesus says he knows our name, when Jesus calls to us personally, when Jesus invites us to follow— it can be hard to believe. But this is the

difference: Every other voice wants something from us. Only Jesus wants life for us. When God calls to us through Jesus, we dare to trust that his call is not for his advantage but for our flourishing. We dare to believe that in his care we will be fed—together—along with all God’s people.

So today’s Gospel leaves us with three gifts:

First, that sheep fare best together. Community matters. Faith is communal. We are held and guided together.

Second, that there is promise of great pasturage. Abundant life is not a dream but Christ’s intention for us.

Third, that Christian living is public, open, honest, straightforward. No sneaking, no climbing walls, no manipulation—just the shepherd, the gate, the sheepfold, and the voice that calls us out into freedom.

May we learn to listen again for that voice. May we trust the One who always goes ahead of us. And may we find life —life in all its fullness — together. Amen.

## **Hymn     Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You**

Richard Gillard (born 1953) © 1977 Scripture in Song/Maranatha! Music OneLicence No. # A-734713 Performed by members of St Lawrence Church Chorley.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace  
to let you be my servant, too.

2 We are pilgrims on a journey.  
We’re companions on the road.  
We are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

3 I will hold the Christlight for you  
in the night-time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.

4 I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh, I'll laugh with you;  
I will share your joy and sorrow  
till we've seen this journey through.

5 When we sing to God in heaven,  
we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we've known together  
of Christ's love and agony.

6 Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace  
to let you be my servant, too

## Prayers of Intercession

Good Shepherd, your sheep need protection.  
So much in the world threatens to harm or destroy them.  
They are oppressed, exploited, unjustly treated,  
prey to conflict and violence. We pray for . . .

We ask that the world may know life in all its fullness.  
In your love and mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

Good Shepherd, your sheep need good pasture.  
So many in the world do not have enough to eat.  
Their lives are narrowed by need as they struggle to exist.

We pray for . .

We ask that the needy may know life in all its fullness.  
In your love and mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

Good Shepherd, your sheep need healing.  
So many are sick and in pain.  
Incapacitated by illness, sorrow, anxiety,  
their journey through life is hard.

We pray for . . .

We pray that those in trouble  
may know life in all its fullness.  
In your love and mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

Good Shepherd, your sheep need guidance.  
So often they do not know the way they should go  
but stumble along blindly, not listening for your voice.

We pray for guidance for the Church . . .

We pray that we may know life in all its fullness.  
In your love and mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

Good Shepherd, your sheep need saving.  
So often they stray from you and get lost,  
needing your costly forgiveness,  
needing you to risk all to fetch them back.

We pray for ourselves . . .

We pray that we may know life in all its fullness.  
In your love and mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

In the name of the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for the  
sheep. **Amen.**

**Hymn**     *I Will Sing The Wondrous Story*

Francis H Rowley (1854-1952) Public Domain BBC Songs of Praise

I will sing the wondrous story  
of the Christ who died for me.  
How he left the realms of glory  
for the Cross on Calvary:

*Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story  
of the Christ who died for me,  
sing it with his saints in glory,  
gathered by the crystal sea.*

2 I was lost; but Jesus found me,  
found the sheep that went astray,  
raised me up, and gently led me  
back into the narrow way:

3 He will keep me till the river  
rolls its waters at my feet;  
then he'll bear me safely over,  
where the loved ones I shall meet:

## Blessing

Go now in the peace of the Shepherd:  
gathered in his love, guided by his voice, guarded by his grace.  
May Christ, the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls,  
lead you into abundant life, and may the blessing of God Almighty  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
be amongst us and remain with us  
this day and for evermore. Amen.

## Closing Music *Fughetta*

by Johann Pachelbel (1653 - 1706), Man III, Jenny Gill Crawley URC - 2021

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**Sources** All liturgical material by Nicola Furley Smith.

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