

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Valentin Dedji. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church and pray for them as they pray for you.

Welcome and Invocation

Dear friends, I warmly greet you in the name of: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen!

You would certainly agree with me that, the whole world is currently going through very strange times during which world leaders seem to have lost every sense of wisdom, moral compass and guidance for the people under their authority. That's why I have chosen to reflect with you on the theme: 'TRUSTING IN GOD AS OUR GOOD SHEPHERD'. As such, our first hymn is an invitation to 'trust and obey' as 'We walk with the Lord'.

Opening Hymn: 'When we walk with the Lord'

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://youtu.be/OoLLWZEK7A>

1. When we walk with the Lord in the light of his Word
What a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will, he abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

2. Not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies,
But his smile quickly drives it away;
Not a doubt or a fear, not a sigh nor a tear,
Can abide while we trust and obey.

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

3. Not a burden we bear, not a sorrow we share,
But our toil he doth richly repay;
Not a grief nor a loss, not a frown or a cross,
But is blest if we trust and obey.

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

4. But we never can prove the delights of his love
Until all on the altar we lay;
For the favor he shows, and the joy he bestows,
Are for them who will trust and obey.

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

5. Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at his feet,
Or we will walk by his side in the way;
What he says we will do, where he sends we will go,
Never fear, only trust and obey.

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

Prayers of Restoration:

Have faith in God, my heart, trust and do not be afraid;
God will fulfil in every part, each promise he has made.
Have faith in God, my mind, for when your light burns low
God's mercy holds a wiser plan than you can fully know.
Have faith in God, my soul, his cross forever stands;
and neither life nor death can pluck his children from his hands.
Lord Jesus, make me whole;
grant me no resting place, until I rest, heart, mind, and soul, the
captive of your grace. **AMEN!**

1st Bible Reading: Ezekiel 34: 11-16 and 21-24 (NRSV)

¹¹ For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. ¹² As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by

the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

²⁰ Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged, and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

²³ I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I the LORD have spoken.

2nd Bible Reading: Ephesians 3: 14-21 (NRSV)

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,^[a] ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be

strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Sermon:

Dear friends,

I would like to share with you on the theme:

'TRUSTING IN GOD AS OUR GOOD SHEPHERD'.

According to the Christian liturgical calendar, Sunday 26th November is the last Sunday in what is called 'ordinary times'. This means that, from next week, we'll start the 'Advent season'. As the hymn writer Arthur Ainger put it:

*God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year:
God is working his purpose out,
and the time is drawing near:
nearer and nearer draws the time,*

*the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.*

It is indeed comforting and reassuring to know that, it is God who is 'working His purpose out' as He is our Creator as well as the Creator of the whole universe. Equally so, as the hymn writer reminds us, 'nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the Glory of God as the waters covers the sea.' This is a powerful reminder that, not only God is our Creator, He is also the One who controls 'The Time'. Therefore would it not be a wise choice to confide our past, our present and our future and ourselves in God as the 'Good shepherd' who can surely guide our footsteps?

In our Old Testament reading in Ezekiel 34: 12 we read: '

As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

The image of the shepherd is found throughout the scripture. In the Old Testament God has words of strong rebuke and warning for bad shepherds, and prophecies of a good shepherd that is to come. In the New Testament, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd and we find in the epistles the notion of good shepherding extended to those who would lead in the church.

Why the Image of the Shepherd?

The idea of shepherding, and in specific the idea of God acting as the Shepherd of His people, is a theme found throughout the Bible, from beginning to end. We know the comforting statement by King David in Psalm 23 'The Lord's my Shepherd'. Revelation 7:17, when the saints who come out of the tribulation are brought before God, the Apostle John brings together two of the most striking images of the scripture by stating, "*for the Lamb in the centre of the throne shall be their shepherd and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eye.*"

This image appears at critical times of the history of God's people. This theme is certainly valid for us today, considering the times of wars, chaos, confusion, anxiety and hopelessness that millions of people are going through in our world.

For our information, let me remind ourselves that, shepherding was, and still is to a certain extent, a very common occupation for those in the Middle East. The Patriarchs were all shepherds, as was Moses and of course David. It was to shepherds in the field that the news of the birth of Christ was first revealed! The terrain and geography of the area lend itself to the raising of both sheep and goats, but in particular sheep. There is scarcity of grass and less than abundant sources of water. Sheep are moved from one area to another with relative ease and require less water than other domestic animals. Everyone was familiar with shepherding.

Shepherds commonly used long poles such as these to poke

around crevices in caves to scare out scorpions and snakes. It came to be a symbol of protection, power and authority. Even in Egypt, a divine symbol of kingship was the shepherd's crook. It is true that the idea of shepherd as leader was not exclusive to the Bible. However, what we will find is that God as the ultimate shepherd of His people takes this concept to a level not present in other cultures.

As we look at the characteristics of a good shepherd it will become clear that God chose this motif at least in part because His people are so apt to act like sheep. Scriptures like Isaiah 53:6 remind us over and over again that God's people and sheep are very much alike. Sheep are not only dependent creatures; they are prone to wandering and unable to find their way to a shepherd even when it is in sight. The analogy is fitting. It is clear, because of our helplessness and our tendency to wander and get lost we are in need of a Good Shepherd.

The Characteristics of a Good Shepherd

The Bible sketches out in great detail what a good shepherd would look like both in the Psalms and in the words of Christ himself. The focus of a good shepherd was to be on his flock, mainly to provide the assurance of their provision, guidance and safety. The description of the bad shepherds, in the book of Ezekiel exposes Israel's leaders of his day. This sketches out in vivid terms, what it looked like when leaders failed to provide this care. This calls to mind the image of a 'bad shepherd' painted by Jesus in John 10:10, who comes only to steal, kill and destroy. Rather than caring for the flock, they treated them with "*force and severity*".

Knowing that the bad shepherd fails to provide for the sheep, protect the sheep and guide the sheep, the picture of the good shepherd laid out in scripture comes into clearer view. The most famous description of the good shepherd, and perhaps one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, is Psalm 23. These lines were written a proven shepherd. King David's ability as a shepherd was clearly connected with God using him to masterfully lead Israel.

As far as prophet Ezekiel is concerned:

' [God] will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34: 13-16).

As we can see, the good shepherd provides nourishment and refreshment for his sheep. This meets a critical need due to the shortage of water in the region as already pointed out.

Not only did the shepherd provide nourishment and direction, but prophet Ezekiel like King David, conveys the idea of the shepherd providing safety and protection. Sheep are extremely fearful, but the shepherd was equipped to protect the sheep. The rod, which

was more of a club, was use to ward off wild animals and robbers. The staff, as we have seen already was used to protect form scorpions and snakes. As a result the sheep were safe, even walking through the valley of the Shadow of Death--literally the valley of deepest darkness.

Also, the picture here is of the shepherd leading the way and most crucially, as prophet Ezekiel put it 'feeding them with justice'. Sheep in the East are not driven like in the West due to differences in the terrain. For the most part, in the East the shepherd goes ahead of the sheep, choosing the way to go.

The new born and the nursing mothers with young are the members most vulnerable to attack. "*Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs, and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ones.*"

Choosing Christ as our Good Shepherd

It was certainly with all the characteristics here-above described about a good shepherd that the apostle Paul recommended his readers to Jesus Christ as 'The Good Shepherd' as he put it this way in his epistle to Ephesians 3: 15-21:

I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may

have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Wow! Personally, I find very fascinating the image of being wrapped in God' love through Christ in four dimensions: 'the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge'.

How wonderful would that be, particularly in these times when world leaders seem to have lost wisdom, moral compass and a sense of guidance for their people.

Conclusion

In summary, the good shepherd showed great concern for his sheep. He provided for them in terms of nourishment and rest. He guided them, leading the way. He was intimately involved with the flock and concerned for the safety of each individual. He was willing to sacrifice his own comfort, even his own life, for the sake of his sheep.

This is the kind of love and care with which God wanted His rulers to lead Israel in the Old Testament, and the writers of the New

Testament have much of this in mind when it comes to leadership in the church. It was in this context that Jesus introduced Himself to his disciples as 'The Good Shepherd' and challenged Peter to prove his love after his betrayal. Therefore, understanding the level of love, commitment and sacrifice expended by the shepherd on behalf of the sheep raises the bar for those who seek to lead in the church. This is the choice that we are invited to make. May God Himself lead us, guide us and provide for our needs as He has promised, through Jesus Christ, the Ultimate Good Shepherd. Amen!

Prayers of Intercession:

Compassionate God,
who sent Jesus Christ to deliver us
from all manner of injustices and inequalities,
create in us new hearts and enlarged visions,
to see the image of God in every person.

May we be generous in our love of others
as we work towards ending misunderstanding,
racism and injustice;
creating communities of human flourishing,

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Lord, we bring our broken towns,
our neighbours hurt and bruised;
you show us how old pains and wounds
for new life can be used.

We bring our broken loves,
friends parted, families torn;
then in your life and death we see
that love must be reborn.

Lord Jesus Christ,
We bring our broken selves,
confused and closed and tired;
then through your gift of healing grace
new purpose is inspired for our life.

Come Spirit, on us breathe,
with life and strength anew;
find in us love, and hope and trust,
and lift us up to you.

(Silent personal prayers+ The Lord's Prayer)

Our final hymn is an invitation to each of us to affirm The Lord as
our Shepherd, trusting in Him and walking justly before Him, in
this world where we live...

Final Hymn: (StF 480) 'The Lord's my Shepherd'

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://youtu.be/pN4tPkX0MG0>

Verse 1

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.

Chorus

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.

Verse 2

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.

Chorus

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.

Verse 3

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.

Chorus

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.

Chorus

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.

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Music*

Blessing

May the Lord, our Shepherd guide us, refresh our soul, guide us and
secure us as He has promised. And the blessing of God Almighty,

The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit, Be among you and remain
with you always. **Amen!**

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