

Winchester, Eastleigh & Romsey Circuit
SERVICE AT HOME – Sunday 26th November 2023

Prepared by the Revd Kate Cambridge

Welcome to our worship for Christ the King
Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent.
Psalm 95.1-7 reads: *O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our
salvation!*
*Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of
praise!*
*For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.*
*In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.*
*The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.*
*O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!*
*For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

We worship God our King and the shepherd of the
flock as we sing or listen to our first hymn:

Listen, Read, Pray or Sing Along STF 57

[Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!](#)

Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!
The heavens are not too high,
His praise may thither fly;
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow.
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!
The Church with psalms must shout,
No door can keep them out;
But above all the heart
Must bear the longest part.
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Prayers

Lord, you are a great God, the King over all,
and the shepherd over your people.
Help me now to worship you,
in the quiet or the busyness of my daily life.
May I be ever thankful for your blessings,
open to your voice - and become more aware of
your presence.
In Christ's name I pray, Amen.

Introduction to readings

Our Old Testament and New Testament reading
today follow in the footsteps of the Psalmist and
continue the pastoral imagery. By the time of the
prophet Ezekiel, shepherding was a well-
established metaphor for governing. After
criticising the shepherds of Israel, the rulers, for
their lack of care, God is revealed as the true
Shepherd who seeks out and cares for his sheep.
Then in the gospel reading, Jesus is the one who
judges over his people, and separates the sheep
from the goats.

Read Ezekiel 34.11-24

Read Matthew 25.31-46

Listen, Read, Pray or Sing Along STF 481

[The Lord's My Shepherd - Stuart Townend - YouTube](#)

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 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.

• *Stuart Townend (b. 1963)*

Reflection

'For thus says the Lord God: ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, 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.' (Eze 34.11a, 15-16)

I wonder if you heard the recent story in the news about a sheep, now named Fiona, who was dubbed the 'world's loneliest sheep.'? Fiona became stranded at the foot of the cliffs on Cromarty Firth, in the Scottish Highlands, over two years ago. The farmer whose flock she belonged to had attempted previous rescues, but was unable to rescue her without putting himself or others in danger. Eventually a group of five farmers, with climbing expertise and the help of a winch, managed to reach Fiona and brought her successfully up the cliff. You can read the story here:

[Resc-ewed: Britain's loneliest sheep saved from shoreline - BBC News](#)

There are many passages in the Bible which refer to God's people as sheep and God as the shepherd. Psalm 23 is a particularly popular passage, which speaks of the Lord as our shepherd.

'He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.' (Ps 23.2).

The passage in Ezekiel takes up this imagery. It is preceded by a critique of the shepherds of Israel, who have neglected the sheep. They did not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured or seek the lost. God himself therefore comes to rescue the sheep from the false shepherds. The fat and the strong sheep, those who have trampled on the rights of others and sought only their own good God will destroy. The last line of verse 16 is especially striking: God says, *'I will feed them with justice.'*

Justice (*mishpat*) is a key concept in the Bible and a quality which is essential in any leadership role. However, we are all called to be a people who seek justice. It is not only the role of those in leadership positions. Ezekiel makes clear that God's judgement is not only pronounced upon the unfaithful leaders of the people; there are also distinctions made within the flock. God says,

'Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.' (Eze 34.21-22)

Similar language is found in the gospel reading from Matthew 25. In this passage, Jesus sits as judge over the nations and separates the people, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep, those on his right, are called blessed by his Father, and invited to inherit the kingdom of God prepared for them since the foundation of the world. The goats, those on the left, are sent away into eternal punishment. Disconcertingly, the criteria for inheriting the kingdom is not believing the right thing or worshiping in the right way. God's people are judged on how they cared for the weak and disadvantaged – the hungry and thirsty, those who are sick, the prisoner and the stranger.

'A Justice Seeking Church,' the recent Methodist Church publication, is useful in helping us to think about justice: what does it look like? How do we seek justice? In the opening section, on listening and learning, the guide asks, 'What is justice like?' The first area it considers is God's justice – and offers the following quotes, amongst others:

*'Where there is God's justice...
... 'it is so much bigger than simply fairness'
... 'people feel heard and their dignity is affirmed'
... 'there is enough for all, no one lives in poverty, in hunger, or is without'
... 'all creation flourishes, all is well'
... 'there is joy and hope for the future.'"*

Secondly, it considers what life is like without justice:

*'When there is a lack of justice...
...we feel unseen and unheard.'
...we do not feel we can make a difference'
...we are prevented from fully flourishing'
...the most vulnerable bear the heaviest burden'*

Finally, it considers what seeking justice looks like:

*'Seeking justice...
...looks like praying, listening, speaking, acting, giving, relating, co-operating, resisting – and so much more.'
...involves deep attentiveness to people who have experienced injustice.'
...should inspire righteous anger, compassion, humility and hope.'*

You can find out more about the report and guide here:

[A Justice Seeking Church \(methodist.org.uk\)](http://methodist.org.uk)

A few years ago I bought a Bible from the Bible Society called the Poverty and Justice Bible. It highlights every text which refers to poverty and justice in red – and it is informative to see just how much of the text is red! It is clear, from our Bible readings today and from a wider look at Scripture, that God is a God of justice and we are called to be justice seeking people. The first step, if we are to take our Bible readings today seriously, may be repentance for the times when as a church or in our own individual lives, we have acted in ways that have not sought justice. This involves continuing to listen to those who have not experienced justice and to commit ourselves to working for change.

In a recent Circuit Staff meeting, we looked at the Justice seeking church guide and considered how we can seek justice and use the resources in our churches. One staff member made a point, also made in the guide, about what seeking justice can

look like at the local level. The guide offers this quote:

'Seeking justice...is about doing what we can in our own context, and not being overwhelmed.'

In our churches, communities, homes and families, perhaps it is, at its simplest, seeing where there is need, and being those who listen, who respond to need and who offer loving care and practical service in our own small ways. From our gospel passage, it is about recognising Jesus in those we meet and doing what we can, to feed those who are hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe, care for and visit those in need. What small thing is God calling you to do, to be someone who seeks justice and reflects God's heart for his world and its people?

In our Ezekiel reading, after God comes as shepherd and judge of his flock, the final words promise a future ruler over God's people.

'I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.' (Eze 34.23-24)

If you compare a similar passage in Jeremiah 23.1-8 on which this passage appears to be based, Jeremiah also predicts a future Davidic ruler who will rule wisely, exercising justice and righteousness – he is given the title 'a righteous shoot.' Much later it was understood as a messianic designation for Jesus. As we consider what it is to seek justice as God's people, on this Sunday before Advent, let us not forget to lift our eyes and look to Jesus, our inspiration, our redeemer, hope and light for our world. Amen.

Prayers of intercession

A prayer challenging injustice from the Methodist Prayer Handbook *Hidden Treasures* p. 7:

God of justice,
You long for everyone to have life in all its fulness;
Help us to refuse to accept inequality and poverty.

You yearn for a right relationship with people and planet,
Help us to enable a flourishing of all creation.

You created one people and one world;
Help us to stand for justice for all people seeking refuge.

You fashioned everyone in your own image;
Help us to resist all forms of discrimination.

You desire justice and reconciliation for all people and nations;
Help us to be peace-builders in our lives and in the world.

May your justice roll like a mighty river,
Your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
And may your people say Amen!

Offering and Prayer of Dedication

We offer our gifts, asking that they would be spent wisely, invested ethically, and given generously, that we might be a beacon of hope and a voice for justice in this community and in your world. 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.

Listen, Read, Pray or Sing Along STF 713

[Show me how to stand for justice | Lyrics - YouTube](#)

Show me how to stand for justice:
How to work for what is right,
How to challenge false assumptions,
How to walk within the light.
May I learn to share more freely
In a world so full of greed,
Showing your immense compassion
By the life I choose to lead.

Teach my heart to treasure mercy,
Whether given or received –
For my need has not diminished
Since the day I first believed:
Let me seek no satisfaction
Boasting of what I have done,
But rejoice that I am pardoned
And accepted in your Son.

Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
Modelled on your living word,
In humility submitting
To the truth which I have heard.
Make me conscious of your presence
Every day in all I do:
By your Spirit's gracious prompting
May I learn to walk with you.

Martin Leckebusch (b. 1962)

Closing Blessing

To him who is able to keep you from falling,
To Christ our King and our Saviour,
Be praise and glory, majesty and power
For ever and ever;
And the blessing of God Almighty,
The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Be with you and remain with you always.
Amen.

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