

Planning

LECTIONARY

Acts 4.5-12, Psalm 23,
1 John 3.16-24, John 10.11-18

Context

Easter tide continues, and we move on from the resurrection appearances to encounter some of the teachings of Jesus which prepared the disciples for the time when he no longer walked physically beside them. This week we encounter the qualities of leadership, care and sacrifice embodied in the traditional image for the fourth Sunday of Easter, the Good Shepherd. In these weeks before Ascension and Pentecost, we develop a 'memory box' in which to store the qualities encountered.

Common thread – The Good Shepherd (John 10.11-18)

The ROOTS resources this week examine one of the seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus found in John's Gospel: I am the good shepherd. We explore the commitment of the shepherd to the sheep and note the extraordinary potency of this image. *An alternative thread for adults*, Cornerstone or stumbling block, *encounters Peter speaking confidently in the face of authoritative opposition in Acts 4.5-12*.

Seasonal

Theological reflection p.2; Prayers p.3; All-age service outlines (for Rogation Sunday, an invitation service, and for Ascension tide) pp.4-5.

PLUS

Hymns and songs See opposite page.

Fast response [WEB](#) Reflection linking recent events to these readings, posted on the website on 01.05.2009.

Take-home sheet [WEB](#) Downloadable activities for parents and children.

ROOTS resources Look at ROOTS *Children & Young People* magazine for further ideas.

Archive [WEB](#) These readings were covered on 11.05.2003 and 07.05.2006.

Pictures

The good shepherd: http://farm1.static.flickr.com/110/366185082_ad1227674b.jpg?v=0;
http://communitycomics.com/psalms_project/fullsize/psalm23.jpg;
http://oneyearbibleimages.com/jesus_shepherd.jpg;
Nail cross: <http://grassrootsrevival.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/nailcross.jpg>.

Websites Alternative words for Psalm 23: www.encouragingwords.net/psalm23.htm.
Hyperlinks: [WEB](#).

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Gather

Prepare the space

Create a shepherding scene with a collection of soft toys or farmyard animals, woolly jumpers, knitting needles with balls of wool, a sheepskin rug (if possible) and a shepherd's crook. (If a shepherd's crook is not available, a wooden walking stick is a reasonable substitute.) All this might be arranged on a swathe of green fabric or even a carpet of artificial grass sourced from a local greengrocer. The space could also have a distinctive cross placed centrally as a reminder of Christ the Good Shepherd laying down his life for us. Create a memory box. A battered old suitcase or trunk would be good for this and would probably not be too difficult to obtain, if you ask around in good time. Otherwise, use a cardboard box, decorated with a huge variety of old photographs and postcards. Place this next to the shepherding scene.

Gathering words

As we gather today, we acknowledge our longing for security, nurture, refreshment and guidance. Christ, the Good Shepherd, offers this to all who follow him; and he relies on us, his hands and feet today, to love and nurture his people.

Call to worship

In God we find our soul's restoration:
**he leads his flock as the good shepherd,
our Lord.**

In God we learn to fear no evil:
**he leads his flock as the good shepherd,
our Lord.**

In God we are granted goodness and love:
**he leads his flock as the good shepherd,
our Lord.**

May each of us sense the guidance of God
and the blessings he pours upon his people.
Amen.

Prayer

A prayer of approach

Heavenly Father,
we gather in your name and
we worship you here today.
Grant to each one of us
the peace and the security,
the comfort and the courage
that your presence brings.
Amen.

A prayer of confession and forgiveness

Far we wander,
frequently we stray,
in mind and word and deed.
Please look on us
with goodness and mercy, Lord,
when we have wronged you,
and where we have injured others on the way.
It is never your desire that any be hurt
or harmed,
always your will that blessings will overflow.
Yet, where our actions hinder such blessing,
for ourselves and for our neighbour,
rescue us with your eternal staff
and lead us back to your path of righteousness.
Amen.

A prayer of praise

You are the maker of hillside and hamlet,
you are creator of soil and of star.
Praise be to your name!
You are the Saviour, steering all history,
you are Redeemer of ancient and new.
Praise be to your name!
You are the Spirit, advancing your purposes,
you are the power to the lost and the found.
You are the one God, triune in majesty.
Praise be to your name!
Amen.

Sending out

In the name of the Good Shepherd,
who sacrificed his all for the good of his flock,
go onward from this place.
In the name of the Good Shepherd,
who calls us to sacrifice for the good of his flock,
go onward from this place.
And as he drives us on,
may we know his presence with us,
night and day; now and always.
Amen.

Ways into prayer

Cut short lengths of wool and invite people to tie knots into them representing situations close to their hearts. These may be kept in a pocket or tied around a wrist as an aid to prayer during and after worship.

Prayers of intercession, a personal prayer
for the week and further prayers are
on the [WEB](#).

Bible notes

True leadership and discipleship cannot be separated from the personal love of those whom we know by name and voice.

The links between the lectionary readings

Psalm 23 gives a rich example of the Old Testament use of the shepherd as a metaphor for the good ruler, in particular for the Lord. In John's Gospel, Jesus picks up this metaphor and gives it a new, self-referential, twist: the good shepherd is the one who is prepared to face death in order to fulfil his responsibilities.

In Acts, Peter follows his master's example. By healing the cripple and fearlessly proclaiming the source of his power, he puts himself in immediate danger. 1 John urges its readers to lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters. In each case, the willingness to sacrifice oneself is tied to personal love: the shepherd knows the sheep by name and they know his voice; the disciples act in the name of Jesus; the ones we care for are our brothers and sisters.

Acts 4.5-12

Peter is the dominant figure in the early chapters of Acts, and his appearance here is typical. After a night in prison, he and his companions are brought before the Jewish religious authorities. The assembled array is impressive: rulers, priests and scribes; the high priest and members of his family, listed by name. The disciples are thrust right into the middle of all this. They are unlettered, ordinary men, as Luke reminds us a little later; we know also from his Gospel that Peter's nerve had failed when his master had been arrested. But now he is transformed: he speaks with the freedom and confidence that was, in the ancient world, the mark of a philosopher. His style is fluent and authoritative, more a sermon than a speech of defence. He even emphasises the errors of his prosecutors by adding 'you' to the Old Testament quotation, 'This is the stone which *you* builders rejected', and by insisting on the resurrection of Christ before the Sadducees, who rejected even the future resurrection. The transformation of Peter reveals the power of the Holy Spirit, bestowed on the apostles at Pentecost.

Psalm 23

Does it matter how we treat other animals? In the imagination of the Old Testament, it is taken for granted that a good herdsman loves rather than exploits his flock. Psalm 23 gives the details that bring such a vision to life. The shepherd's staff, for example, is used still today to guide and reassure individual sheep. Scholars tend to conclude that there is a change of metaphor at verse 5 from God as shepherd to God as host; however, there is no consensus about how to divide the psalm. It is interesting, therefore, that more than one practising shepherd has without difficulty found references even in verses 5 and 6 to the care of sheep, for example, in anointing their sores with ointment.

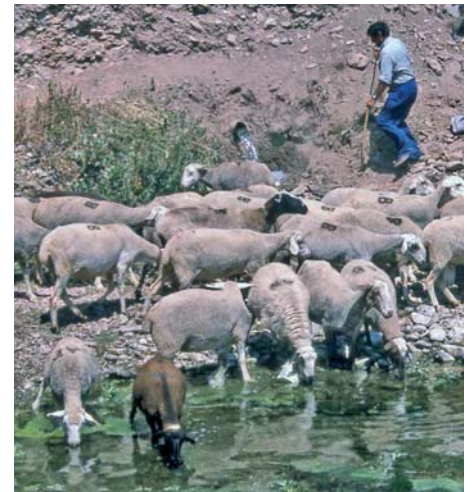
New Testament 1 John 3.16-24

1 John is difficult to categorise. It is more like a homily, or meditative reflection, on the Gospel of John than a letter; it contains elements of both polemic and pastoral edification. It comes from quite a different milieu from the story of Peter in Acts. Yet the two share a remarkable number of common elements: the power of the name of Jesus; the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer; love shown through helping those in need; the imitation of Jesus' self-giving even to death; and fearless freedom of speech. Whatever the diversity in the Early Church, there was a striking degree of common ground.

Gospel John 10.11-18

Jesus is rarely in the New Testament described directly as 'God'. Instead, the writers repeatedly ascribe to him activities or titles or descriptions that properly belong to God. Here Jesus identifies himself with the Good Shepherd who, in the Old Testament, stands for God. Ezekiel 34 makes a contrast with the bad shepherds, who neglect and exploit their flocks; Psalm 23 gives details of the painstaking care provided by the true herdsman. In John, Jesus contrasts the shepherd with the hired hand: the one abandons his charges at the first sign of danger; the other faces death for the sake of his sheep. The extension of the Old Testament metaphor is striking: Jesus identifies himself with God *precisely* in his self-giving death.

Jesus' claim is that his relationship with the Father, one of mutual love and knowledge, is the source of his love and knowledge of his sheep. They are his own: the Greek word *idios* is used of members of one's family. It is the unity between Father and Son that makes unity among the sheep an imperative. That is why the 'other sheep' will become part of one and the same flock. Some scholars argue that the 'other sheep' are scattered groups of Jewish Christians in John's own day, facing persecution by the synagogues; most think that they are the non-Jews who will eventually become Christians. In either case, the readers are reminded that they are all linked as members of one family through the one shepherd.



Hymns and songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.

A new commandment

Because the Lord is my shepherd (*Walker*)
(CHE, LAU, SG)

Good Christians all, rejoice and sing
How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In Christ alone my hope is found (SOF, TS)
I will sing the wondrous story

Jesus, the Lord said (BPW, CCH, HP, LAU, MP)

Master, speak, thy servant heareth (HP, MP, SOF)

Nade te turbe (Taizé) (HON, LAU, SG)

Praise my soul, the king of heaven

The King of love my shepherd is

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want

The Lord's my shepherd (*Townend*)
(MP, SG, SOF, TS)

Thou Shepherd of Israel, and mine (HP)

See inside front cover for key to abbreviations.

WORD & RESPONSE ADULTS

The Good Shepherd
John 10.11-18, Psalm 23

This week's psalm and Gospel lesson present to us one of the most famous images in the whole of Scripture.

- This week's readings demonstrate extremely well the interconnectedness of Scripture and the way in which the lectionary compilers draw on this to help us appreciate and learn from the Word. We see how the beautiful and timeless image from Psalm 23 blends with the teachings of the Good Shepherd, Christ himself, when he said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' Similarly we hear in 1 John of how we ought to lay down our lives for one another.
- This idea of 'laying down' describes the way that the shepherd would put his life before that of his flock in order to protect them from wild bears or lions (see 1 Samuel 17.34). Christ, too, is proclaimed to have given his life for his people, fending off the power of sin and even of death.
- We might consider another aspect of laying down and the gift of perspective that it bestows. At the end of a long day, with the flock safely within the sheepfold, the shepherd lay down at the gate. Perhaps he would gaze up into the night sky. There the maker of the heavens shines forth in the splendour of the stars. Might our days be different, too, in such contemplation? Perhaps the power of this pastoral image is a clue to the place that the images of Psalm 23 and the good shepherd have had in the human heart over countless ages.
- It still says much to our busy lives. Once we stop trying to do everything ourselves we arrive at a place where God can enter and support what we do. What might we lay down in order to be in a position to follow the lead of the good shepherd?
- There was much for which Jesus had to prepare his disciples, yet they did not know what was coming. This was not a modern-day course in discipleship with a well-defined content, anticipated each week. All he could do was to engage his friends in a way that was inspirational.

- Finally, there is great comfort in this passage for those who have been forced to lay things down they would not have chosen. We think of the man who is bereaved, the woman who is made redundant, the teenager in a broken friendship, the child whose pet is ill. Jesus knows what it is to lay things down and to stay beside those of his flock who go through the dark places of life. We will go through such troubles but we need not be afraid, for God is always with us supporting, upholding and protecting.
- At the end of this talk you might consider the items in the *Prepare the space* display and, if you are using the memory box idea, you could put them into the box at this point, closing it to keep them safe until you add to them next week.

Another angle

Christian values in industrialised and post-industrial societies have been characterised by a commitment to hard work. Are we really capable of laying things down?

Living faith

For discussion: Five times Jesus uses the phrase 'lay down'. When do we genuinely take time to lie down physically or metaphorically in order simply to ponder the Good Shepherd's blessings upon us?

Alternative thread
Cornerstone or stumbling block
Acts 4.5-12

The newly confident Peter is eloquent in word and deed in the face of need and opposition.

- There is gossip, and there is the handing on of useful information, and there are probably many other categories of handed-around material in between. In the reading from Acts, we find Peter quoting Jesus, quoting Psalm 118. 22: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.' Jesus had quoted this line from Psalm 118 and the huge significance of this strange paradoxical assertion has struck Peter forcibly. Only a short while ago Jesus had been driven out of the city carrying his cross to a shameful death, but now Peter proclaims him as Lord.

- Could Peter have seen an application of the words to himself also? Jesus had called him *Rock*, yet he had denied his master when it came to the crunch. He might have seen himself as a worthless rock at that time, yet he is the man who is now filled with boldness to act as the chief spokesman for the apostles. He is now acting as the rock on which the Church is being founded.
- After the miraculous healing of the cripple, observed by so many people, there was no way that it would be possible for the Temple authorities to deal with Peter and John quietly.
- Around 5,000 people had been convinced by the apostles' words. Peter and John were now celebrities, the healing demonstrating that God was with them. What was more, the former cripple appeared as a witness (verse 14) to what had happened the previous day. This gave Peter the opportunity to be heard, and he links the healing, or saving of the life of the cripple, with the one who offers salvation, Jesus. The claim he makes about Jesus, that there is salvation in no one else, is made here for the first time.
- In these weeks following Easter Day, we learn of the founding events which established the Early Church as an ongoing and ever-present, if persecuted, entity. Here we see Peter, dauntless in the face of authoritative opposition, setting out eloquently the case for belief in Jesus. This is a person truly transformed by the risen Christ.
- But, as with miracles performed by Jesus, the effect is divisive. To many people it is a sign of the power of God, but to the authorities it is a threat that undermines their right to be considered the real spiritual leaders. So instead of seeing this as a cornerstone of faith leading to salvation, the rulers, elders and scribes find this to be a stumbling block and a stone to trip over. They refuse to see this as a sign from God.

WORD & RESPONSE ALL AGES TOGETHER

The Good Shepherd John 10.11-18

Open the Word

This week *Open the Word* uses a story especially for children. If this is inappropriate in your situation, read the Gospel from a suitable translation of the Bible.

“ Once upon a time there was a shepherd. He wasn't a baaad shepherd. No way! He was a good shepherd. In faaact he was such a good shepherd that if one of his little laaambs got tired, he would pick it up in his arms and carry it all the way home. If one of his grown-up sheep got lost, do you know what he would do for it? Well, he loved them all so much that he would go out and look everywhere for that lost sheep until it was found. Then he'd bring it home to the other sheep, knitting the flock baaack together again.

He haaad other men to help him, but they weren't as good a shepherd as he was. No way! They thought they could pull the wool over the good shepherd's eyes, but he knew they didn't love the sheep like he did. He knew that if a big, baaaad scary wolf were to chase the sheep with its big baaad scary teeth and its big, baaaaaad scary claws then the other men would just hoof it and run away, bleating on about how scary it was and how *their* lives were in danger. But not the good shepherd. No way! The ewes and the raaams all knew their shepherd's voice and they listened to what he had to tell them. He knew his sheep and they knew him in the same way that God knows each one of his children; we who are his little laaambs.

In faaact, the good shepherd wouldn't just stay around and fight that big baaad scary wolf, with its big baaad scary teeth and its big baaad scary claws. No way! He would actually lay down his life and die for the sheep if he needed to, just like Jesus who laid down his life and died for us on the cross. But the question is, will we listen to our Good Shepherd's voice and listen to what he has to say? Baaa! ”

Explore the Word

Jesus used images and examples that would be familiar to his listeners. How can we build on this today?

Jesus talked about shepherds and sheep because he lived in a place where shepherds were common. People would see them passing through their villages and towns with their flocks of sheep on a daily basis. Sheep were an important source of wool and people relied on this for much of their clothing and household fabrics. (Did you know that there are only two mentions of cotton in the whole of the Bible?) So Jesus talked to people, and based his teaching on what was familiar to them.

If Jesus were around here today, he might not talk to us about sheep and shepherds – though there are places in the world where that would still be appropriate. In John's Gospel Jesus says, 'I am the ...' seven times. Today we have heard about the shepherd and next week we shall hear about the vine. But if Jesus were living in our town or village today, what might he say that would help us to understand? I am the ... *what?* What would be helpful to us?

Respond to the Word

Watch: Type 'Psalm 23' into the search box on *YouTube* and select some of the accounts you will find. Invite people to discuss and evaluate them. This is probably best undertaken in small groups.

Pray: Name aloud people who are in the valley of the shadow of death, whatever that may be. Note the names and then pray for them. Simply read the words, 'The Lord is our shepherd who cares for ...' (reading out the names of each person mentioned). Conclude the prayer with the words 'May goodness and mercy follow them all the days of their life and may they dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Amen.'

Sing: Sing the version of 'The Lord is my shepherd' which is number 244 in *Junior Praise*. It is a simple two-part round which is easily learnt and enables the singer to internalise and remember the words.

Listen: If not used already, listen to the story printed above.

Invite: Invite someone who works with sheep to visit and tell you about the work of a shepherd.

Lie back: Lie on the floor, looking at the familiar space you are in from a whole new perspective. Take note of the things that you hadn't noticed before and ask if there is anything you now need to do as a result of your new perspective.

Plan: Plan an expedition to look at the stars on a clear night. You will need to go to a place where there is no light interference so you may need to go some distance. Make your plans flexible because you will need a clear night.

Plan: Plan a visit to an animal park or a farm where there are sheep. You can find them in cities as well as in the countryside. It is good to have the opportunity to encounter sheep first hand for those who have never seen one in real life.

Don't forget the Take-home sheet WEB

which has activities for parents and children to do together.

A prayer for all ages together

You, Lord, are our good shepherd:
you give us all we need.

You make us lie down in green pastures:
lead us by quiet waters.

You guide us in paths of righteousness:
may we go in your name.

Sometimes we must walk through
dark valleys:

please help us to not be afraid.

You are with us to guide and to comfort:
we will not be afraid!

You provide so much for us:
make us grateful.

Your goodness and love will follow us
all the days of our lives:

**we will dwell in your house forever!
Amen.**