

4th December, 2022

The paper-version Service



The Good
Shepherd
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable

place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing,

the song from this Sunday's Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.

Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;
I ever with thee, and thou with me, Lord.

Born of thy love, thy child may I be,
thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Be thou my buckler, my sword for the fight.

Be thou my dignity, thou my delight,

thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tow'r.

Raise thou me heav'nward, O Pow'r of my pow'r.

Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise;
thou mine inheritance, now and always.

Thou and thou only, first in my heart,
Ruler of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, when vict'ry is won
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heav'n's Sun!

Heart of my heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Sermon by Robert Hughes: We Live: What kind of life?

Read John 3:1-21

Whenever Jesus mentions 'Heaven' he is taking 'the longer view of life; the view from Advent; he is standing back, seeing from a distance. Yet Christmas is the opposite kind of seeing; up-close up and personal. Today's reading calls us to understand living from these two perspectives.

Both the Book of Genesis and the opening of John's Gospel tell us no substance existed before the Creation - only the Spirit of God. We learn the same Spirit brought substance into being and being into substance. We discover that existence is animated and inter-connected by the Spirit of God. Substance and Spirit are inseparable. God's world is a world of mutual dependency. And that principle underpins all of scripture. It brings the fundamental value of mutuality into existence. So to 'love' is to 'serve' the needs of life - one life, many lives, all life. It means taking the side of life.

From a Heavenly perspective, how are we doing with that? Is life prospering? The Bible has things to say about this.

I called the Creation 'a world of mutual dependency'. But when we look doesn't what we see justify the criticisms of humanity we read in the Bible? The human story is surely a history of exceptionalism, not mutual dependence, a story of life built upon falsehood: The first is that we are not connected, not to one another and not to the Earth; 'we are here and everything else is over there, different. A second falsehood is our unassailable sense of personal entitlement that what lies 'out there', exists to serve our own purposes. These two falsehoods on the road of 'exceptionalism' have brought disconnection to the planet, brought it to edge of catastrophe. And, if its effects were somewhat less evident to people in Jesus' lifetime, they are now unmissable wherever we look, - even from space. These are surely signs of a judgement we are bringing down on ourselves. The view from Heaven speaks of our failure to honour our spiritual connections - to 'live by the spirit' in solidarity with all Creation.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that though we are born in the power of the Spirit, we see ourselves merely as 'flesh born of flesh'. We have not understood we are animated and propelled by The Spirit, that we receive life through the Spirit. We do not acknowledge the inner 'Life within our lives', (which is our true selves); we do not let it 'live'.

Christmas, by contrast, brings a more intimate spiritual perspective. We are moved from 'macro' to 'micro', to the arrival of Jesus in body AND Spirit,

to 'The Christ' the *infant*, the helpless *child*, an image this time encapsulating helpless dependency. The child's mother, Mary, is the perfect emblem of unconditional Love, love that is summoned by need - need at its most evident in the moments after birth.

For little children there is no separation between need and love: Children know their connectedness, they know their need of others; they give their trust first to those who answer it. The love that arrives to rescue and sustain establishes life-long connections, unbreakable bonds. This is the kind of love about which Jesus speaks at length: Not that we loved him, but that first He loved us. God not only knows our needs but provides for them - most often through us! We are to be pro-life, mutual support.

Jesus' concern is not so much that we are 'flesh' but that we are not 'just' flesh. The 'Spirit' is our 'heartbeat and navigator'. Yet we do not hear it's beat and we ignore its compass. We reject dependency. What stands revealed is that CARING for life, for each other, for Creation, is Jesus' foundational call upon our lives.

We might ask, like Nicodemus, 'Where is 'heaven?' Where is this place so familiar to Jesus? (v13). Well, perhaps with the help of the world's most powerful telescopes we can answer that ... or perhaps not. Astronomers say they can see back almost to the first heart beats of Creation - almost to the beginning of existence. And yet 'No one', says Jesus, 'has ever gone there except the One who came from there', Jesus himself. 'Unless they are 'born again.'

'How can someone be born when they are already old?' Nicodemus asks. Jesus replies with an episode from the story of Moses. Moses' people must stick together because there are dangers on their road, 'vipers' along their path. What will keep them confident, united? Moses has a plan, telling his artisans to caste a bronze serpent and fasten it to a pole. And tells his followers: 'If you fear snakes, put your trust in the Spirit of God. Gaze upon this shining Serpent cast in bronze, a symbol of God's authority, and 'LIVE!'

This was done says Jesus, "for the same reason that I am lifted up, so that all who see will see me believe in my strength." (Numbers 21:8.)

Prayers: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* (Philippians 4:4-6)

- Pray for this day, and the coming week.
- Pray for justice, mercy, peace, and hope.
- Pray for individuals, neighbours, and for family & friends.
- Pray for the Church.



Collect: Second Sunday of Advent

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer: *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. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

The Notices: We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat & Bowls: Wed. 18th Jan. at 2pm, Church Hall and Church.
- Coffee and Questions: 25th Jan at 11am in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise: TBA
- COGS Tots: 2nd Mondays. COGS Tinytots: Monday mornings.
- Messy Church: Second Sundays of the month.