

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*The Fourth Sunday of Easter
25 April 2021*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: Come, let us worship and bow down let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

P: For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Praise to you, God our Maker; you refresh us with streams that flow with living water. Praise to you, Jesus our Good Shepherd; you gather your people and lead them to green pasture. Praise to you, Holy Spirit; you enfold us in peace and holy joy. We worship you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Forgiving Lord, we hunger and thirst for fulfilment. We search but do not find. We consume but are not satisfied. We lash out at each other, we wound your heart, we stumble in darkness and cannot hear you calling our name. In your goodness and mercy, lead us along safe paths, beyond the terrors of evil and death, and bring us home to you.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Lord Jesus Christ, Good Shepherd of the sheep, by whom the lost are found and guided in to one fold: feed us and we shall be satisfied, heal us and we shall be whole, and lead us into life everlasting with you; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Loving Lord, silence within us any voice but your own, that by hearing your Word we may learn your will and trust your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 23 (*The Lord is our Shepherd*)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul:
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil:
 for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

St John 10: 11-18 (*The Good Shepherd.*)

Jesus said: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away — and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.

‘For this reason, the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St John 10:11 *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

What makes the ‘good shepherd’ good? Two things, says Jesus: “I know my own” and “I lay down my life for the sheep.” But ‘good’ is such a bland word, faded from overuse. So is ‘nice’, as in “Have a nice day!” Would it help to know that the Greek word for ‘good’ in ‘the good shepherd’ doesn’t mean *morally* good, as in ‘goody-two-shoes’? It means ‘beautiful’, ‘noble’, ‘attractive’.

There’s *beauty* in his living and dying. “No one takes my life from me,” says Jesus, “but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.” This is the beautiful truth of Easter. Despite all appearances, his horrible death is a ‘beautiful’ death, an act of divine love. He is the *beautiful* shepherd.

Not *pretty*, like cheap perfume or costume jewellery. The cross of Jesus Christ is an ugly place of defeat and death. It’s made from wood soaked with blood. We may ‘prettify’ the cross by gilding it with gold, but that won’t make it ‘beautiful’. Beauty is never cosmetic glitter or shiny veneer. Beauty radiates from a truth housed deep within it. Beauty is goodness, glowing.

But we’re suckers for shiny surfaces. This can make beauty difficult to recognise when we see it. My father and I once visited the rooms that house ‘abstract art’ in Ottawa’s National Gallery. One canvas was covered with red dots on a black background. Another was just three massive, vertical stripes (Barnett Newman’s infamous ‘Voice of Fire’). Another was by Jackson Pollock, or maybe one of his imitators. Paint had been dripped on a canvas as if it were a decorator’s ‘drop cloth’.

We looked at them from up close and far away. We squinted at the labels fastened to the wall beside them. They said things like: “1947. Acrylic on Canvas.” We scratched our heads and whispered to each other. “I don’t get it. Do you get it?”

Then we saw ‘the flesh dress’, a woman’s dress made of raw meat, hanging on a dressmaker’s dummy. It had been in the news. People said, “This isn’t art. Why is it in the National Gallery?”

Artists came to its defence. “It is art,” they said. None of them said it was *beautiful*, I noticed, but they all said it was *meaningful*. It conveyed a message that was relevant and important. In fact, it had *three* messages.

“First,” they said, “it speaks in a graphic way of human mortality and decay. Aren’t we destined to be dead flesh too? What’s more, secondly, it mocks our vanity, our objectification of bodies as ‘raw’ material for fashion. Finally,” they said, “it ‘critiques’ how women are so often treated as...well, as *flesh*, as objects to be gazed upon.”

This is good. They told me what the ‘flesh dress’ *means*. What a Philistine I am to have to be *told* its message! But my question remains. Does the ‘flesh dress’ emanate its ‘beauty’ from deep within? Or had the artist only meant to preach a ‘sermon’?

Like that ‘flesh dress’, the crucified body of Jesus is human flesh, raw and wounded, a display of death designed to be gazed upon.

But early on, soon after Jesus’ resurrection, the Church came to see the cross as a *beautiful* event to be gazed upon – beautiful because it is, if you like, *God’s* work of art, an intimate disclosure of God’s beauty, not because it’s ‘pretty’ but *because* it’s the place where God’s love happens.

Instruction in the cross’s meaning reveals its beauty. And we desire beauty. To receive its beauty is to assimilate its meaning. We know this. We’re not Philistines, are we?

Maybe we are, though, if we think beauty should have nothing to do with our salvation. Maybe we thought God’s *righteousness* should scold us instead, and Jesus’ death should shame us, and we should feel a guilt so severe that it drives us to our knees in helplessness, filling us with feelings of worthlessness and a fear of hell so strong that it scares us into an ‘artificial’ virtue, one that’s all ‘veneer’.

In the secular world, this is what passes for ‘being religious’.

Sometimes guilt is real, though. It signals something sinful and broken in us. The pain that guilt causes may be goading us to seek a forgiveness we need.

But sometimes it’s not real at all. It’s not unknown for the Church to impose an artificial guilt upon us that sickens us with fear. Or is it fear that sickens us with guilt?

In James Joyce’s novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Father Arnall preaches a sermon that frightens the wits out of Stephen Dedalus. “Place your finger for a moment in the flame of a candle and you will feel the pain of fire,” he says. “But the lake of fire in hell is boundless, shoreless, and bottomless.”

It’s a long sermon. I know you like those. So, here’s more: “O, how terrible is the lot of those wretched beings! The blood seethes and boils in the veins, the brains are boiling in the skull, the heart in the breast glowing and bursting, the bowels a red-hot mass of burning pulp, the tender eyes flaming like molten balls.”

Crikey! Can this sadistic voice of death, judgment, and hell lead us to virtue’s green pastures and healing’s still waters?

No, we're saved by God's beauty. We desire beauty. "And beauty demands to be noticed," says Roger Scruton, an overlooked English philosopher. "Beauty speaks to us directly like the voice of a friend."

A friend. "I know my own and my own know me," says Jesus. "I lay down my life for the sheep...and they will listen to my voice." It's the beautiful voice that...

*...charms our fears, and bids our sorrows cease,
'tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life and health and peace.*

The beauty we gaze upon will one day shine from deep within us. Perhaps it already does.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord Jesus Christ, great Shepherd of the sheep, to you for help we fly. Hear the prayers of your Church.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God our Redeemer, in the body of your Son Christ you have gathered into one fold people from every race and nation. Grant that all who confess his name may be united in your truth, enamoured by your beauty, moved by your love, and wise in the stewardship of all the riches of the earth.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are hungry for food, shelter, companionship, and for meaningful work to do. Good Shepherd, lead those whose needs are dire to still waters, green pastures, and every good thing that makes for abundant life. Guide those who lead us with your justice and compassion. When they lead us through a dark valley, let them be led by you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for land and sea and sky, for the integrity of your whole creation and the well-being of all animal life. Help us to make room for them, to love them as you do, and to abolish the greed that ruins the realm of nature.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who cry aloud in pain and panic, or weep with sorrow in the silence of their hearts. Touch them with your healing hand. Be present to those who shed visible tears. Give comfort to those who disguise their sorrow behind a smiling face. Encourage their hearts with the sound of your voice.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord of life, we pray for those, dear to us, who are sick and recovering, and those who are dying and letting go of this life. We remember victims of tragedy, accident, and the hatred of others.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We remember those who have died, who now see you face to face. We are grateful for the good that came to us through them, for the gift of memory and the promise of eternal life...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, strengthen us for another day along the way, following wherever Christ, our Shepherd, leads us. Then bring us at last to our true home in your secure presence, where Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. As our Saviour Christ has taught, so we pray:

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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever. Amen

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**