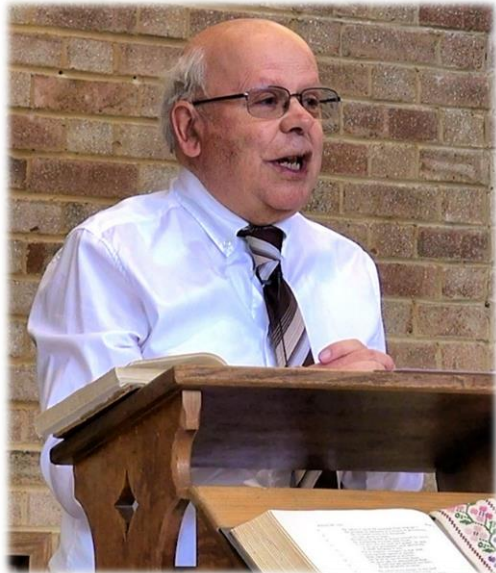


## Morning Service Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> April – led by John Wainwright



*How thoughtful of John to pass up the opportunity to compete in the London Marathon to come and lead our Worship (or so he told us!). Wainwrights come as ‘double-headers’ with Sue reading for us “A modern version of Psalm 23 for busy people”. This week it was all about shepherds and sheep. John had been brought up on a farm and knew quite a bit about shepherding: he’d even had a sheep called Floss and had bottle-*

*fed a lamb called Violet. I will not forget the image of John returning to the little plot of land that belonged to his parents, leaning over the fence and calling “Meeeeeeah!” to the assembled sheep. The sheep look up at him but do not come and follow him. Hopefully he will have had a bit more success with us!*

To challenge the misconception that the Christian life was nothing but a miserable and dull existence, John offered us a ‘blow by blow’ account of the healing miracle from John, Chapter 9, before moving to the day’s Lectionary reading from John 10.

The story was about Jesus healing a man who had been blind from birth. The healing had taken place on a Sabbath day and so became a point of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. Following the healing, some people had questioned whether the healed man was indeed the same beggar they had known, or merely someone resembling him. The man confirmed that it was Jesus who had healed him: the Pharisees insisted that a prophet would know not to heal on the Sabbath. Some of the Pharisees accused Jesus of heresy yet acknowledged the miracle. Seeking a different answer the authorities had summoned the man's parents who had confirmed that their son was indeed born blind but feigned ignorance when asked about his healing. The authorities had again questioned the man about his healing, and he’d responded that he had already explained it to them and then asked them if they wanted to become disciples of Jesus as well. This had provoked insults and the authorities had aligned themselves with Moses and expressed ignorance regarding Jesus' origins. The healed man had found it remarkable that they did not know where Jesus had come from despite the miraculous act. He observed that God listened to those who did His will, and that never before had anyone heard of a man born blind being healed. If Jesus were not from God, He could do nothing. The Pharisees had reacted harshly, accusing the man of being steeped in sin (*his blindness having been due to his own sin*), and casting him out.

In John Chapter 10, Jesus had spoken about the Good Shepherd. The image of the shepherd appeared many times in the Old Testament, with David, the shepherd boy, famously singing the 23rd Psalm and God depicted as the great Shepherd of His people.

When we thought of shepherds, the qualities that came to mind were, first and foremost, their care for the sheep; tending to them diligently, often exposing themselves to risks from thieves or wild animals such as wolves. Not highly educated by the standards of religious leaders of the time, their work was of great importance. Indeed, in the Christmas story in Luke, the angels first brought the news to shepherds, not to the religious elite. Jesus distinguished between the actions of a good shepherd and those who failed in this duty. He highlighted the shortcomings of certain religious leaders—such as the Pharisees—who, preoccupied with their own status and rigid rule-following, neglected true pastoral care.

Jesus contrasted the thief, who entered the sheepfold by deceit to steal and destroy, with the Good Shepherd, who entered properly and acted with the sheep's best interests at heart. The Good Shepherd was trustworthy and compassionate, caring for people even if they did not always adhere perfectly to rules, but whose hearts were open to him.

Jesus had said, "I am the gate." The function of a gate was to protect what lay within. The sheepfold's gate especially protected the sheep at night, and Jesus referred to himself both as the sheepfold and the Good Shepherd, proclaiming that he had come so that people might have life, and have it abundantly. None of us was perfect, but God was ready to renew and refresh us through the Holy Spirit, provided we were willing to listen and open our hearts.

Our attention today was pulled in many directions—from the media to political debates—which often left us questioning what was true. Jesus, however, assured us that by trusting in him, we would find the truth. He demonstrated this by living his teachings, accepting all rather than excluding those who did not meet human-made standards.

Jesus called each of us by name, just as shepherds in ancient times knew their sheep individually. When their shepherd called, they followed, recognising his unique call. In the same way Jesus' true followers recognised and responded to his voice.

Jesus cared for each of us individually, giving us a sense of freedom, courage, and joy. His care was not just for our own benefit; he called us to be pastoral too - each of us reaching out in our own way to others. Our mission was to witness to Jesus, sharing the joy of knowing him, and emphasising his care during both high points and life's valleys. Many people faced challenges—health, finances, family issues—and while God might not remove our difficulties, he promised to be with us through them all, just as the shepherd had sought the one lost sheep.

*And a 'high point' for Margaret Barton, at a big family celebration for her 95<sup>th</sup> Birthday the day before had been the news - quietly let slip by her eldest granddaughter - that a baby was due in October. We all prayed that things would go smoothly for her.*

