



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk  
Christ Church United Reformed Church  
The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Call to Worship:

Let us share with God and with one another our hopes for the world:

**a world in which all people are treated with tolerance and respect;**

a world whose resources we gladly share with each other and with the generations to come;

**a world in which it is possible to live together in peace and love;**

a world of freedom, justice and harmony;

**a world of justice, compassion and hope.**

Prayer/Meditation:

God of all creation  
who gives life to every being  
who is mindful of humankind in all its diversity  
and whose divine image is shared by all people,  
granting different gifts and talents to shape life in this world:  
we ask for your Spirit to unite us  
where we face lack of understanding and disunity  
among faiths, among communities, among nations.

We ask for your Spirit to unite us  
in the face of the conflicts, hatred and violation of life  
experienced in so many regions of the earth  
and we bring to you the pain of the victims.

We ask for your Spirit to unite us  
in these times of sickness and infection,  
when the world is paralysed by fever and fear  
and your people are united only by their anxieties,  
and we bring to you the suffering of nations.

We ask for your Spirit to unite us  
wherever fear prevents us from caring for our neighbour,  
from meeting people of different ethnicities, cultures  
and faith communities with respect  
and we bring to you the brokenness of human relationships.

God of all creation,  
in Christ we are reconciled,  
and so we ask for your uniting Spirit  
to help us to overcome all our divisions  
that we may live in peace.

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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen**

Reading: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Hymn: 691

God is our refuge and our strength,  
in straits a present aid;  
therefore, although the earth remove,  
we will not be afraid:

Though hills amidst the seas be cast;  
though waters roaring make,  
and troubled be; yea, though the hills  
by swelling seas do shake.

A river is, whose streams make glad  
the city of our God;  
the holy place, wherein the Lord  
most high hath his abode.

God in the midst of her doth dwell;  
nothing shall her remove:  
The Lord to her an helper will,  
and that right early, prove.

Reading: Matthew 15: 21-28

Reflection:

Matthew tells the story of a culture clash between Jesus and a Canaanite woman. It isn't surprising that they should meet, for Jesus is travelling into her territory - the land of Tyre and Sidon. For Matthew's readers, that would say something in itself. Jezebel, who had tried to destroy Elijah, was the daughter of one of the Kings of Tyre, indicating the type of person who was seen as coming from that region! Perhaps not surprisingly whilst He's there Jesus is met by a pagan, a (Canaanite) woman. When His disciples ask Jesus to send her away it would appear that he doesn't, but repeats to them that He has come only to the "lost sheep of Israel", those who are professing a faith in the God who is His Father. The Canaanite woman continues to question Him and her faith is rewarded with the healing of her daughter. In not rejecting the Canaanite woman we get an insight into both into Jesus' mission both to his own people and those of other faiths.

The story is of a Canaanite woman who came to Jesus. She was a woman and she was also a gentile, which meant that she should not have approached Jesus, it went against the custom of the day, she was not of sufficient social status. This Canaanite woman refused to believe that Jesus was sent only sent for certain people. And so it was that her faith enabled her to go close to Jesus and believe that he would help her, against all the odds.

Jesus' initial response, however, suggested that he *was* only sent for certain people, for his own people, the people of Israel, the descendents of Abraham. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' And when the woman appeals to him he replies, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

What do these words tell us about Jesus and his mission? Did he speak them in earnest, believing that his mission was only to some people? Did he speak them as a test of the woman's faith? Did he speak them as a way of teaching an important truth to the gathered disciples? Did he speak them with a smile on his face, teasing the woman into declaring her faith?

The answers to those questions will be different depending on which commentator you are reading, but the truth of the incident is revealed in Jesus' actions. He listens to the woman's pleading for her daughter and did as he always did, he fulfilled the immediate need. The woman's daughter was healed.

So, in helping this Gentile woman, this foreigner, this person who was one of the dogs who lived outside the sheepfold of Israel, was Jesus betraying the faith of his own people? Earlier in Matthew's gospel we find Jesus telling his disciples, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Yet now Jesus is doing exactly what he told them *not* to do. Why should that be?

Perhaps because Jesus understands the nature of God's covenant with his people. God covenants with Abraham that, in exchange for his loyalty and obedience, he will have a whole nation of descendants who will inhabit the promised land and will enjoy God's special blessing. Everyone knew that and celebrated it, but perhaps part of Jesus' mission was to remind his followers that God's covenant with Israel does not imply that those of other faiths or nations should be rejected or despised.

We can hear throughout the Hebrew scriptures the call of God to all nations. We read it in the prophecy of Isaiah earlier:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

And in the prophet Micah, and in the book of psalms, and in Genesis with God's covenant after the flood with 'every living creature of all flesh'.

Modern Judaism continues to honour and respect the stranger. Perhaps in Christianity we sometimes need to remind ourselves that, in the tradition of our Jewish heritage, we are called to inhabit a house of prayer for *all* peoples. As Jesus could not refuse to help a Gentile woman in her time of need, neither can we refuse our love and compassion to any and all who need us.

Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (now Lord Sacks) has written:

*Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see God, or good, or human dignity in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different colour, whose faith is not my faith and whose truth is not my truth. The ancient texts of Judaism suggest a way: that God is greater than religion, that He is only partially understood by any faith. He is my God, but he is also your God. He is on my side, but he is also on your side. He exists not only in my faith, but in yours.*

What would that kind of faith be like? It would be like being happy and secure in your home, yet moved by the beauty of foreign places, knowing that they are someone else's home, not ours, but still part of the glory of the world that *is* ours. It would be to know that we are part the story of our own nation and our own church, but that there are other stories in different scripts of other nations and other faiths, each with the unmistakable trace of God's authorship.

We live in a richly diverse world, and it is all too easy to be tempted to retreat into a comfortable religious bubble where all are the same and we can protect our faith and tradition from the corruption of outside influence. But Jesus calls his followers to go out into all the world, and in his encounter with the Canaanite woman he demonstrates what that means. Those who are confident in their faith are not threatened but enriched by the different faith of others. In times of uncertainty and fear of difference in our world, we need that confidence and that enrichment.

Prayer:

Merciful God,  
In love You created us,  
and in love You sustain us, day after day.  
So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to You,  
knowing that You will hear and respond.

We pray for those who are estranged from spouse or family,  
friends or neighbours;  
who find it difficult to forgive past wrongs done to them;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who for years have carried feelings of guilt or regret  
for something they did or something they neglected to do;  
who find it difficult to ask for forgiveness or forgive themselves;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those who find themselves far away from You,  
struggling to overcome their doubts or disillusionment,  
and who wonder how to find their way back;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those watching someone they love try to cope  
with serious illness or injury,  
and who long for comfort and healing;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For the many others in our world who are suffering this day—  
from grief, or loneliness, hunger, poverty, violence or illness;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Sustain all those who look to You in hope.  
And strengthen us—Your people—  
so that we may be a light to all those who find themselves in darkness.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Amen.

Hymn 605:

Son of God, eternal Saviour,  
source of life and truth and grace,  
Son of Man, whose birth among us  
hallows all our human race,  
Christ, our Head, who, throned in glory,  
for your own will ever plead,  
fill us with your love and pity;  
heal our wrongs, and help our need.

As you, Lord, hast lived for others,  
so may we for others live;  
freely have your gifts been granted,  
freely may your servants give.  
Yours the gold and yours the silver,  
yours the wealth of sea and land,  
we but stewards of your bounty,  
held in trust as from your hand.

Come, O Christ, and reign among us,  
King of love, and Prince of peace;  
hush the storm of strife and passion,  
bid its cruel discords cease;  
by your patient years of toiling,  
by your silent hours of pain,  
quench our fevered thirst of pleasure,  
shame our selfish greed of gain.

Son of God, eternal Saviour,  
source of life and truth and grace,  
Son of Man, whose birth among us  
hallows all our human race,  
in your love you prayed the Father  
that your people should be one,  
grant, O Christ our hope's fruition:  
here on earth your will be done.

Benediction

We are called with all peoples into God's presence,  
and we are sent out into the world:

We are not too young or too old,  
we are not too rich or too needy  
to bring good news to those who will hear,  
to give a hand to the broken-hearted,

and to live out freedom and forgiveness  
through the gifts we have been given.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with us, and with all those we love, today and always, Amen.