



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 23rd August 2020

Call to Worship:

In the name of the Lord Jesus
the bread breaker
the light gatherer
the cross carrier
welcome

May the peace of the Lord Jesus
the peace maker
and the temple disturber
friend of the sinner
and companion on the road
be with us all

Let us draw close to the Lord Jesus
the saviour
the healer
the teacher
and worship him

and ask ourselves
who do we say he is?

Prayer/Meditation:

Living God, we name you as immortal, the Alpha and Omega of our creation, the eternal living presence. And now in our prayers, the immortal meets the human; eternity touches time, and we are made aware of your constant presence, aware of your great love in each place where we are.

“Immortal, invisible, God only wise”, we worship and adore You. And we believe, now, when we choose, at a time that is right for us, that you are present, and receive our prayers as we release them from our hearts and minds. What right have we to call on you when it suits us? And yet, you bid us come. You are ready to hear us. You invite us into your presence through our worship. You smile upon us in welcome when you see us.

“Unresting, unhasting”, you are God. And we come tentatively into Your presence - in awe of your justice; wondering whether we are worthy; questioning whether we deserve to be here. Yet you bid us come; you call us to confess; you wait till we bow down; you receive our penitence. And then you say, stand up, my friend. Come closer. You are forgiven. You need fear no more.

“Thy justice like mountains, high soaring above thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love”. Unchanging God, we name you now as our life-giver. Take us now; free us from all fear; call us by name; welcome us home ... so that we can sing now in your presence: “We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither, and perish, but naught changeth thee ...”

These prayers we bring You, “Great Father of glory, pure Father of light”, in and through the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Hymn 67

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish - but nought changeth thee.

Great Father of glory: O help us to see
‘tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.
And so let they glory, Almighty, impart,
through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

Reading: Romans 12:1-8

Prayer

God you have given each of us many gifts,
**but sometimes we cannot recognize
what gift we have to share,
so we keep it to ourselves.**

God you remind us that all gifts are needed,
**but sometimes we let ourselves be convinced
that some gifts are more special than others.**

God you call us to work, to live, to love together as parts of one body,
**but sometimes we decide that membership in the body
is limited by our understandings.**

God, for the times we have ignored your gifts or failed to recognise them
for those times we have cut another off from the body,
**We offer words of repentance,
we ask for forgiveness and grace.**

God is the giver of many gifts.
God is the Creator of the one body.
God is slow to anger and quick to forgive.
God helps us to share and honour the gifts of all,
God helps us to heal the wounds and reunite the body.
We are forgiven, loved, and accepted.

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: Matthew 16:13-20

Reflection:

"Who do people say that I am?... But who do you say that I am?"

On the day that Jesus was asking these questions he knew the news about him was spreading - people were talking and speculating about this person who was clearly more than a simple carpenter from Nazareth. Interesting how his friends and closest followers respond to that first question Jesus asks - *Who do people say that I am?* They tell him that people are saying he is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the other prophets. So, the teaching and healing Jesus has been involved in leads people to think of the great figures of their faith from the past. They use those great past figures to make sense of what they see in Jesus - to give him identity - to define him.

But today we think about the first part of this passage - these two questions, *"Who do people say that I am?... But who do you say that I am?"* because, as members of his mystical body, they are questions for us also. Through this Gospel Jesus calls us first to be aware of what people of our day and age say about his identity. The definitions of Jesus around us are many!

Some say Jesus is God in a human body; others say he was a great prophet, teacher and healer, but not divine; some say he is a fictional character; others believe he is irrelevant in this modern age; some say Jesus is the one who can reward you with material prosperity; still others think he is their property alone, and on their side against others who do not fit neatly into their narrowly defined in-group of believers. As you go through your daily life, read the papers, watch TV, talk to friends and colleagues, who do you hear people saying Jesus is?

And where do we find ourselves in this field of answers?

Through this Gospel Jesus asks us, *"Who do you say that I am?"* This gospel challenges us to think about our *own* beliefs. We can so easily get focused on what other people believe that we forget to ponder deeply our own answer to the question - *Who do we say Jesus is?* What is it that we believe about Jesus?

Who do *you* say that I am, Jesus asks. Who do you say that I am, not just intellectually, not just when you stand up in church on Sunday and recite the Creed, not just when you are enjoying quiet moments of prayer, not just when you are sharing time and space with your fellow Christians. All these things are good. But there is more to being a follower of Jesus. Who do we say that Jesus is, in those places where our lives are lived? Who do we say that he is, when we are in the presence of those who don't know Jesus, those who aren't interested or even, whether we know it or not, those who might be just a little curious about Jesus? What does the way we live our lives say about who Jesus is? Is the joy, the love, the peace that we find in Jesus reflected in the way we live our lives?

See these Christians, how they love one another, it was said of the followers of Jesus in the Early Church. Can that also be said of us? Only in and through us will Jesus make himself known to those who do not know his love. Edward Schillebeeckx, the great modern Dutch theologian, wrote: "Jesus' light burns in this world only with the oil of our lives, in quite particular circumstances, in which we emanate liberating light or dim and quench this light."

And this raises an interesting question. Not just who do we say Jesus is, but also, who do we say we are.

In pondering that question, we find guidance and challenge in the letter of Paul to the Romans, from which we read earlier. Paul outlines his understanding of what it means to live in Christ, and what kind of people such a relationship produces. So if we are in Christ, if we are his people, we are people of sacrifice who have given ourselves wholly to him, we are people transformed and able to discern the will of God; we are people of humility, says Paul, not thinking too much of ourselves but living according to the measure of faith God has given us. We are each endowed with our own gifts, and those gifts combine to serve God as we live as community - as Paul puts it, each member belongs to all the others, like the various organs of the body. Together, using the gifts and talents God has given each of us, we become the Body of Christ.

You may be familiar with these words which have been attributed to St Theresa of Avila: *"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."*

Prayer:

In this time of COVID-19, we pray:
When we aren't sure, God,
help us be calm;
when information comes
from all sides, correct or misleading,
help us to discern;
when fear makes it hard to breathe,
and anxiety seems to be the order of the day,
slow us down, God;
help us to reach out with our hearts,
when we can't touch with our hands;
help us to be socially connected,
when we have to be socially distant;
help us to love as perfectly as we can,
knowing that "perfect love casts out all fear."

For the doctors, we pray,
for the nurses, we pray,
for the technicians and the janitors and the
aides and the caregivers, we pray,
for the researchers and theorists,
the investigators and statisticians,
for those who are sick,
and those who are grieving, we pray,
for all who are affected,
all around the world...
we pray
for safety,

for health,
for wholeness.

May we feed the hungry,
give drink to the thirsty,
clothe the naked and house those without homes;
may we walk with those who feel they are alone,
and may we do all that we can to heal
the sick—
in spite of the epidemic,
in spite of the fear.

Help us, O God,
that we might help each other.

In the love of the Creator,
in the name of the Healer,
in the life of the Holy Spirit that is in all and with all,
we pray.
AMEN

Hymn 650

God with humanity made one
is seen in Christ, God's only Son:
in you, Lord Christ, the Son of Man,
we see God's reconciling plan.

To save a broken world you came,
and from chaotic depths reclaim
your whole creation, so we share
your reconciling work and care.
In you all humankind can see
the people God would have us be.
In you we find how God forgives,
through you, the Spirit in us lives.

Through us God calls the world again;
and constantly his love remains
with arms outstretched, to heal and bless
the refugees of emptiness.

Where race or creed or hate divide,
the Church, like God, must stand beside
and stretch out reconciling hands
to join, through suffering, every land.

Then give us strength, great Lord of life,
to work until all human strife
is reconciled, and all shall praise
your endless love, your glorious ways.

Benediction

We are part of the body of Christ.
May we have the heart of Christ,
tender for mercy.
May we have the eyes of Christ
to see a world in need.
May we have the feet of Christ
to bring good news.

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.