



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

Sunday 30th August 2020

Call to Worship:

We worship this day in different places.

O God, do not be far from us.

We worship this day for different reasons.

O God, do not be far from us.

We experience the presence of the Spirit in different ways.

O God, do not be far from us.

We hear Jesus' words with different ears.

O God, do not be far from us.

“Deny yourselves.”

O God, do not be far from us.

“Take up your cross.”

O God, do not be far from us.

“Follow me.”

O God,

**we thank you for drawing near to us
in this place,
in our lives.**

Prayer/Meditation:

Lord, help us say no
when the voices speak of building up investments
in the things of the world
when you call us to invest ourselves
in the ways of your kingdom.

Lord, help us say yes to you

Lord, help us say no
to what the world tells us we need
in the accumulation of stuff
when you call us to let go the stuff
and rely on you instead

Lord, help us say yes to you

Lord, help us say no
to the quick fix and ready-made answer
that patches the cracks
when you long for us to take a lifetime

to live and explore the questions

Lord, help us say yes to you

Lord help us say no
to throwing money at every problem
of feeding the hungry with direct debts
when you call us to live in a more equal relationship
with those who are hungry in the world

Lord, help us say yes to you

Lord help us say no
to the easy way the world wants
that involves no pain or hardship
when you call us to carry crosses
and trust the love that bears all

Lord, help us say yes to you

Lord help us say no
to conflicts that show humanity at its worst
in repression and cruelty
when you know we can live
ways that show the magnificence of humanity

Lord, help us say yes to you

Lord help us say no
to a faith that speaks empty words
and is borne by hollow actions
when we know of a word
that brings the fullness of life
and is carried by actions shaped by justice

Lord, help us say yes to you

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 16:21-28

Hymn 108

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.
God leaves us free to seek him or reject him,
he gives us room to answer 'yes' or 'no.'

*The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.*

We long for freedom where our truest being
is given hope and courage to unfold.
We seek in freedom space and scope for dreaming,
and look for ground where trees and plants can grow.

Chorus

But there are walls that keep us all divided;
we fence each other in with hate and war.
Fear is the bricks and mortar of our prison,
our pride of self the prison coat we wear.

Chorus

O, judge us, Lord, and in your judgment free us,
and set our feet in freedom's open space;
take us as far as your compassion wanders
among the children of the human race.

Chorus

Reading: Romans 12:9-21

Reflection:

In this season of the Christian calendar, in this particular year, each of our services of worship includes a reading from the gospel according to Matthew, and one from the letter of Paul to the Romans. The two readings today are difficult and challenging for any Christian, for they don't appear to offer words of comfort, inspiration or reassurance, but rather words of challenge and even of warning.

In the reading from Matthew, we find Jesus predicting his own death at the hands of the leaders, chief priests and scribes of the temple. The temple authorities in other words. The Establishment if you like.

Peter finds this quite offensive and he objects, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!' No doubt to Peter's surprise - and perhaps to our surprise as well - Jesus seems to be angered by this, and accuses Peter of being a stumbling-block. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he says. Peter must have been shocked by this response, but worse is to follow, for not only is Jesus to give up his life, but it seems that his followers are, too. 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

That's possibly one of the best known phrases in the gospel - 'take up your cross' - and in our modern context we usually take it to refer to some unpleasant burden we have to carry, some difficult but unavoidable situation we find ourselves in, some long-term suffering, like a chronic illness we have to endure, or some sacrifice we have to make because of our faith in Jesus. Many years ago, in my days as a factory worker, I used to think that my refusal to earn overtime by working on a Sunday was a way of taking up my cross and following.

But when we look at the context of the gospels, the taking up of the cross means something very different. The cross is an instrument of execution, and the taking up of the cross is an indication of imminent death. The condemned criminal is forced to carry the means of their own death - and in the crucifixion scene in John's gospel we see Jesus doing just that - carrying the cross to the place of execution.

It would seem, then, that Jesus words to Peter are a challenge and a warning, and that when he says ‘follow me’, he is saying ‘follow me all the way, even to death’.

Now we do need to be aware that Matthew was writing for a Christian community that was suffering great persecutions and he may have been encouraging his readers to remain firm in their faith even to the point of martyrdom, but Luke, in his version of the same story has Jesus saying that his followers should take up their cross *daily* and follow him. Every day, suggests Luke, is an opportunity for sacrifice, a chance to give ourselves over in faith to the service of Christ’s kingdom. That may involve the sacrifice of life itself, but even when it doesn’t, it still implies a giving of ourselves wholly and completely to our life of discipleship.

That’s quite a challenge, and in our reading from Romans we saw just one example of how that might work out for us in practice. Paul reminds us that in so many ways the life of the Christian is what in today’s terms we might call counter-intuitive.

Specifically, the verses we read are about dealing with enemies. Most of us, I suspect, would claim that we don’t have any enemies as such, but there may well be people in our lives whom we don’t like very much, or who don’t like us very much; there may be people we don’t approve of because of their lifestyles or their attitudes or their beliefs or their relationships. There will certainly be those who have hurt us in some way, have taken advantage of us, have cheated us, insulted us, stolen from us, abused us.

How are we to treat them? By taking revenge? By calling for a just punishment? Paul says no. ‘If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.’

And that’s quite a challenge, too. Neither Paul nor Jesus himself are trying to put people off by telling them how difficult it is to be a follower. Rather, they are reminding us in these two passages of scripture that the new life of the kingdom of God is not something that is offered only to those who believe the right things, or worship in the right way, or follow the right rules. Rather the new life of the kingdom of God is for all the world and all its people. That means that for many there will need to be forgiveness and hope of change, and for others there will need to be the capacity to forgive and not to seek revenge, to welcome and not reject, to share blessings and not to hoard them - and for all there will need to be sacrifice of selfishness.

Yes, it’s a challenge, but it brings with it the hope and the promise of a world in which all things are new. May that Kingdom come.

Prayer

Loving 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

We pray for the world around us,
for the many who continue to suffer and call out for help:
 for those without enough to eat or drink;
 for those caught up in violence and political uprisings;
 for those picking up the pieces after a natural disaster;
 for those desperate to find work to support their families.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

We also pray for family and friends who are suffering:

those afflicted or affected by the coronavirus plague,
those struggling physically or emotionally,
those working to overcome mental illness;
those facing challenges at home or at work;
those grieving the death of a loved one.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

God, You have called us to pray for our enemies;
to bless, rather than curse, those who deliberately seek to harm us.

We bring their names before you now—

those who have hurt us, physically or emotionally;

those who have stolen from us,

or cheated us of what was rightfully ours;

those who have spread rumours about us,

or turned our friends against us.

We ask you to bless them.

Open our hearts so that we may see them as you see them,
and be able to respond to them with your love.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

We pray for your church around the world,
that it might be a living demonstration of your kingdom:

offering hospitality to all,

ready to help in times of need,

showing love to friends and enemies alike,

seeking to live in peace with all.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

God, we praise you for your faithful love,
and for the mercy you have shown toward us.

Open our eyes to recognize your presence in our lives.

Give us grace to hear your call,

and courage to follow without hesitation,

knowing that your way is the way that leads to life.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Hymn 509

O Jesus, I have promised

to serve thee to the end;

be thou forever near me,

my Master and my Friend;

I shall not fear the battle

if thou art by my side,

nor wander from the pathway
if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me feel thee near me!
The world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but Jesus, draw thou nearer,
and shield my soul from sin

O let me hear thee speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self will.
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
O speak and make me listen,
thou guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, thou hast promised
to all who follow thee,
that where thou art in glory
there shall thy servant be;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
my Master and my Friend.

Benediction

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.