



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

Sunday 9th August 2020

Call to Worship:

Peace-loving and peace-giving God, you bless
us with your unfailing and unconditional love:
**We come to worship and praise our loving God,
and rejoice in God's tender mercy towards us.**

Generous God, you pour blessings and grace
upon us, forgiving us for our sin and shame:
**We come to worship and honour our merciful God,
and rejoice in the wonder of forgiven and forgotten sin.**

Holy God, in the beauty of your shalom, and in
the glory of your presence, all barriers are lowered:
**We come to worship and revere our glorious God,
who enriches the lives of God's own people and
speaks peace into the hearts of all faithful people.**

Prayer/Meditation:

When nothing is right,
when we are weary and lost,
when clouds dull the sky,
help us to be still.

When our cries are unheeded,
when no effort bears fruit,
when the sun sets,
help us to be still.

When love is over,
when hope is gone,
when darkness covers the land,
help us to be still.

When sickness spreads through every nation,
when all the world is worried and afraid,
when work dries up,
and futures are uncertain
help us to be still.

For in being still,
in refusing to panic or despair,

we shall come to know that God is there,
suffering alongside and with us,
waiting to show us stepping-stones through the swirling waters,
and to help us sing a new song.

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: Psalm 46

Hymn:

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in every change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
to guide the future as he has the past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he lived below.

Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,
then shall you better know his love, his heart,
who comes to soothe your sorrow, calm your fears.
Be still, my soul: for Jesus can repay
from his own fullness all he takes away.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joy restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

Reflection:

Earlier in our worship, we offered a prayer with the repeated phrase 'help us to be still'. And that stillness, that calm, that peace, is a theme of our two scripture readings too. Matthew's story which we have just heard begins in stillness and quiet with Jesus going off alone, as seemed to be his habit, to pray, and it ends after a dramatic storm, with calm restored.

Jesus went up a mountain to pray, and sent his disciples off in a boat to cross to the other side, but while Jesus was enjoying the peace and quiet of his prayer time, the disciples were caught in storm which battered their boat. Much later - early in the morning - Jesus appears them and we get this story of Peter attempting to walk to him over the waves.

At first reading, this episode may appear to be a miracle story about Jesus' power over the elements. But a closer reading might persuade us that it is really about Peter.

In this little episode, Matthew paints a picture of the kind of disciple Peter was. There is no doubting his faith. There he is with the other disciples out on the lake in their boat. The weather is rough, and they see Jesus walking towards them on the water. Peter's faith in Jesus is such that he expresses no surprise at seeing this miracle, but rather, having seen it he wants to be a part of it. There seems no doubt in his mind that if Jesus can walk on water then he can too, so he says, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He steps out of the boat and walks towards Jesus, but the wind is so strong and the water is so rough that he becomes afraid and begins to sink. He calls out, 'Lord, save me!' and Jesus reaches out and catches him. Then Jesus says a strange thing, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

Jesus' words seem strange to us because we generally interpret this story to mean that it is Peter's faith in Jesus that keeps him afloat, as it were. When his faith in Jesus suddenly slips, then he begins to sink and has to be rescued. But that can't be the case because when Peter is sinking it is Jesus to whom he calls for help. If his faith in Jesus was shaken, why would he call to Jesus for help. And if his faith in Jesus remained strong enough to know that it was Jesus who could help him, then what were his doubts? What did Jesus mean when he said, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

Maybe Peter's doubts were not about Jesus, but about himself, and although the context of walking on water is not something we are familiar with, we can nonetheless identify with Peter's feelings. He has been in a vulnerable, dangerous situation in a small unstable boat in a fierce storm. He has set out at his own request with the encouragement of Jesus, leaving behind what little security the boat had to offer and stepping out into something even more dangerous. And he has very quickly reached a point where he is asking himself, 'What on earth am I doing? This is just foolish and dangerous!'

Perhaps, then, Peter's doubts were not about the power or presence of Jesus - it was, after all, to Jesus that he called for help - but about his own ability to trust Jesus in a dangerous situation. And Jesus did help. He reached out to Peter. They returned to the boat. And calm was restored.

Do you remember the old Boys Brigade hymn? 'Will your anchor hold in the storms of life, when the clouds unfold their wings of strife? When the strong tides lift and the cables strain, will your anchor drift or firm remain?' It's a similar theme.

We are living in difficult, dangerous, stormy times. The plague of coronavirus continues to threaten the health of the world. Societies, organisations and individuals have to somehow determine levels of acceptable risk and decide to what extent it is safe to resume normal activity. And all this, of course, on top of the world's many other risks, dangers and challenges.

And as disciples of Jesus we are called to step out into the midst of the storm in the faith that peace and calm may be restored, trusting that when our faith wavers and weakens, as it invariably does, the love of God will be there for us.

Our thoughts this morning might well be summed up in the words of Psalm 46 which we heard earlier:

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter. Be still, and know that I am God. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Prayer:

As we join now in prayer, I'd invite you to be thinking especially today about the recent horrific disaster in Beirut, Lebanon; of the hundreds injured, the thousands dead and the countless made homeless; of the compassion of those who care for the suffering and the guilt of those responsible.

I'd invite you to be thinking too of everyone affected by the coronavirus pandemic; those suffering from Covid-19 and those who have lost loved ones; those who have lost work and income and whose security is under threat; businesses collapsing and national economies in crisis; those living with fear and anxiety.

For those who are suffering.

For those who are injured.

For families that are separated.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

For firefighters, police, emergency medical workers and all public officials.

For those who answer the call to comfort and give aid.

For those who provide support through their prayers.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

For those who are dying.

For those who died while saving the lives of others.

For all who lost their lives.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

For those who survived.

For the children who have been orphaned.

For the men and women who have lost their spouses.

For all who mourn and those who comfort them.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

For generosity of spirit.

For hope in times of despair.

For light in the darkness.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Gracious and Loving God,

you are our comforter and our hope.

Hear your people's prayers as they come before you.

Strengthen us in this time of need.

Inspire us to acts of charity and generosity

and give us hope of a brighter future.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen

Hymn 345: Guide me, O thou greeat Jehovah

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy powerful hand:
bread of heaven,
feed me now and evermore.

Open thou the crystal fountain
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fiery, cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through:
strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee.

Benediction

God, bless your people with the assurance of your love:

When fear and uncertainty circle around,
May we encounter the calming presence of Jesus.
When we feel isolated and alone,
May we encounter Immanuel, God-With-Us
When we feel frustration and boredom,
May we encounter the energising presence of the Spirit.

May we find our worth in our being as well as our doing.
May we savour the slowness and travel with care.
May the face of God turn toward us, and
May we find comfort in the warmth of God's love.

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.