



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

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

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Call to Worship:

God of renewal,  
of life and death,  
rebirth,

**Renew our hearts and minds**

God of promise,  
of all beginnings,  
and all endings,

**Renew our hearts and minds**

God of hope,  
of new growth,  
and harvest.

**Renew our hearts and minds**

Prayer/Meditation:

Gracious and Compassionate God,  
As we journey on, walking the way with Jesus,  
Through deserts and low places  
Over mountains and high places  
We continue to seek you.

We need you more than ever:  
in our busyness, our loneliness, our sadness, our depression  
our anger, our happiness, our joy, our excitement

We need:  
your presence, your compassion, your grace, your comfort  
your renewal, your healing, your peace, your joy  
your love, your salvation

Lord we are reminded that all this is embodied in your son Jesus,  
in his life, his death and his resurrection

and that all this was freely given  
that all people may have  
abundant life, eternal life  
fullness of life  
freed lives, loved lives, loving lives, grace giving lives

Come Lord

pour your mercy and grace and love over us  
And for these gifts from you we are grateful.

Covenant-making God,  
you provide for us in many different ways,  
and we confess that we do not always recognize you  
at work in the world around us.

We get impatient,  
wanting you to work on our schedule.  
We wish for something more or different  
than what you have offered.

We want someone else to solve  
problems we have had a hand in creating.

Forgive our foolish ways,  
our thoughtless words,  
our arrogant ignorance.  
Help us to face the temptations within.  
Turn our eyes once again to you,  
and focus our hearts on your way,  
that we may be faithful to your promise.

Eternal God,  
by your word you create  
and by your breath you give life.  
We worship you with joy and thanksgiving,  
praising you for the fullness  
that your presence brings to our lives,  
and our life together.  
We praise you that by your word you feed us;  
we are satisfied, and there is always more.  
Your goodness is displayed in your wonderful works  
for all humanity,  
and in your perfect love.  
In our humanity we are rebellious,  
and sometimes follow after foolish ideas;  
going ways which lead away from life with you . . .  
And yet, when we cry out you are there,  
your word healing our inner emptiness and pain,  
embracing us, leading us in your life-giving ways.  
For your unending faithfulness, revealed to us in Christ Jesus,  
and made present to us in your Holy Spirit  
we praise you, Lord God. We pray in the name of the One  
who walks with us as we walk with him, Jesus Christ our Lord.

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: Romans 14:1-12

Hymn 492

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
forgive our foolish ways;  
re clothe us in our rightful mind,  
in purer lives thy service find,  
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard  
beside the Syrian sea  
the gracious calling of the Lord,  
let us, like them, without a word  
rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee,  
O calm of hills above,  
where Jesus knelt to share with thee  
the silence of eternity,  
interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all  
our words and works that drown  
the tender whisper of thy call,  
as noiseless let thy blessing fall  
as fell thy manna down.

Drop thy still dews of quietness,  
till all our strivings cease;  
take from our souls the strain and stress,  
and let our ordered lives confess  
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire  
thy coolness and thy balm;  
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm!

Reading Matthew 18:21-35

Reflection:

Some of the things Jesus says are counter-intuitive, that is, they seem to go against what we believe to be natural and right. Jesus teaching about loving enemies, as we saw last week, or about the way we treat the poor and needy. And above all, perhaps, the way we should think

about forgiveness. The parable we address today is like that - counter-intuitive to the point almost of being offensive.

And it is such a sensitive subject because it is something we are involved with every day. It is about the need to find an appropriate response to those who have done something wrong, particularly something that has offended or hurt us, or caused us suffering.

And the story is counter-intuitive because it emphasises for in a very vivid way the gulf between the world of God's kingdom and the world we live in today. Yes, we often rejoice and celebrate when we catch glimpses of God's Kingdom in our own world, but we acknowledge also that much of the human activity of the world runs contrary to the kingdom that Jesus speaks about in his parables.

The first act of the story begins in a world that looks like this world. It's a world of finance, of debts and repayments; a world where justice is about repaying what is owed, about getting what you deserve, no more and no less; a world in which the defaulter's possessions can be sold to settle his debt and if that's not enough he and his family can be sold too; a world in which it's possible to accumulate such a mountain of debt that it becomes impossible to repay. It's a world of balances, of credit and debit. It's a world very like our own where money and possessions and savings and loans are central to the functioning of society.

But then Jesus reveals that it's not really this world at all, it's a different kind of world where the transactions and balance sheets count for less than compassion and forgiveness. This world, this room, the king's counting-house, is actually the Kingdom of God, for here it is possible to find forgiveness.

So the debt is forgiven, and no doubt with a sense of relief as overwhelming as was his fear a few moments before, the former debtor leaves the king's counting-house that has been revealed as the kingdom of God, and goes back out into the world of money, possessions, savings and loans. And there, it seems, one of the first people he met was someone who owed *him* money - a very small amount of money in comparison with the huge amount that he has just been forgiven. But actually, the amounts of money involved are not a factor in the story. The point here is that we have moved on to the second act, and it is not set in the king's counting-house - the Kingdom of God. This act is set in the world of human society, and is built, not upon the justice of God but upon the whims of human nature.

Slipping easily back in to the old ways, the protagonist of the story falls upon his unfortunate acquaintance who owes him money and demands repayment. It can hardly be that he has already forgotten his narrow escape from debtors' prison, or even that he has any sense that he should be behaving with the grace and compassion that he has so recently received. Rather he has walked out of one world into another. The rules and conventions of the King's counting-house just don't apply to what he regards as the 'real' world of trade and commerce. Jesus at this point in the story is drawing a stark contrast between the two worlds, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of weak, misguided human nature.

And that distinction is one that is true of our world today. It's not that the character in the story is being particularly ungrateful or sinful, or that he's being deliberately wicked in his dealings with his poor fellow-slave who owed him money. It is simply part of the world he was now inhabiting to know that debts must be repaid. It is only fair. If you borrow, you must repay. That is only justice.

If you borrow, you must pay. If you transgress, you must be punished. If you work hard, you will be rewarded; if you are unwilling or unable to work, you may struggle. If you are hurt, you may seek revenge. That's the human world which - we have to confess - we often translate into the world of faith too: if you are faithful you will be rewarded; if you are sinful, you will be punished; if you are hurt, you may seek revenge; an eye for an eye etcetera.

By the end of the second act of this parable, then, we have seen the way of the Kingdom of God, and we have seen the way of the world. And so in the third act we are returned to the Kingdom of God for what are the most problematic verses in the story. The king who has been so generous and compassionate is now furious. He points out the obvious lesson that one who has been treated with forgiveness and compassion should surely learn to offer the same grace to those who are indebted to them, and if they're not going to learn that lesson... 'And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my Heavenly Father will do do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

We are obliged to seek the meaning of all this beyond the literal. For one thing, the ending seems to contradict the beginning. Jesus has instructed Peter to forgive seventy times seven (or seventy-seven times) but is now suggesting that God will give only one fresh start before condemning the sinner to torture. For another, such a punishing God seems contrary to most of what Jesus teaches throughout the rest of the gospel. Maybe this last verse was inserted by a church already beginning to revert to the human standards of the world....

Yet for all its difficulty, this final act of the drama still speaks the truth which is that refusal to forgive leads to torture. Many of us probably know the truth of this from personal experience, hopefully in a fairly trivial way. If someone has offended or upset us, we will brood on it, perhaps think about getting them back, even if it's just by not speaking to them, until we realise that we are allowing our refusal to forgive to torture us. And we do forgive; and the burden is lifted; and we can resume our relationship.

But we sometimes hear of those amazing people who are able to offer forgiveness to criminals and terrorists who have committed terrible atrocities against them and their loved ones, who have stabbed and killed and terrorised, robbed families of their children in murder, abuse, drink-driving or terror attack. Amazing people who seem able to forgive even when the perpetrators seem to feel no remorse. And often part of their reason for being able to offer forgiveness is simply that for their own sakes, they do not wish to consume the rest of their own lives by carrying a burden which would only compound their loss.

Forgiveness is not easy - if it were, Jesus would not have been so insistent about it. But 'I forgive you' doesn't mean, 'there, there, just forget about it, what you've done doesn't really matter'. Of course it matters! If you've committed an act of theft or violence against me or someone I love, it matters all the world to me, and I shall never forget. But forgiveness offers the beginning of healing, not of physical wounds but of hatred and bitterness and guilt and revenge. Forgiveness offers a way forward to a better world for both victim and perpetrator. Forgiveness offers the possibility of a society or community such that that described by Paul in Romans, in which all are convinced of the truth of their own faith, but are respectful of difference and diversity, in which everyone teakes responsibility for their own beliefs and actions, in which there is the possibility of healing.

That's why God's kingdom is a place of seventy-times-seven forgiveness. And that's why we must pray without ceasing and seek again and again the grace to forgive one another, no matter how difficult, or impossible, it may seem.

Prayer:

We pray today for all who are walking a hard journey:

for those whose daily paths encounter barbed wire and guns;  
for those who did not want to leave home but were forced to;  
for those who set out today in search of food and water;

for those whose journey is shattered by economic hardship;  
for those whose journey is marred by pain or despair,  
and for those who faithfully journey alongside them;  
for those who are making a move and beginning again;  
for those who are clinging on to something that has ended;  
for those who are being bullied, and for those who are bullying;  
for those who have just taken their first breath, and  
for those who today will take their last.

May our journey of faith, with its stories  
about the words and example of Jesus,  
give strength and courage to all  
whose journey is far from easy.  
And may it inspire us to risk Christ's Way of love  
as we share the journey with other travelers.

Loving God, your goodness always tests our readiness to receive it  
and enlarges our ability to share your love around.  
Gracious God, steer us through times of temptation,  
*And deliver us from evil.*

We think of those who are being sorely tempted:  
tempted to look the other way when wrong is happening in their workplace;  
tempted to misuse their gifts for a selfish purpose;  
tempted to allow untamed emotions to hold sway;  
tempted by the corrupting power of money;  
and those tempted to stay in a rut rather than strike out on new paths for Christ Jesus.  
Generous God, steer us through times of temptation,  
*And deliver us from evil.*

We pray also for the many who feel pushed and tested almost beyond their endurance;  
those in positions of heavy responsibility who feel overloaded to the point of collapse;  
or those pressured from all sides by factions in workplace or community;  
suffering people-and all who must watch a loved one suffer- who feel they can bear no more;  
kindly folk whose patience with a difficult friend is now at breaking point;  
persecuted Christians whose faith seems stretched beyond their limit;  
and the depressed whose inner being endures a misery which no human word can soothe.  
Merciful God, steer us through times of temptation,  
*And deliver us from evil.*

We also pray for those who seem to be in a position of advantage:  
the happy, that their happiness may always be used for goodwill and compassion;  
the strong, that their energies may be used wisely and gently;  
the clever, that they may employ their mental facility for good not evil;  
for the rich, that their wealth may be shared for the uplifting of the poor;  
for the powerful, that they may use their position as a blessing to humanity;  
and those of strong faith, that they may walk humbly and affirm the weaker souls.  
Righteous God, steer us through times of temptation,  
*And deliver us from evil.*

And now Loving God, we pray for each other. None of us know the extent of the pressures that some may be under this very day. Look upon us all, read our thoughts and weigh our feelings, and by your utter resourcefulness, “save us in the time of trial and deliver us from all evil.”  
Through Christ Jesus our Saviour.

***Amen!***

Hymn 663

Love divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven to earth come down:  
fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
all thy faithful mercies crown:  
Jesus, thou art all compassion,  
pure, unbounded love thou art;  
visit us with thy salvation,  
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,  
let us all thy life receive;  
suddenly return, and never,  
never more thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
serve thee as thy hosts above,  
pray and praise thee without ceasing,  
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish, then, thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be:  
let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee;  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heav'n we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Benediction

Eternal God, the refuge and help of all your children,  
we praise you for all you have given us,  
for all you have done for us,  
for all that you are to us.  
In our weakness, you are strength,  
in our darkness, you are light,  
in our sorrow, you are comfort and peace.  
We cannot number your blessings,  
we cannot declare your love:  
For all your blessings we bless you.  
May we live as in your presence,  
and love the things that you love,

and serve you in our daily lives;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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.