



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

Sunday 18th October 2020

Call to Worship:

We are called from the ends of the earth,
we are called from the centre of our lives.

Men and women, young and old,
rich and poor, strong and weak.

We are called into God's love
to yearn for justice and to pray for peace.

The world belongs to the Lord,
the earth and all its people.

How good and how lovely it is
to live together in unity.

Love and faith come together,
justice and peace join hands.

Lord, open our lips
and our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we gather for worship now, hoping to grow, hoping to learn, hoping to be enabled to cope with the difficult challenges we face every day, hoping that, through our study of the gospel of Christ we might understand more fully the way the world works and discern with more certainty our place in it, hoping to catch the vision of a new and different world, a better world, the world Jesus teaches of.

Loving God, we address you as 'you' because our language has not the words to describe the relationship between God and creation. We know that we are not simply addressing another person, but rather are directing our thoughts and feelings and concerns outward beyond us and inwards to the depths of our hearts. We worship and pray not because we expect the world to be changed or our lives to be directed by some divine ordinance, but because we need to express the way we feel about ourselves, our relationships and the world we live in; we need to share together our faith that in Jesus of Nazareth we see a better way of relating to other people and a better way of understanding the world.

And we turn our thoughts now to our own weaknesses and omissions, not because we expect some magical cleansing of our souls, but because we need to face up to what is wrong with us in order that we might change. We pray for forgiveness knowing that we need to forgive ourselves and allow ourselves to start afresh.

And so we call on the purpose of God to enfold us now.

God, be present in our activity and our stillness.

We call on the presence of God to be with us now.

God, be present in our gathering and in our parting.

We call on the power of God to meet us now.

God, be present in our thinking and our speaking.

Faithful God, you are loyal to your people always,
forgive our betrayals of you and of each other.
Covenant God, you remember your people always,
forgive our forgetfulness of you and of the poor and the broken.
Active God, you love your people always,
forgive our failure to do your will and to cherish creation.
Living God, be present in power to fulfil your purpose.
How complex life is,
Always we face challenges that seem beyond us.
We are caught in a web of relationships
Which too often become sterile,
Or irritating
Or just a formality.
We face work which is demanding
Too often with impatience
And little joy
Watching the clock.
We hear the cries of a broken world,
Too often with despair
Or a sense of futility
As though we can do nothing to help.
And so we seem to ourselves
Shallow people
Just ticking over the calendar
And not going anywhere.
That is not what you created us to be.
Grant us the spirit of hope infusing our lives,
So that what we have been
May not determine what we shall become.
In Christ, may we draw closer to you
In constant pilgrimage.

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: Exodus 3:1-6

Hymn 64

I lift my eyes to the quiet hills
in the press of a busy day;
as green hills stand in a dusty land
so God is my strength and stay.

I lift my eyes to the quiet hills
to a calm that is mine to share;

secure and still in the Father's will
and kept by the Father's care.

I lift my eyes to the quiet hills
with a prayer as I turn to sleep;
by day, by night, through the dark and light
my Shepherd will guard his sheep.

I lift my eyes to the quiet hills
and my heart to the Father's throne;
in all my ways to the end of days
the Lord will preserve his own.

Reading: Matthew 6:7-18

Reflection:

It isn't clear from Matthew's text of the Lord's Prayer whether Jesus was giving his disciples a few words of advice about the way they should be praying, or dictating a script to them that should be followed to the letter. The translations which claim to be the most literal just have Jesus saying 'pray like this', which of course could be interpreted in either way. There is no record of Jesus using the words himself as a prayer and we're probably quite safe in assuming that the words of the Lord's Prayer can be taken as a sample or template of the kinds of thoughts, feelings and requests that we can express in prayer.

Nonetheless, the church has taken these words of Jesus and has been using them in public worship probably since Christians first began to gather together. So long have they been used, and so long have we been using them in our own personal experiences of worship, that the words probably roll off our tongues without needing any careful thought behind them. So over these few weeks, we're trying to take some time to examine, clause by clause, those ancient words to attempt, not just to uncover their meaning, but to explore their relevance to us and our world.

One of the difficulties of taking the Lord's Prayer clause by clause is the same as the difficulty we have of looking at only a few verses of scripture in sermons week by week. We have to be careful not to lose the context, and to make sure we are aware that there may be relevant verses on either side of the ones we are addressing. And that is true of the bits of the Lord's Prayer we're looking at this morning: '*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*' This phrase of course follows on immediately from the one we looked at last week - *Thy Kingdom come* - and can be seen as a development of it.

We suggested before that Jesus saw God's Kingdom as something that was close, not far away, and could indeed be seen in the world around. In the stories Jesus told and in the life he led, in his relationships with those around him and in his unstinting dedication to his mission we see the kingdom of God at work. So if the Kingdom of God is not something so distant as to be almost unattainable, then how is it to be achieved? How and when can God's Kingdom come in our time and in our churches? *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. This is, if you like, the next part of Jesus' mission manifesto. Those parts of the Kingdom of God that are already present and visible, Jesus seems to be saying, are present and visible because they are places where the will of God is being done. God's will being done in heaven. The challenge of the prayer then, is the desire for God's will to be done on earth - in our own circumstances, among our own society and in our own time.

That's reasonably straightforward. God's Kingdom will come when God's will is done. The hard part, of course is to discover how we can know what God's will is. We are all well aware that a great part of the world's strife and suffering over the centuries has been caused by people and groups of people claiming to have insight into the will of God, and therefore feeling justified in imposing their beliefs on others. If it is the will of God it must be right for the world, and therefore if it entails a bit of conflict and killing along the way, then that's only because the end justifies the means.

It would seem from Jesus words to be a crucial part of establishing the Kingdom of God, that it is above all where God's will is done, yet history shows how difficult it is to know the will of God and how disastrous the results can be if wrong assumptions are made.

In a simpler time, perhaps, we may have been more ready to take someone else's word for it. In our reading this morning from the Old Testament book of Exodus there was no difficulty in accepting that God spoke directly to Moses, outlining in quite some detail God's plan for the people. Moses would go off up a mountain, have a person-to-person conversation with God, come back down and explain to the people what the will of God was for them. From chapter three of Exodus through to chapter fourteen, almost every chapter begins with the words, 'Then the Lord said to Moses.' The will of God was easy to know and understand, because the will of God was communicated directly from God's mouth to Moses' mind, and what Moses was able then to relate to the people was nothing less than the will of God.

Imagine if today someone said that they'd had a direct conversation with God. Even a prominent leader of Christians - Pope Francis or the Archbishop of Canterbury. They are likely to be met with mockery and ridicule, or at the very least, suspicion. However we are to determine the will of God in today's world, it is not through the personal statements of any individuals no matter how respected they may be.

Similarly, it is difficult for us to turn to the Bible for a comprehensive explanation of God's will, to use it as a guide book for life in the twenty-first century, for we know something of the background to much of the scriptural writing, and realise that a letter, for example, written by Paul to encourage faithfulness in the face of persecution may have a general relevance in revealing the faith and beliefs of the early Christians, but won't be so much help in trying to determine the details of Christian life today. The cultural gulf is so wide, the society in which we live is so different, so much time has passed, and the challenges and decisions we face today so far removed that it is impossible to look at some of the detailed advice Paul gives about, say, worship or family life and say: 'That is the will of God for us.'

This once again illustrates, as if we need to be reminded, that living a Christian life today is not an easy thing to do. We have a delicate balancing act to perform, holding, on the one hand, to the scripture and tradition of the Christian faith, the doctrines and beliefs of the church that have been developed and adjusted over the centuries and handed down to us by our ancestors in the faith; and, on the other hand, maintaining a faith that is real and alive and relevant for the twenty-first century, a faith that is credible in an age that is so full of miracles of technology that it would have been beyond the imagination of the people who wrote the Bible or those who established and nurtured the Church in earlier times.

So where do we find God's will?

Faced with any decision in church or personal life, we can only approach the problem by looking again at the teaching of Jesus, and by asking some questions. We know fairly clearly the thrust of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God. We know from the many stories Jesus told, what life in the Kingdom of God is like, we know how people treat each other and we know what the priorities are. Justice, peace, valuing other people, even those we don't like, putting the good of others before our own desires, bringing the good news of the kingdom to others, serving instead of being served, expressing love in all our relationships. All these things and others must

be the basis for our seeking the will of God. So when we are faced with any decision about which we feel we need guidance, then our guide is those priorities. We look at each possible outcome and say: 'Is it just? Is it loving? Does it hurt anyone? Does it help or hinder the common good? Is it selfish?' And having considered all possibilities, we make our decision.

Seeking the will of God is one of the many reasons it's important for Christians to be part of a community, worshipping Sunday by Sunday. The will of God is not simply handed to us; the Bible is sadly not a book of instructions for every eventuality - life would be so much easier if it was. But week by week, by immersing ourselves in the ongoing life and worship of the church, we become more and more familiar with the personality and the mission of Jesus, and through his example and teaching, we come to discover the way to seek God's will. It's a joint effort in which we are all involved; it is part of the work of the Church, and no wonder that it is such a central part of the Lord's prayer, for it is in that seeking and exploring that the work of the Kingdom is achieved. *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Next time we will explore how God provides us each day with our daily bread.

Prayer:

Trusting in God's care for all people,
we pray in the name of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For those who are sick

*Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

Psalm 36:5

We pray for those whom coronavirus has made unwell:
in your compassion, grant them strength and healing.

For our health workers

*In the day of trouble you answer us, O Lord, and you protect us;
you send us help and give us support.*

Psalm 20:1-2

We pray for all who minister to the sick throughout our health service,
that they may renew their strength in you
and be channels of restoration and renewal for those who suffer.

For the anxious

*You are near to the broken-hearted, O Lord,
and you save the crushed in spirit.*

Psalm 34:18

We pray for all who are anxious about loved ones, friends and neighbours:
enable them to trust in you and be steadfast in hope.

For the lonely and the isolated

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me.*

Psalm 23:4

We pray for all those who feel isolated or alone,
that they may experience your loving presence.

For the strong and the vulnerable

Lord, you raise the poor and lift the needy.

Psalm 113:7

We pray that you would inspire those who are strong
to care for the vulnerable
and to serve them in love.

For the Church

How can we sing your song, O Lord, in these strange times?

(cf. Psalm 137:4)

We pray for your Church who longs to praise you
throughout this strange and confusing time;
through your creative Spirit
fire our imaginations to proclaim your unchanging love in new ways.

For those in authority

*We cast our burden upon you, O Lord,
and you sustain us.*

Psalm 55:22

We pray for all in authority who face difficult decisions
that affect the lives of many;
grant them wisdom and courage.

For those engaged in research

*O Lord, you are great and abundant in power;
your understanding is beyond measure*

Psalm 147:5

We pray for all engaged in research,
who are seeking to develop a vaccine and remedies for coronavirus:
grant them wisdom, understanding and effectiveness in their endeavours.

For traders and employees

*Lord, you are our light and our salvation; whom shall we fear?
You are the stronghold of our life; of whom shall we be afraid?*

Psalm 27:1

We pray for traders and employees who are fearful of the future,
that businesses may be secured, jobs protected and families supported.

For those who face hardship

*The eyes of all look to you
and you give them their food in due season.*

Psalm 145:15

We pray for all those facing financial hardship
that you would support and sustain them.

We remember also those who seek to fulfil Christ's command to love one another
through the work of foodbanks and charities
and through acts of simple kindness.

For those in education

*Lord, you give strength to your people
and you bless them with peace.*

Psalm 29:11

We pray for all in education at this uncertain time:
inspire those who feel bored or directionless,
protect the vulnerable
and give fresh hope to the dismayed.

For those who have died

*Lord, you show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.*

Psalm 16:11

With sadness, we remember those who have lost their lives due to the coronavirus
Give us thankful hearts for the privilege of knowing them
and strengthen our faith in your Son who died for us
and rose again in glory
that we might share in his victorious life.

For the grieving

*O God, for you alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from you.
You alone are my rock, my salvation and my fortress.*

Psalm 62:5-6

We pray for those who weep and mourn,
that they may find comfort and hope in you.

Hymn 532

Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working, most wondrous your ways!
Your glory and greatness no mortal can tell,
and yet in the heart of the humble you dwell.

Lord of all power, I give you my will,
in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfill.
Your bondage is freedom, your service is song;
and, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong.

Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to find.
What eye has not seen and what ear has not heard
is taught by your Spirit and shines from your Word.

Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart;
your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,
your presence to shield me, whatever betide.

Lord of all being, I give you my all;

if e'er I disown you, I stumble and fall;
but, led in your service your word to obey,
I walk in your freedom to the end of the way.

Benediction

Lord of life, in this time of crisis for our families and communities, our nation and our world, we turn to you in faith, to seek your guidance and your blessing, knowing that nothing in all creation can separate us from your love made known to us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. We ask this in the name of him who gave his life for the life of the world and raises us up with him to new and abundant life.

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