



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

Sunday 4th October 2020

Call to Worship:

In the name of God,
who created us,
who holds us and the whole world in loving hands

In the name of the Son,
who came into the world,
who reconciles us with God.

In the name of the Holy Spirit,
who fills us with eternal life,
who links us with all Christians
and incites us to peace,
we come together to offer our thanks and praise.

Prayer:

God whispers to each of us:
you are my beloved,
created in love for love.
My spirit answers,
Here I am, Lord.
Speak to me anew.

God breathes on us the Holy Spirit,
knitting many members into one body,
the body of Christ.
Together we answer,
Here we are Lord.
Come, Holy Spirit.

God has yet more vision for the people.
Who will work for God to extend God's kingdom
into our hurting world?
Here we are Lord.
Empower us for your work.

God calls the small, and helps them do great things.
God calls the weak, and reveals their hidden gifts.
God calls the rejected, and opens their eyes to their worth.
Here we are Lord, humble and waiting.

Then let us gather, old and young, small and great,
to dream God's dreams,
receive God's power,
and do God's deeds.

Here we are Lord.

Shine the light of your love on us.

Kindle your Spirit within us.

*Work your redeeming will in us,
that all the world may be one
through the power of your love.*

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 148

Hymn 116

Praise the Lord, ye heavens adore him;
praise him, angels in the height;
sun and moon, bow down before him,
praise him, all ye stars and light.

Praise the Lord, for he has spoken;
worlds his mighty voice obeyed;
laws that never shall be broken
for their guidance he has made.

Praise the Lord, for he is glorious;
never shall his promise fail;
God has made his saints victorious;
sin and death shall not prevail.

Praise the God of our salvation;
hosts on high his power proclaim;
heaven and earth, and all creation,
laud and magnify his name.

Reading: Matthew 6:7-18

Reflection:

I have encountered many many Christians, often church members of faithful church attendance and long standing, who have expressed a problem with prayer. It seems that, for many church people, the most difficult thing about being a Christian is the whole business of

praying. For some, it has been *how* to pray: what words to use, if any, what kind of frame of mind to be in, what circumstances are best for offering prayer. Should one be alone in the silence? Should one go to a special place or pray at a special time? Should one speak out loud or simply pray in silence?

For others there are deeper questions: What is prayer all about? What is its purpose and what is its effect? Does prayer make any difference and, most crucially, how does it work?

In many ways, prayer is something we take for granted. It is something so fundamental to the Christian faith that we feel inadequate and embarrassed if we have questions about it. From the very moment we are old enough to be prised from our parents and taken into Sunday School or Junior Church, we find ourselves in situations where a minister or leader will say the words 'let us pray'. We know that we're supposed to adopt a reverent pose, kneeling down or hands clasped in front of us - almost always we are advised to close our eyes. And we are probably taught that prayer involves talking to God. We may have heard children's talks in church over the years that involve telephones and satellites and other metaphors of communication designed to explain to us what prayer is and how it works, but for many people there is an uneasy feeling that these simple images, while they might be fine for the elementary Christian education of children, leave a lot of questions unanswered and a lot of doubts unresolved.

Much of the Bible takes prayer just as much for granted. Paul tells his readers to 'pray constantly', but gives no advice on how that's to be done. Only in the Lord's Prayer do we find anything like in-depth advice on prayer, and so this week, and in the few weeks to come, we will have a close look at the Lord's prayer to see if we can find some enlightenment not just on the subject of prayer, but on the mission priorities of Jesus and the religious culture in which he lived and worked.

First, though, I have to tell you about the Revd Dr Arthur Morton Price. The Revd Dr Arthur Morton Price was principal of the Scottish Congregational College when I was a student there. He held a weekly sermon class, at which some poor unfortunate student had to present a complete service of worship, prayers, hymns, sermon, the lot, and then be subjected to the criticism of two fellow students and the principal. The Revd Dr Arthur Morton Price always began his criticisms in one of two ways; either with the words 'well, now', which indicated that the criticism would be favourable; or with the words 'one of my betes noirs is...', which indicated that the student was in for a rocky ride. One of his 'betes noir' - and consequently one of mine ever since, was ministers who say, 'let us pray in the words that Jesus taught us to say together'. Of course, when we look at what the Bible actually says we discover that Jesus just said, 'When you pray, pray like this', or words to that effect. There is no instruction to pray together. It can also be argued with this, as it can with all of the Bible, that the instruction was given to those who were listening to Jesus at the time without any suggestion that it was intended to apply to people who might be reading about it two thousand years in the future. Indeed, it is one of the more dangerous approaches to the Bible in general to assume that it was written for us.

And so at last we come to the actual words of the Lord's Prayer. 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name.' There are three nouns and one verb in that short sentence, and really every one of them deserves a sermon of its own. What did Jesus intend to convey, when he suggested that his disciples should pray to 'our Father', and what do we imagine today when we use the image of God as Father. There are certain obvious points. A Father in society of Jesus' time was one who creates, provides and disciplines. In a male dominated society it is the father

who is the head of the household, who makes the decisions, and whose word is final. Yet a Father also has a duty to provide and to care for his family, to protect his children from danger and harm and to offer them a secure environment in which to grow up. It takes little imagination to see that this perception of fatherhood - to our minds rather primitive - would be not unlike the same society's perception of God - also rather primitive - that God can be seen as a divine father, the ultimate creator and the ultimate provider. And this father, furthermore, is the father of all people and all things. Psalm 148, a hymn to the creator, paints a picture of God in terms so much broader and more sweeping than the word 'father' can convey. In the psalm, God is responsible not just for people, but for all things, even monsters and fruit trees, and all places, the earth and the sea. This God described in the Psalm is so big and so all-encompassing that the word 'father' - a word that we use to describe a human man - becomes somehow too small and too tainted by human weakness to properly describe God.

As with almost every word we use to describe God, 'father' is no more than a metaphor, and, as with all metaphors, it is partial and incomplete. So when we say the Lord's Prayer, we are doing so in the knowledge that the God to whom we pray is more, far far more, than the word 'father' can convey. We use it as a convenience, not as an accurate description. We know what it means, but we also know how much more it means.

'Our father, who art in heaven'. Heaven is a hugely difficult concept for us. It wasn't so difficult of the people of Jesus' time; they believed that God lived somewhere else. We can't believe that heaven is a place, a physical place that is a happy land far far away and that's where God lives. Our experience tells us that if God is to be found anywhere it is in the nitty gritty of our own world; God dwells in our midst and also in heaven, which we call God's Kingdom. Again we can turn to Psalm 148 and see where God's kingdom is. It is in the sun and moon and stars, in earth and ocean, in fire and hail, snow and ice, with kings and commoners.

In order to come even close to describing God, we can not define God by where we think heaven might be, but rather define heaven by where God is. To say that God lives in heaven is almost to put God in a box, but to say that where God is, *there* is heaven, is to release God into the complete breadth and depth of the universe.

'Hallowed be thy name'. Again we can go to Psalm 148 to see why that should be. From the great powerhouses of the stars, to the frightening violence of storm and tempest, to the beauty of mountains and hills, to the variety of land and sea creatures, to the detail of tiny insects, to the social and cultural mix that is humanity - all are included in the creation of this God. And in the face of this spectacular and awesome universe, with all its power and all its mystery we say, 'Hallowed be thy name.'

Next week we will say, 'Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

Hymn 473

God is love, and where true love is, God himself is there.

Here is Christ we gather, love of Christ our calling.

Christ, our love, is with us, gladness be his greeting.

Let us love and serve him, God of all the ages.

Let us love sincerely, seeing Christ in others.

God is love, and where true love is, God himself is there.

When we Christians gather, members of his Body.

Christ, our head, is with us, loving and beloved

Here is sent the Spirit, one with Son and Father,
fire of love's indwelling, bond of peace among us.
God is love, and where true love is, God himself is there.

Grant us love's fulfillment, joy with all the blessed,
when we see your glory, risen Lord and Saviour.
Bathe us in your splendour, Light of all creation.
be our bliss for ever, as we sing your praises.
God is love, and where true love is, God himself is there.

Communion:

As Jesus shared meals with his friends long ago, so today we share this symbolic meal together. Separated by distance but united by faith, we eat and drink in his memory; we remember his life, his words and relationships; and we give thanks to God that his Spirit is with us to the end of the age.

So let us pray:

Holy God, through the seasons of our lives, we struggle to know you; we wrestle with questions and doubts and what it means to be faithful, to lose our lives to save them, to take up our crosses and follow you.

We try to hold fast to all that is good and true, but even so, we sometimes cause hurt; we betray others, and we are not faithful to our best selves. We long to know your saving presence with us, especially when life challenges us to be brave and wise. We look for ways forward out of sadness and pain, for ourselves and for all people. Like Jesus' disciples, after he had gone from them, we look for signs of your love and strength, signs of life's deep meaning and goodness.

In faith, we find those signs when we remember how, on the night before he died, Jesus took bread, gave thanks to you, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

After supper, he took the cup of wine, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink this, all of you; this is my blood, poured out for you and for everyone. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me."

May these gifts of bread and cup indeed be signs and substance for us of your presence within us and throughout creation, may your Holy Spirit be upon them and upon us, strengthening us to live with power and compassion in the assurance of your blessing. **Amen.**

Here is bread:
broken, as the body of Christ was broken
broken, as the heart of God was broken
broken, as the seal of the tomb was broken
broken to make us whole.

The body of Christ, broken for us. [*we eat the bread*]

Here is the cup:
a cup that brings us together, even in our social distancing
a cup of forgiveness and blessing.

The blood of Christ, poured out for us. [*we drink the wine*]

Prayer:

For all we have heard, and for all we have seen:

Thanks be to God

For all we have received
and the hope we have been given:

Thanks be to God

For signs of God's presence here among us:

Thanks be to God

For peace and commitment
which the world cannot destroy:

Thanks be to God

For the promise of love, now and forever:

Thanks be to God

In the name of Christ

We pray for peace in this world, Lord,
the kind of peace in which we celebrate diversity,
are joyfully challenged by adversity,
and share in the joy that is to be found everywhere.

We pray for those who are lonely,
that you might lead us to reach out and be friends.

We pray for those who are hungry,
that you might lead us to offer sustenance.

We pray for those who are lost,
that you might lead us to give hope and direction.

We pray for the nations of the world,
that we might find a way to work together to lift one another up.

We pray for the leaders of nations,
that your Spirit might guide them
to set an example for the world
to work together rather than against one another.

And we pray for ourselves and those close to us,
that we might continue on our journey,
learning the lessons you offer,
seeking the fullness of your perfection,
and living as you would have us live.

These prayers and hopes we offer
in confidence and gratitude for your love and presence

Hymn 548

Nothing distress you, nothing affright you,
everything passes, God will abide.
Patient endeavour accomplishes all things;
who God possesses needs naught beside.

Lift your mind upward, fair are his mansions,
nothing distress you, cast fear away.
Follow Christ freely, his love will light you,
nothing affright you in the dark way.

See the world's glory! Fading its splendour,
everything passes, all is denied.
Look ever homeward to the eternal;
faithful in promise God will abide.

Love in due measure, measureless goodness;
patient endeavour, run to Love's call!
Faith burning brightly be your soul's shelter;
who hopes, believing, accomplishes all.

Hell may assail you, it cannot move you;
sorrows may grieve you, faith may be tried.
Though you have nothing, he is your treasure:
who God possesses needs naught beside.

Benediction:

May our Lord Jesus Christ
who has loved us
and given us unending encouragement
and unfailing hope,
inspire us with courage and confidence
in every good thing we say or do.

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