



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

Sunday 15th November 2020

Call to Worship:

God stretches out the heavens
and shapes the earth.
Come and give thanks!

God raises up the mountains
and pours water into the seas.
Come and give thanks!

God calls forth plants from the soil
and forms animals in infinite variety.
Come and give thanks!

God breathes upon us
and fills us with life.
Come lift your voices in praise!

God gives our lives meaning
through laughter and tears.
Come lift your voices in praise!

God touches our hearts
through family and friends.
Come lift your voices in praise!

God loves us and blesses us
with everything good.
Come and worship!

God loves us and overwhelms us
with never-ending generosity.
Come and worship!

God loves us and surrounds us
with love in abundance!
Come and worship!

Prayer/Meditation:

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 unite, 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.**

Holy God,
we confess that we do not always love our neighbor.
We confess that we have despised others,
even to the point of hatred.
We confess that we have been hurt by others.
We confess that forgiveness and reconciliation at times
are just impossible for us.
We know that nothing is impossible in You.
We come to You, seeking healing and wholeness for us.
Help us to live in peace with others,
to seek reconciliation and healing and forgiveness.
For Your Son came and lived among us,
was betrayed and denied,
abused and put to death.
He rose again,
and came with the message of peace to those

who had denied him and abandoned him.
May we walk in his ways.

For nothing is impossible with God.
There is no place we can go,
no end of the earth we can run to,
where God cannot find us.
There is nothing on earth or beyond death
that can separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
we are forgiven.
we are loved.
we are reconciled to God.
and live in the love of God.

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: Genesis 1:24-31

Hymn 41

For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth over and around us lies:
Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.

For the beauty of each hour of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower, sun and moon, and stars of light:
Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.

For the joy of ear and eye, for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony linking sense to sound and sight:
Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.

For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth and friends above; for all gentle thoughts and mild:
Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.

For each perfect gift of thine to our race so freely given,
graces human and divine, flowers of earth and buds of heaven:
Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.

For thy people, evermore lifting holy hands above,
offering up on every shore their pure sacrifice of love:
Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.

Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

Reflection:

This parable from the gospel according to Matthew tells of the giving of a resource and of how that resource may be used. It's known as the parable of the talents - a talent in the story being a sum of money. The use of that word talent makes it easy for us to understand the story as talking about the individual God-given gifts and skills that we all possess, and serving as an encouragement to use those gifts in positive ways, sharing them around and not keeping them hidden.

But the beauty of Jesus' parables is that there is often more than one way of looking at them. We tend to assume that each parable has a specific meaning, yet in very few instances did Jesus reveal what a parable was about. The parables come from a background of Jesus' Jewish faith, a faith in which a Rabbi will teach by argument, by looking at different points of view, different angles - unlike the Christian tradition where we all too often believe there is a right answer to everything, and that all other answers are wrong. They come from a background of Jesus' Jewish faith, a faith in which the community is at the centre, so they may be understood as speaking not just to individuals, but to the whole nation and - through Jesus - to the whole world.

What is the most precious thing we have been given? Life itself, and this world in which to live it.

The Bible is quite clear that this world is a gift from God. Except that it's not exactly a gift at all. Like the sums of money in the parable of the talents, the world we live in is not ours, it is given to us to look after.

The way in which the human race, with the approval of the church, has used and abused the world, can also be justified by reference to the Bible. It shows that various ways of living, treating other people, and treating the environment, can be justified in different ways depending on how we interpret the words of scripture.

The Old Testament book of Genesis makes it quite clear, in the mythical language of the people who wrote it, that, while the earth and everything in it belong to the Lord, God has nonetheless given humans power over it to exploit as they see fit. Adam and Eve were set in the garden of Eden where they ruled as masters over all creation. And even when they were expelled from the garden, they were still given power over the environment. All the fruit and vegetables and cereals, all the animals, all the resources of the earth were at the disposal of the human race to use as they saw fit.

That understanding of the Bible became a licence for exploitation and destruction that carries on to this day. We need only turn to the papers any day of the week to see how dangerous we have become to the integrity of the planet and how, far from renewing and sustaining the life of the earth, the opposite is happening. Species of animals, birds and sea life are constantly being rendered extinct because we have made their environment unable to sustain them any longer, or because we have destroyed them for food or for sport.

Today our understanding of scripture is rather different. We have realised that we cannot simply take the words of the Old Testament at face value without relating them to our own experience of the world. The Old Testament says, 'go ahead and exploit the world', but our experience tells us that when we do that we become a danger to life and the health and beauty of the planet. Our experience of living in the

world and using it tells us that, on the one hand, the Old Testament is right, we do have the power and the ability to use the natural world for our own benefit, but our experience also tells us that not all we do is good and helpful, and that we need to care for the world and protect it, otherwise it will become unuseable for us or for future generations.

So one way of interpreting then parable of the talents might be to say that it is about the nurture and care of gifts. The servants in the story who were praised and rewarded were the ones who were able to both exploit *and* care for the gifts they were given. The servant who was condemned was punished because he had neglected his gift and done nothing with it. If we were re-telling the story today in the context of the environment, we might want to include another servant - one who took his master's money and just went off and spent it - for that, in effect, is how the human race has been treating the gift of the earth.

Is there any way that we, as individuals and as Christian communities, can help to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth? Yes there is. Advice such as the use of energy saving electrical equipment, being diligent about recycling, or the boycotting of the products of large companies that exploit the environment or the people in it is well known to us, and we perhaps think that it's hardly worth it for all the difference our small efforts would make. But then maybe that's what the servant with the small amount of money thought: 'It's not worth risking this in investment, or I might lose even the small amount I've got.'

We all have a share - a very tiny share, but still a share - in the earth. We still, in our own lives have the choice of exploiting or nurturing the environment we live in. Even insignificant things like dropping litter in the street or burning energy we don't really need are making a contribution to the harm being done. We have a call and a duty to care for the places we go and the people we meet, so that we can say we have cared and nurtured, that no-one and nothing has been hurt or destroyed because of us, and that the gift of our environment will be returned to the master not spoiled, not neglected, but nurtured and sustained and more full of life and goodness than when we received it.

Prayer

God of wonder and mystery,
God of the stars and the universe,
God of winding ways and straight paths,
we pray today with gratitude
for the gift of your constant presence,
your trustworthy guidance,
and your daring risk-taking with us.
You dare to love us despite our inability to respond fully.
You dare to care for us, despite our challenge in caring for others.
You dare to walk with us, despite our fickleness.

On our own journeys
toward the stars and guiding points you put before us,
you continue to lead us forward,
guiding us by the teachings of Jesus

to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in your loving shadow.

As we struggle with the political wrangling of this world,
the wars waged for both justice and greed,
the violence committed daily against the innocent,
let alone the pain of broken relationships and loss,
you remain steadfast in your care and devotion
for your entire creation throughout the universe.

It is almost too much to take in sometimes.
And even in our doubts and disbelief,
our struggle to understand and constant misunderstanding,
and our flat-out ignorance about your ways,
you remain constantly present to us.

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 countries 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 work together rather than against one another.

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

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

Hymn 485

Almighty Father of all things that be,
our life, our work we consecrate to thee,
whose heavens declare thy glory from above,
whose earth below is witness to thy love.

For well we know this weary, fallen earth
is yet thine own by right of its new birth,

since that great cross upreared on Calvary
redeemed it from its fault and shame to thee.

Thine still the changeful beauty of the hills,
the purple valleys flecked with silver rills,
the ocean glistening 'neath the golden rays:
they all are thine, and voiceless speak thy praise.

Thou dost the strength to worker's arm impart;
from thee the skilled musician's mystic art,
the grace of poet's pen or painter's hand,
to teach the loveliness of sea and land.

Then grant us, Lord, in all things thee to own,
to dwell within the shadow of thy throne,
to speak and work, to think, and live, and move
reflecting thine own nature, which is love;

that so, by Christ redeemed from sin and shame,
and hallowed by thy Spirit's cleansing flame,
ourselves, our work, and all our powers may be
a sacrifice acceptable to thee.

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;

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

