



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 22nd November 2020

Call to Worship:

Kindle in our hearts, O God
the flame of love that never ceases;
That it may burn in us, giving light to others.
May we shine for ever in your temple,
set on fire with your eternal light,
even your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Among the poor, among the proud, among the persecuted, among the privileged,
let there be peace, O Lord.

With gentle touch, with an angry word, with a clear conscience, with burning love,
let there be peace, O Lord.

Within us, without us, behind us, before us, in this place, in every place, for this time, for all
time,
let there be peace, O Lord.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, today we come again for worship to give thanks for all that we enjoy and to seek forgiveness for all that is wrong, to search for understanding and to find strength of faith.

We are glad to be part of this Christian community that supports and nurtures us as we struggle day by day with the challenge of faith and the realities of the world, and we give thanks for the love that upholds us, the care that reassures us and the mission that challenges us.

We are glad to be part of the worldwide family of Christian people that binds us together with people of all nations and cultures, teaching us of the breadth and depth of God's love and showing us different ways of responding to the call of Christ to engage in the mission of the Kingdom.

Yet glad though we are to be a part of the church, our gladness is mixed with unease, with disappointment, with guilt, even with fear as we look around us and see that the world seems as uncertain and dangerous place as it ever was. Despite our message of peace and justice, despite the gospel of indiscriminate love, and despite the similar teachings of other faiths about love and respect, we seem to live in the midst of increasing hatred, violence and war. Daily we hear of death and destruction, of stubborn refusal to consider the other's point of view, of personal and national selfishness that will allow nothing to stand in its way.

The world is in need of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation, and we pray that these qualities of the kingdom might come; that humanity might be seen as more important than nationality or religion, and that the One God of Christianity, Judaism and Islam might be worshipped and served in peace and mutual respect.

We cannot repent on behalf of others, but we can seek ways of contributing to the peace of the world. We can hold in our thoughts and our prayers the misery of war and the anguish of loss.

Through us and through people of all faiths and people of goodwill of no faith, may God's kingdom come and God's will be done.

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: I Corinthians 1:18-25

Hymn 200

The kingdom of God is justice and joy;
for Jesus restores
what sin would destroy.
God's power and glory
in Jesus we know
and here and hereafter
the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace;
the prisoners are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share;
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

The kingdom of God
is challenge and choice:
believe the good news,
repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
brought Christ to his cross:
our crisis of judgement
for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come,
the gift and the goal;
in Jesus begun,
in heaven made whole.
The heirs of the kingdom
shall answer his call
and all things cry 'Glory!'
to God all in all.

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Reflection:

The Gospel of Matthew, which has been read for most of this year, points over and over to the kingdom of God as something real but hidden in the world of human activity, a reality that peeks out occasionally, when Jesus does what Jesus does: he heals, he masters the chaotic elements of creation, he feeds people, he meets and loves people on the margins. In Matthew, Jesus says over and over that the kingdom is visible and available to his followers, as well, when we behave as citizens of that kingdom: when we serve the least, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the sick, and perhaps above all, follow Jesus' example when he speaks God's truth to the rich and influential.

There is also a subversive quality to this reality of the kingdom, a sense that those who see and understand it are from the margins of society rather than from the powerful and content centre. In Matthew, the list of those who see and accept what Jesus has to offer includes a Roman centurion, a Canaanite woman, and Matthew, a despised tax collector. The disciples themselves are hardly the elite of Jerusalem; they are country bumpkins from the provinces, hardly the sort to set the world on fire. Yet all these people listen to Jesus and follow him, perhaps because the status quo has not given them very much.

While the world has changed over and over in the years since the Gospel of Matthew was written, the list of the vulnerable in today's gospel has only grown. "The hungry" now means a billion people who go to bed every night with little or no food. "The thirsty," means millions of people worldwide dealing with severe drought. "The sick," includes millions of people infected with the most difficult and pernicious illnesses, including COVID, malaria, AIDS and tuberculosis. The population of "those in prison" is still significant. It is harder than ever to see the reality of God's kingdom and the Lordship of Christ behind these depressing everyday realities. But it is easier than ever to see those on the margins whose needs are overwhelming.

The call of Jesus to his disciples has not changed. As followers of Jesus, we are called to behave as citizens of the kingdom.

St Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, says that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. What he exactly meant by that is open to interpretation, but one thing we can notice straight away is that human wisdom and strength seem to be at their best when they are used for destruction. Indeed, the history of the human race is almost defined by its power in war. The rise and fall of empires; the technological advancements over the centuries; the great political struggles; the very development of human society since written records were first made - all have their milestones in conflict between nations. Likewise with that way the human family has treated the natural resources of the world, taking and taking and taking without any thought until fairly recently about the consequences to the natural world. Whole regions of the planet have had their natural environment eradicated, hundreds of species of animals and birds have been rendered extinct - all because of the power of humans over the natural world. When we talk of human power and wisdom we are talking mostly about the power and wisdom that lead to destruction and conflict.

Compare that with what we believe about God; the one whose power creates; the one who is love; the one who builds up rather than tearing down; the one who loves and welcomes all people and doesn't discriminate against groups or races.

But when Paul talks of the weakness and foolishness of God, he is not talking about a God who is weak and foolish. He says 'God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.' It is the message of the gospel, the way it is preached, and maybe the lives of those who preached it that seemed like foolishness to many people - especially the religious leaders of the time. He says the Jews expected miracles and the Greeks expected great wisdom - but the message they actually heard sounded to them like weakness and foolishness. But if human power and wisdom are not God's way, then what does this weakness and foolishness look like that represent the strength of God?

We preach Christ crucified, says Paul. Not, in this letter at least, Christ risen, not Christ triumphant and victorious - but Christ crucified. This, he says is a stumbling-block and is foolishness. Christ's Kingdom is not one of conquest but of love, not of domination but of service, not of oppression but of extravagant welcome.

And this notion of Christ's Kingdom, over against the reality in which we live, raises the question: are we behaving like citizens of the kingdom? Are the hungry and thirsty, the poor and neglected better off because of us? Is the reality of the expansive, all-encompassing love of God visible in what we do? In the end, this gospel says, that's what matters in human existence. When we make choices about where to spend our time, our money, our energy, and our best gifts, we are making choices that build the kingdom - or don't build the kingdom.

We are called by today's gospel to understand ourselves as those who are called to embody the kingdom in the here and now, so that it can come in its fullness, and Christ will be king - because we choose to dwell in that kingdom.

Prayer

Compassionate God,
we pray for vulnerable people all over this world,
people without power
who live in places of terror and violence, fear and oppression.

Protect them, God;
we feel so powerless ourselves to help them.
Encourage and empower us to work
for peace and freedom from fear in our own contexts.

God of grace,
we pray for those whose lives have been turned upside down
by various disasters: floods, fire and drought-driven famine.
Bring courage and hope to them;
through their pain, may they remain connected to you in prayer.

We pray for those say there is no God;
may we through the living of our own lives
demonstrate the joy and peace of a Spirit-centred existence.

God of community,
we pray for our own congregation;
may we be a source of hope for our neighbourhood.

Help us to discern needs and work to fulfill them.
Strengthen and unify our congregation
and show us how we can be the disciples you envision us to be.
Return the sick to health and well-being
and relieve the suffering of those who have lost loved ones,
are unable to find meaningful employment
and fear the challenges of old age.

Guide us, Great Shepherd,
into your paths of right relationships.
In Jesus' name we pray; Amen.

Hymn 621

Almighty Father, who for us thy Son didst give,
that all the nations through his precious death might live,
in mercy guard us, lest by sloth and selfish pride
we cause to stumble those for whom the Saviour died.

We are thy stewards; thine our talents, wisdom, skill;
our only glory that we may thy trust fulfil;
that we thy pleasure in our neighbours' good pursue,
if thou but workest in us both to will and do.

On just and unjust thou thy care dost freely shower;
make us, thy children, free from greed and lust for power,
lest human justice, yoked with our unequal laws,
oppress the needy and neglect the humble cause.

Let not thy worship blind us to the claims of love;
but let thy manna lead us to the feast above,
to seek the country which by faith we now possess,
where Christ, our treasure, reigns in peace and righteousness.

Benediction

Let us go in peace; loving and caring for one another in Christ's name, and may we be blessed with every gift needful for God's work, may the Spirit grant us the willingness to risk ourselves completely for the sake of the gospel, and may the love and the compassion and the hope and the faith of Jesus dwell richly within us until his kingdom is fully come.

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

