



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 13th December 2020

Call to Worship:

Let us begin this day by rejoicing!
The Lord has done such wonderful things for us.
Let us be glad!
The day before us is uncertain.
We know not what we will encounter on our way.
Wherever we go, we go forth as people of the living God,
And we go forth to touch the lives of all with his healing touch.
Let us begin this day with rejoicing,
Let us live out this day with gladness,
and let us end this day with gratitude.
God be praised for this day!

Prayer/Meditation:

Here are some words written by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin which speak well, I think, both to the season of Advent and to the continuing battle against coronavirus...

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability - and that it may take a very long time.
And so, I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually - let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

Let us pray:
Even if we cannot gather in person
Emmanuel, God with us

Even if some Christmas traditions have had to go
Emmanuel, God with us
Even if we might not get to hug family and friends
Emmanuel, God with us
Even if we cannot sing carols beside each other
Emmanuel, God with us
Even if Christmas cheer is harder this year
Emmanuel, God with us
Lord Jesus, You came And come To all
You came And come Especially to the poorest
And the most vulnerable
Come to us here, Lord Jesus
To help and to heal the poverty of our spirits
To refresh and inspire us
Even through the weakness of our faith...
Come - to love and to hold us -
To give us the courage
always to point to you

in the stopping
in the pausing
in the quiet
we cannot avoid what we are not
Our faults
our lack of faith
our lack of vision and of action
our lack of trust in You -
You, Father God, see what we are and still stand by us
offering us hope and above all, forgiveness
Help us here
Help us now -
to recognise that it was for our world that Jesus came
It was for our world that He grew to live and die and to rise again
So may Your love set us free this day and always -
these things we ask in the name of Jesus
whose praise we sing and in whose words we pray together now::

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: **Isaiah 61:1-11**

Hymn 181

Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the Source, the Ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!

By his word was all created;
he commanded and 'twas done;
earth and sky and boundless ocean,
Universe of Three in One,
all that sees the moon's soft radiance,
all that breathes beneath the sun:
evermore and evermore!

O that birth forever blessed,
when the Virgin, full of grace,
by the Spirit's power conceiving,
bore the Savior of our race;
and the babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face,
evermore and evermore!

This is he whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord,
whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
now he shines, the long expected;
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore!

Let the heights of heav'n, adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing:
powers, dominions, bow before him
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
ev'ry voice in concert ring,
evermore and evermore!

Reading: **John 1: 19-28**

Reflection:

Life under Roman rule was difficult for the people of Israel and Judea, so they were hoping for a messiah to rescue them, to drive out the Romans. John the Baptist, the Gospel tells us, was travelling around baptizing people.

With their expectations of a messiah, they questioned John: are you the messiah? But John said, no, he was not. There was another coming, he said, for whom he was only preparing the

way. We see here a picture of John early in his ministry. We hear how he speaks of Jesus, the one to come.

The Old Testament lesson also makes this connection for us. It is the lesson from Isaiah that Jesus reads in the synagogue at the start of his public ministry. So we have John and his ministry, Jesus and his ministry, and the description in Isaiah of the ministry to which we all are called.

John was baptizing people and calling them to repentance and forgiveness, to a new relationship with God. Jesus did the same, calling his followers to a new life in the Spirit. In using the words of Isaiah, Jesus harkens back to his own ancient tradition of caring for the marginalized, and sets out the heart of the Christian calling: to care for the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the outcast, the oppressed; to bring release to the captives; to proclaim the kingdom of God.

We are now, of course, in the season of Advent, part of the church year, the season of waiting. In the northern hemisphere, people wait as the days become shorter. As the darkness grows, we—like our ancient ancestors—await the turning of the seasons and the return of the sun, the return of the light and warmth.

As Christians, we also wait. We await the birth of the Holy Child, the return of the Son, the Light of the World—just as John waited in his time for the coming of the Messiah. Our earthly waiting mirrors our spiritual waiting.

So we have this paradox set before us, between waiting and action, for we are called to both. Even in this time of quiet, of waiting, of anticipation, the world is also waiting for us.

Often we think that we must either be contemplative, as in this contemplative season, or active, busy, doing. Yet we need both. We may naturally be drawn more to one aspect than the other, but there is room for both in each person's life. In fact, some of each is necessary for a rich and balanced life.

Most of us live pretty unbalanced lives in so many ways—we work too much; we eat poorly; we don't exercise or we are obsessed by it; we allow too little time for rest, play, or prayer; and so on. We live in an unbalanced society that equates doing and busyness with self-worth. And the irony is that this time of waiting comes at such a busy, stressful time for most of us—the holiday season - especially in this time of pandemic.

So one side of Advent is to learn how to slow down, how to enter into this more reflective time of year, to enter into the waiting and the quiet contemplation. That's one of the reasons some people don't decorate their homes or sing carols until closer to Christmas. It's a way of honouring that quieter, less hectic time, a way of taking time to stop and rest, and breathe, and prepare.

And yet, and yet we know that even in the midst of what is to be a more unhurried time, the world still cries out in need, still groans in travail. The hungry still need food, the naked still need clothing, the sick and imprisoned need help, the poor and the downtrodden need justice. That is the heart of our call, and the heart of this season. After all, we speak of Jesus as Emmanuel, as "God with us," wonderful counsellor, Prince of Peace. If we believe that, if these are more than just fancy words, we have to find a way to make them real, to embody them.

We may feel worn out by the needs of the world crying out from every corner of the globe: disease, poverty, war, famine, genocide, disaster, homelessness, greed, and injustice. And this past year has of course been devastating.

How do we begin to meet these overwhelming needs? Since we are not God, we cannot fix everything. We can only do what we are called to do by the Spirit. And to understand that, we need Advent and other times of quiet contemplation where we can go deep inside and hear the whisperings of the Spirit as it calls us to our own individual and communal work in the world. Advent serves as a reminder of this need to take time out from the usual stress of our lives.

Just as spring bulbs don't blossom without a waiting period in the dark soil, so we do not bloom and flourish without times of quiet and rest. The season of Advent is one of those times, a time of dark and quiet and preparation. I hope you can take advantage of this gift of time and not get totally caught up in the frantic holiday preparation. In this quiet space of Advent, if we are willing to listen, we may hear more clearly the promptings of the Spirit deep in the quietness of our hearts, and receive a clearer vision of how we are called to live out the words of the prophet Isaiah to bring freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, and good news to the poor. And may the Advent season help us all find that essential balance between being and doing, between action and contemplation, so that one may inform and nourish the other.

Prayer

Creator God,
we thank You, for Your Son - the Light of the world.
We thank You too, for those in every generation
who have faithfully pointed to Him
and who have spread His light in even the darkest times.

Lord Jesus,
May we find the courage to point to the hope
and comfort and peace You offer,
especially in times of difficulty and sorrow.
May we witness to Your love and Your goodness
Your presence and Your compassion.

We give thanks
for the family of Your people meeting throughout the world this day -
all of us gathered only too aware of our faults
and our limitations,
but knowing too, that You, Lord Jesus,
can take the tiniest spark and fan it into a raging fire.
Give us the courage and the desire
to seek to serve You as best we can -
and in that service may we reflect the life You lived.

We offer You our prayers for those who struggle with this season.
We think of the bereaved,
of those who cannot afford to celebrate as they might want,
of those with no one to share a table,
and of those who are spending these days in hospital.

Lord God,
You understand
and share
tears and silences,
disappointments and regrets.
Bring Your comfort,
fill with Your strength,
and grant all Your peace...
We pray too, for places in the world

where conflict and violence are rife...
For places where nature has been harsh -
and we have been thoughtless in caring for Your creation:

Give us greater concern for one another
and an even greater willingness to do whatever we can for each other
and for the world itself.

So may we work with You, Lord God,
to make this world, the world You intended it to be -
a world where people care and love and laugh
a world where justice reigns and peace is evident
and where all know they belong.

These prayers, along with our gratitude for the birth of Your Son,
we offer You in His name and for His sake.

Amen

Hymn 35

God is unique and one -
Maker, Sustainer, Lord!
Patterns of life were spun
by his creative Word.
Of his intention, love and care
we are with growing trust aware.

Love came to earth in Christ,
our common life to share,
choosing to be the least,
willing a cross to bear.
He died, he rose, that we might live
and all our love, responding, give.

The Holy Spirit moves
people to trace God's plan;
such inspiration proves
more than the mind can span.
Each listening heart is led to find
the will of God for humankind.

God shall forever reign,
ruler of time and space;
God, in the midst of life,
seen in the human face.
We give expression to our creed
by love in thought, in word and deed.

Benediction

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us!
We have been called,
we have been anointed,
we have been given a task.

So let us live as the people of God's Kingdom

going into the world.
carrying Good News to everyone:
news about freedom from oppression
and healing for the afflicted.
For the time of the Lord's favour is now!

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