



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

Sunday 6th December 2020

Call to Worship:

We come to prepare the way;
The way for Christ -
the hope of Christ, the peace of Christ -
to enter our world,
to enter our hearts.
We cry out together in the wilderness:
The kingdom of heaven has come near.
We come to be part of the light-
the light that shines in the darkness.

Prayer:

In the lonely places
The wilderness
Where we stand forlorn
Windswept and alone
Your voice calls out
Prepare a way for the Lord

In the dark places
The shadows
Where we hide our fears
Embrace our tears
Your voice calls out
Prepare a way for the Lord

As the rising sun comes to us each dawn
Shine upon those who live in darkness
That all might know the joy of our salvation
The forgiveness of sins
And your great mercy

For the desert places in which we walk
The streets we roam
The paths we cross
Guide our feet
Take us to places
Where you would go
Give us words that you would use
That in this Advent season
Of promise and preparation
We might point the way
To the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
And to his glorious Kingdom of justice and peace!

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 40:1-11

Hymn 131

The voice of God goes out to all the world;
his glory speaks across the universe.
The Great King's herald cries from star to star:
'With power, with justice, he will walk his way!'

The Lord has said, 'Receive my messenger,
my promise to the world, my pledge made flesh,
a lamp to every nation, light from light:
with power, with justice, he will walk his way!

'The broken reed he will not trample down,
nor set his heel upon the dying flame.
he binds the wounds, and health is in his hand:
with power, with justice, he will walk his way!

'Anointed with the Spirit and with power,
he comes to crown with comfort all the weak,
to show the face of justice to the poor:
with power, with justice, he will walk his way!

'His touch will bless the eyes that darkness held,
the lame shall run, the halting tongue shall sing,
and prisoners laugh in light and liberty:
with power, with justice, he will walk his way!'

Reading: Mark 1:1-8

Reflection:

In some branches of the Christian family, today, the second Sunday of Advent, is celebrated as 'Bible Sunday', when we turn our thoughts to the scriptures, reflect upon their importance, and give thanks that the word of God comes to us through the words of scripture. We affirm on this day the holiness of the book that is our foundational document

But we have to be careful. We are not here to worship the Bible. Technically, we don't really even believe that the Bible *is* the Word of God. The Word of God, we believe, is *contained* within the scriptures. It's important for us to remember that, because if we don't, and if we start preaching and believing that the Bible *is* the Word of God, then we fall into the idolatry of worshipping a book instead of the God that is revealed through it.

We probably know people who have fallen into that trap; indeed we have probably fallen into it ourselves sometimes. The most obvious symptom of Bible-idolatry is the phrase ‘but the Bible says’, as if every word in the Bible is indeed the Word of God. It comes naturally to us, if we’re not careful, to fall back on ‘but the Bible says’ as our defence in any argument - for example about ethics and morals. But when we look more closely at what the Bible says, we very quickly realise that this argument can’t be defended in any logical way.

For example, we say you shouldn’t steal, because the Bible says so in the Ten Commandments. What, then, are we to make of the incident in Exodus chapter twelve, where God colludes with the Israelites in the theft of all the Egyptians’ most valuable possessions. The Bible says you shouldn’t lie - ‘thou shalt not bear false witness’ - yet Moses was apparently happy to tell barefaced lies to Pharaoh in order to escape from Egypt. The Bible says that God encourages violence; the Bible says that the punishment for blasphemy should be death by stoning; the Bible says that those who kill the children of God’s enemies will receive blessings; the Bible says that women shouldn’t be allowed to speak in church. So - when we say ‘the Bible says’ we should be aware of all the other things the Bible tells us as well, and perhaps begin to think of a different way of approaching this holy book.

So we come to looking for another way of reading the Bible that neither asks us to believe the impossible yet still acknowledges its importance and indeed its holiness. One thing we have to avoid is what one Bible scholar calls ‘café Christianity’, that is looking through the Bible as if it was a menu, and snacking on the bits we like while ignoring the bits we don’t. That would be bordering on the dishonest, and would do nothing to help those who have been driven from the church.

In Mark chapter One, we read of John the Baptist proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. He began by appearing out of the desert quoting from the prophets ‘make a straight path for the Lord.’ What is interesting is where this John the Baptist came from and who he was, and why he thought the people should listen to his words. The gospel has given us some clues to persuade us that John is worth listening to.

John is portrayed as the messenger who has come to prepare the way for the Lord. All four New Testament Gospels interpret that prophetic phrase “messenger to prepare the way before me” as referring to John the Baptist. Mark quotes Malachi 3:1 at the beginning of his Gospel as an announcement of John’s ministry (Mark 1:2), though he attributes this to Isaiah. In Matthew 11:10 and Luke 7:27, Jesus himself quotes Malachi 3:1 to describe John. Then we’re told that John lived in the desert, wore camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. If we were to search the Old Testament for a similar character we would discover in I Kings that Elijah also came out of the wilderness wearing hairy clothing and with a leather belt.

It becomes possible to understand that the story of John the Baptist was written to point to Elijah. When we remember that that connection would be obvious to the people Mark was writing for, we can perhaps see that he was trying to make the point that John the Baptist knew what he was talking about because he was a prophet like Elijah.

The Christmas story, and indeed the whole of the New Testament, is full of those pointers to the past which the evangelists employed to prove to their readers the truth of what they were writing, and we’ll no doubt be looking at some of those signs over the next few Sundays. And by looking at the Bible in this logical way, we’ll see that, far from being a book of fantasy that has no relevance, nor one that asks us to accept the impossible, it is an account of God’s relationship with the human family that helps us come closer to the truth and to understand the reality of God’s kingdom.

Hymn

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
Awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings from the King of kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin:
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

We hail you as our Saviour, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward.
Without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

Stretch forth your hand, our health restore,
and make us rise to fall no more.
O let your face upon us shine
and fill the world with love divine.

All praise to you, eternal Son,
whose advent has our freedom won,
whom with the Father we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

Communion:

This is the joyful feast of unity.
Christ has gathered his people around the earth
to commune at this table.

Across political lines and economic lines,
in places of powerfully protected affluence,
and among the poorest of the poor,
we share a meal,
remembering and celebrating the One who proved shalom possible.

And so, we come:
from the East and from the West,
from the North and from the South.

We come.
We come with our doubts,
We come with our hopes,
We come with our inadequacies
and with our strengths.
Come everyone, for this is a table where all are invited
and all are welcome.

Welcome:

And so we gather at the table.
We come from many places,
differing in age, differing in race,
differing in politics, sexual orientation and even religion.
As we come together around the table
we discover that our differences are not something we tolerate
but that our differences are indeed a blessing,
the more difference we bring, the more fully we experience
the presence of the sacred in our midst.
So come, children of God, just as you are.
Wherever you are on this journey of life, you are welcome here,
here in this place, here in this community, here at this table.
Come, children of God, come and remember.

Remembrance:

We remember the stories that Jesus' friends tell,
stories of bread broken and shared, feeding a multitude,
stories of being gathered together, enemy and friend, around tables,
stories of unlikely guests revealing the face of the sacred.
They say that that
it was on a night of both celebration and betrayal
that he took the bread leftover on the table,
blessed it and broke it;
reminding them that it is
in the breaking that we become whole,
in losing our lives that we find them,
in serving that we are served.
As the grain scattered becomes one in the loaf,
when we eat this bread, we become one with one another.
They say that he took the cup also leftover on the table,
poured out and sharing,
remembering with them, the life-giving breath
even now pounding a rhythm through our veins,
the breath of life from whence we come
the breath that precedes and follows all that we can see
As the grapes find life in the vine,
when we drink this cup,
we become at one with the source of life itself.

Blessing:

And so we pray:
Come, holy Spirit, come.
Bless this bread and
bless this fruit of the vine.
Bless all of us in our eating and drinking that our eyes might be open,
that we might recognize the risen Christ in our midst,

indeed in one another.
Come, holy Spirit, come.

The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

This bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ. Take and eat, this is the body of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

This cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ. This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

Prayer:

Loving God, you have called us, fed us and nurtured us; now hear us as we bring before you the needs of the world:

God, hear the cries of all creation,
the cries of the waters, the air, the land and all living things;
the cries of all who are exploited, marginalized, abused and victimized,
all who are dispossessed and silenced, their humanity ignored,
all who suffer from any form of disease, from war
and from the crimes of the arrogant
who hide from the truth, distort memory
and deny the possibility of reconciliation.
God, guide all in seats of authority
towards decisions of integrity.

God, in your grace, transform the world.

We give thanks for your blessings and signs of hope
that are already present in the world,
in people of all ages and in those who have gone before us in faith;
in movements to overcome violence in all its forms,
in the deep and open dialogues that have begun
in the search for mutual understanding and respect;
in all those working together for justice and peace -
both in exceptional circumstances and every day.
We thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ,
and the assurance of resurrection.

God, in your grace, transform the world.

By the power and guidance of your Holy Spirit, O God,
may our prayers never be empty words
but an urgent response to your living Word -
in non-violent direct action for positive change,

in bold, clear, specific acts of solidarity,
liberation, healing and compassion,
readily sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Open our hearts to love
and to see that all people are made in your image,
to care for creation and affirm life in all its wondrous diversity.
Transform us in the offering of ourselves
so that we may be your partners in transformation,
to become neighbours to all,
as we await with eager longing
the full revelation of your kingdom
in the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

Hymn

Not far beyond the sea, nor high
above the heavens, but very nigh
your voice, O God, is heard.
For each new step of faith we take
you have more truth and light to break
forth from your holy word.

The young in Christ your scriptures feed
with milk sufficient for their need,
the nurture of the Lord.
Beneath life's burden and its heat
the fully grown find stronger meat
in your unfailing word.

Rooted and grounded in your love,
with saints on earth and saints above
we join in full accord
to grasp the breadth, length, depth and height,
the crucified and risen might
of Christ, the incarnate Word.

Help us to press on toward that mark,
and, though our vision now is dark,
to live by what we see.
So, when we see you face to face,
your truth and light our dwelling place
for evermore shall be.

Benediction:

God is our light, our hope, our all in all:
Blessed be God, now and forever!

Christ is our home, our life, our joy:
Blessed be God, now and forever!

Our worship concludes; our service continues.
Blessed be God, now and forever!

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