



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

Sunday 10th January 2021

Call to Worship:

We are here to worship God.

Send your Spirit upon us.

We sit in many places, we carry many burdens.

Send your Spirit upon us.

We turn our hearts to you, O God.

**Send your Spirit upon us,
and make us your beloved family.**

Prayer/Meditation:

God of wisdom and truth,
at the beginning of this new year
we look back and we look forward.

In the year that has passed
we experienced joy and we experienced sorrow;
we felt blessed and we felt challenged.
Some things went by much too fast,
and some things lingered for far too long.

Here in this place
we are reminded that you are present through it all.
We are reminded that we are never alone.
We are reminded that nothing can separate us from your love.

So at the beginning of this new year,
we pause now in silence
to reflect on the year that has passed.

We remember the things from this past year that we are most thankful for.
We recall the moments we were the happiest.
We consider the times we felt most alive.

We recognize the times we gave and received the most love.

We are grateful, God, that you were present in all those times.

We also remember the things from this past year that we are least thankful for.
We recall the moments we were the least happy.
We consider the times we felt vulnerable and alone.
We recognize the times we gave and received the least love.

We are grateful, God, that you were present in all those times too.

Gracious God,
at the beginning of this new year,
we also look forward to the year to come.
We are confident that you will be with us still,
when we are thankful and when we are not;
when we are happy and when we are sad;
when we feel alive and when we feel drained;
when we give and receive love and when we do not.

God, the world we live in is messy and challenging,
it is the world of King Herod,
a world of pain,
a world of doubt,
a world of fear,
a world of jealousy,
a world of violence,
a world of domination,
a world of injustice,
a world of human failings.

Yet, God, you are with us always.
So give us grace and give us courage
to live faithfully in this imperfect world.
Remind us always of the promise of your kingdom,
emerging around us and through us.
It is for this kingdom that we now pray,
using the words Jesus taught us.

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: Matthew 2:1-6

Hymn 187

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim:
gold of obedience and incense of lowliness
bring and adore him, the Lord is his name.

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,
high on his heart he will bear it for thee,
comfort thy sorrows and answer thy prayerfulness,
guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine:
truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness,
these are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
he will accept for the name that is dear:
mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim:
gold of obedience and incense of lowliness
bring and adore him, the Lord is his name.

Reading: Mark 1:4-11

Reflection:

This particular Sunday is the first after Epiphany, represented by the story of the Magi. Our reading from Matthew today is one of the readings for Epiphany

This is also the day when we are asked to celebrate the baptism of Jesus, in which we remember not just Jesus' humility in being baptised by John, but also John's prediction of one coming who is greater than he, and God's blessing on Jesus at his baptism when the Spirit descends on him like a dove. Our reading from Mark is one of the readings for this Sunday.

The wise men who came from the East to search for Jesus were quite specific in their request, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' There seemed no doubt in their minds, nor in the mind of Herod or his advisers, that the one they were looking for was a king. For the wise men an object of reverence and worship; for Herod a potential threat to his throne and dynasty.

In telling this story, Matthew is saying that Jesus is going to be a king, and a king acknowledged and respected not only by his own people the Jews, but also by the rich and powerful kingdoms of the east, symbolised by the wise men. Those kingdoms, it may be, that in the past had been invaders and plunderers of Israel, those nations that throughout the history of Israel had been sworn enemies were now going to accept the reign of this new king. Matthew's first point, then, is that Jesus is a king; and his second is that he will be a good king, respected by others, better, perhaps than any king the nation had ever had before. No wonder Herod was so upset.

In our reading from Mark, we find John the Baptist preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah, and proclaiming what kind of Messiah it was that he thought was on the way. John doesn't mention anything about a king, indeed, it seems that John's Messiah was expected to be a great religious leader. John himself was a popular and radical prophet. He lived a lifestyle far removed from that of the religious leaders of the Jewish faith. He seemed to be living the life almost of a vagrant and was proclaiming a message of repentance and forgiveness through baptism. Yet despite being so radically different from the Jewish religious establishment - or maybe because he was so different - people flocked from all of Judea and Jerusalem to hear him and to be baptised by him in the Jordan.

And John described the coming one as 'one who is more powerful than I'. Coming from someone such as John who in today's terms would be a celebrity, an important figure in Jewish society certainly in and around Jerusalem, this was a high recommendation indeed. 'You think I'm popular and a powerful religious leader?' he seemed to be saying, 'Well I am nothing compared to the one who is to come. I am not worthy even to stoop down and untie his sandals.'

Although John doesn't mention the word 'king', there may well have been little doubt in the minds of those who followed him that he was talking about one who was to come would fill the shoes of the great kings of Israel and Judea. In those golden years of the kingdoms, the king reigned over the political, military *and* religious life of the nation. As the visit of the magi in Matthew's gospel spoke of the king who would be acknowledged as a political leader, so John welcomed the one who would be a religious leader. A political and military king like David, and a head of the religious life of the people, also like David.

In the following years and centuries, the Christian church embraced with enthusiasm the idea of Christ the King. Hymn and song books in particular are stuffed full of images of kings and crowns and thrones, many churches celebrate a special feast on the last Sunday of the Christian year, the Sunday before Advent, the feast of Christ the King, and of course we routinely talk about the Kingdom of God.

Many nations have a history of monarchy, and even though many of them are parliamentary democracies now, it is still not too great a leap of imagination for us to connect the notion of absolute monarchy with that of a Christ who sits on the throne at the right hand of God.

In these two readings from Matthew and Mark, then, we have a king who is a leader of a nation and a king who is a religious figure. These two king figures have arisen out of the Messianic expectation of the people of the time and have been adopted and magnified by the Christian church throughout its history from the very beginning of the church, when the gospels were written, right up to the twentieth century, when the feast of Christ the King was established.

But as always when we are studying the Bible, we find that there is always another way of looking at things, and that here there is another king, a third king, which we find mentioned in the gospel according to John.. After performing the miracle of feeding the five thousand, John tells us, 'Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, and he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.' It would seem, strangely given all that we have read and said, that perhaps *Jesus didn't want to be a king*.

When we look at the way Jesus related to other people, particularly the poor, the sick and the marginalised, it seems very obvious that he didn't treat them as if he were their king and they were his subjects. The very highest status we might justifiably attribute to Jesus is that of a teacher, a rabbi. He certainly didn't behave like a king to them.

Of course we cannot say that the expectations of the Messiah described by Matthew and Mark were wrong. Nor can we say that the whole Christian church has been misguided for the last two thousand years in its reverence of Christ as King. But what we can perhaps say is that these expectations and that reverence describe only one aspect of Jesus. The idea of Jesus the King does not and should not overshadow the idea of Jesus the Teacher, Jesus the Healer, Jesus

the Carpenter, Jesus the Leader, Jesus the Friend - and all the many other images we may have of Jesus to help us understand who he was and what he did.

We are perhaps not helped by our constant use of the expression 'the Kingdom of God', because of course to have a kingdom implies that we must also have a King. Some scholars have taken to using more accurate expressions like 'God's rule' or 'God's realm', in which the gospel values of love and justice and peace are seen to be supreme without the need for a single ruling figure who holds all the power. For if there is one thing we can see quite clearly about Jesus from all of the gospels it is that he is not one who exerts power over other people. He is, as the song says, a servant king. One who allowed himself to become utterly helpless in the face of political and religious power, and whose passion for justice and peace expressed through non-violence led to his execution. In this image Jesus is a kind of anti-king who will not enforce his will, but who will teach, persuade, lead by example, and bring about God's realm not through victory and the suppression or destruction of enemies, but by converting conflict to peace, oppression to justice and hatred to love.

From heaven you came, helpless babe, entered our world, your glory veiled; not to be served but to serve, and give your life that we may live.

Prayer:

And now hear us as we bring our prayers for others: for those who look forward in this New Year to new developments in relationships, to new baby in the family, to a new job or a new beginning - bless and shield them on their way.

We pray for those who find it hard to look forward, to those whose lives are blighted by fear or despair, those chained by addiction, those caught in pain or disability, those struggling with illness, those saddened by loss - that they may know new strength, new hope, new purpose, new peace.

We pray for those who will face new challenges and opportunities - that they may be able to meet them with wisdom and courage.

We pray for those who work and battle daily to bring health and peace to people and to nations - that they will find new strength and vision.

We pray for those at war, under oppression, or in poverty - that they may know the chance of a new beginning.

We pray for our own family and friends, especially those from whom we are separated and who are much in our thoughts at this time - that your love will bring them closer to us.

We pray for the church throughout the world - that your faithful people everywhere are revived and renewed by the contemplation of this holy and hope-filled season - and for your church here, that in this community of faith we may walk forward together into the year ahead with hope and resolution, sharing one another's needs, bearing one another's burdens, listening to one another's concerns and insights, and deepening our common witness and service, so that we might play our part in bringing your kingdom a little closer to this world.

God of all life, at this new beginning, we give thanks for all those who have lived with us here and are now in your loving eternity, beyond the constraints of earthly time and space. Keep us ever in mind of them, that we may follow them, just as they followed in the steps of Jesus. May your spirit, which sang in them, sing in us until the Kingdom of Heaven rules on earth. In the name of your son our Lord, Amen.

Hymn 522

From heaven You came, helpless Babe,
entered our world, your glory veiled;
not to be served but to serve,
and give your life that we might live.

*This is our God, the Servant King,
he calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

There in the garden of tears,
my heavy load He chose to bear;
his heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but yours,' he said.

Come see his hands and his feet,
the scars that speak of sacrifice;
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered.

So let us learn how to serve,
and in our lives enthrone Him;
each other's needs to prefer,
for it is Christ we're serving.

Benediction

Let us continue to live in confidence and hope.
Encouraging those who are tired and exhausted;
comforting those who are anxious and fearful.
saying to them all:
"Be strong, and do not fear!
For God's kingdom is coming—
Indeed, God's kingdom is already here!

And may our loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us and with those we love,
today and always.

Amen.