



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

Sunday 17th January 2021

Call to Worship:

We've come to worship God,
who loved us before we were yet born,
who knows us even better than we know ourselves,
whose presence never leaves us,
and whose love for us never ceases.
This is our God.
Let's worship together!

Prayer/Meditation:

You, O God, love us from the moment of our conception,
You know us and you love us in the womb,
You love us and you call us from before the moment of our first breath,
and you love us when we first see the light of day.
As parents love their children before they ever see them,
and then embrace them gently from the moment of birth,
so you love us—and we thank you.
Help us God to love one another in this way....

You love us, O God from the time of our naming
You love us in our growing and hold us as we take our first steps.
You love us and walk beside us
as we explore the world with eager hands and eyes
As a parents love their children as they watch them grow and develop
so you love us—and we thank you.
Help us God to love one another in this way....

You love us, O God, as we mature and seek our way,
You love as we become aware of the world around us,
You love us as we smile and play,
you even love us when we say no and when we begin to stray.
As parents love their children as they see them become proud and tall,
so you love us even when we sin and fall..
Help us dear God to love one another in this way....

We thank you God for loving us when we are unloving
for caring for us when we are uncaring,
and for calling to us when we go far away....
Help us God to love one another in this way...

God, you know us better than we know ourselves.

You know our thoughts,
our weaknesses,
our motivations,
our sins.

And you love us still.

Forgive us when we don't believe such love is true or possible;
When we wonder how You could love us just as we are,
when we forget our intricate construction,
fearfully,
wonderfully made,
in Your image!

Remove from our minds every thought which keeps us from you.
Break down the walls,
push aside the pride,
and help us to trust anew.
You know our hearts.
And you love us still.

Lord hear our prayers of love this day for those around us,
for those we have held before you in our time of sharing,
and for those we have thought of in our moments of caring.

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: Psalm 139:1-12

Hymn 731

You are before me, Lord, You are behind,
and over me you have spread out Your hand;
such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too high to grasp, too great to understand.

Then where, Lord, from your Spirit shall I go,
and where, Lord, from your presence shall I fly?
If I ascend to heaven you are there,
and still are with me though in hell I lie;

and if I take my flight into the dawn,
or if I dwell on ocean's farthest shore,
your mighty hand will rest upon me still,
and your right hand will guard me evermore.

If I should say, 'Darkness will cover me,
and I shall hide within the veil of night',
surely the darkness is not dark to you,
the night is as the day, the darkness light.

Search me, O God, search me and know my heart;
try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
keep me from any path that gives you pain,
and lead me in the everlasting way.

Reading: John 1:43-51

Reflection:

In these difficult, troubled times it may be difficult for us to discern the presence of God. Indeed, we may be asking, 'Where is God in the midst of pandemic, in the midst of suffering and death, in the midst of what seems to be almost worldwide social unrest?' Is God there at all? Has God abandoned us?

We heard from Psalm 139 today, words which confidently proclaim God's presence not just here with us, but everywhere. The verses set for today's reading concentrate on God's intimate knowledge of us. Here is a picture of a God whose presence we cannot escape. Our path; our words; our thoughts; are all searched by the Living God. From even before we are born, God is with us, coming to us with precious thoughts for our welfare; thoughts more numerous than the sands of desert or sea shore.

And God is not limited to specific places or times; like sacred sites, or holy temples, or in the hours set for public worship. With full poetic flight, the Psalmist sings of the God who comes to us no matter where we are. Even at the most remote fringes of the oceans, God is there. In deep darkness, God is there. If we fly up among the stars, God will be there.

Psalm 139 does not argue a case for all this; it offers no explanation of how all this can be. It simply celebrates it. It is like a great hymn of delight in God's presence everywhere. Whether we recognise it or not, God will always be with us. Nowhere is too far, no place is too humble, no situation too dark, no circumstance too dangerous. God is with us everywhere. So affirms Psalm 139.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul perhaps takes us a step further when he writes, '*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*'

He is addressing here those who believed that God chose to reside in a special place - the temple in Jerusalem. But Paul dismisses that idea when he declares that our bodies are the temples where God's Presence chooses to reside. If God lives in a temple at all, then our bodies must be temples for God dwells within our bodies.

So here we have Paul suggesting another place where God comes to us: within our own being. 'You are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells within you'. If we want to find God, take a look within, where light and darkness wrestle for supremacy, and where light refuses to give up.

I'm not generally a great one for images, analogies and illustrations, but I do quite like the fish-tank image, which asks us to imagine God as the water in a fish tank, and us as the fish - completely dependent on the water for our very life, living *in* the water and breathing *through* the water, our physical bodies even partially composed *of* water.

The Gospel reading from John for today follows on from that moment when John the Baptist points to Jesus and says: "Behold the Lamb of God." From that time on disciples are drawn to Jesus. We read about the calling of Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathaniel, and others not named as yet.

For Christians, God's presence in the human world is illuminated in Jesus. The words and deeds, and the unique person of Jesus, are the access point for Christians in recognising God in the nitty-gritty of human experience.

Jesus of Nazareth brings God vividly and gloriously into the human world. Yes we can take assurance from the Psalm that God is there wherever we may go; we can believe - and we can often feel - that the Spirit of God resides deep within our hearts and minds. But it is in the figure of Jesus that we can truly see God in a human person. We can see the love of God, the compassion of God, the forgiveness of God, the justice of God, all in this man from Nazareth, whom we believe is the very embodiment of the divine.

God is present in, under and around our world, in Jesus and, as Paul says, in each of us.

It's true that there's much about God that remains baffling and mysterious, especially when we are facing unusual anxious times like these. Yet we are blessed, because, if we so choose, we can be open to the divine presence without fear, and we can walk in the way of Jesus knowing that, in him we find the promise that all will be well, that life will conquer death, and that love will conquer hatred.

Where is God? God is where I am; God is where you are; God is wherever we go; God is within; God is in Jesus, in whose faith we follow and in whose way we walk.

Prayer:

Reconciling God,
We pray for Your World.
May all that is divided
by doctrine or politics,
class or nationality,
be united in Your praise.
We pray for a peaceful world,
where children grow up without fear,
where security rests on trust rather than threats,
and where nations fight against poverty
rather than against each other.

We pray for all in authority,
that those who lead us,
may establish right priorities,
and that by Your wisdom and their vision
the world may reflect Your kingdom.

Healing God,
We pray for those who are ill and suffering,
for all who are worried
for those who are grieving
or experiencing trauma
and for a world gripped by the repercussions of pandemic.

May we all know
the power of Christ to sustain us
and the love of friends near and distanced to support us.
You know our greatest fears, our longings and our hopes,

sometimes these are expressed in so many different ways,
so Lord, in Your mercy,
hear those prayers.

Eternal God,
Present among us.
You are with us in our gathering,
You are with us in our distancing.
Hear our prayers,
and blend our voices together in service and praise,
united by your Spirit.

Hymn 511

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust, life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.

Benediction

Let us be ever listening for the voice of the Lord
and follow wherever it leads.
Let us offer ourselves as a temple for the Holy Spirit.
And may God be with us and speak through us;
May Christ Jesus be one with us and lead us to new life;
May the Holy Spirit dwell within us.

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

Amen.