



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 24th January 2021

Call to Worship:

The invitation is given to every person by Jesus Christ:

"Come to me! Follow me! Be my disciples!"

We come to this place, to this time,
at the invitation of Jesus Christ.

In the name of Christ,
we accept the invitation to discipleship.

In the name of Christ,
as his disciples, we worship and praise God.

In the midst of a world where cruelty abounds,
we proclaim the God of Compassion.

In the midst of despair that threatens to swallow up
whole lives, whole peoples,
we proclaim the God of Hope.

In the midst of indifference and apathy,
we proclaim the God of Love.

Come, let us worship together
and share our witness of God's living presence in the world.

Prayer/Meditation:

Our gracious, eternal God, we thank you that Jesus' call to his disciples came in such an uneventful way. Contrary to the wisdom of the world he did not start with the privileged and the wealthy and the powerful. He did not begin with those who had little need and little desire for change. He began with some very simple folk. He began with some fishermen.

We pray that his call, "Come, follow me," might again reverberate through our souls today.

May we hear again the challenge to be your disciples.

May we hear again the message of this one who brings good news.

May we hear again the invitation to come to you, "all you who are weary and heavy laden."

May we hear again eternal words of hope which tell us that however dark the world becomes the darkness cannot ever overcome the radiant light of this holy one, Jesus.

May we hear again those simple words: "Come, follow me," and may we come, just as we are, and know again the depth of your grace and love for us.

O Lord,
forgive us when we fail to respond to your call with faith.

**Through your Spirit
we stand in the assurance of your acceptance.**

Forgive us when we are shackled
by our narrow understandings of discipleship
and our clouded sense of purpose.

**Through your Spirit
we are drawn into the illumination of your empowering love.**

Forgive us when we are frightened of the future
or pull back from the demand of your calling.
Forgive us when we fail to sense your presence in our past,
to acknowledge your grace in the present moment,
and to trust you for our future.

Through your Spirit we offer ourselves in discipleship.

We stand together as your disciples.

We seek renewed and renewing faith.

Touch us now with your Spirit, Lord.

Touch us now with your Spirit.

Give us the will and the ability to bring change and transformation to the peoples of the world as did those first disciples. Give us the will and the ability to provide the same kind of hope for the world-weary as they brought to theirs. Give us the vision of a world transformed.

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: John 1:35-42

Hymn 355

Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult
of our life's wild, restless sea,
day by day his voice is sounding,
saying, 'Christian, follow me':

as, of old, apostles heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home, and toil, and kindred,
leaving all for his dear sake.

Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us,
saying 'Christian, love me more.'

In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
'Christian, love me more than these.'

Jesus calls us! By your mercies,
Saviour, make us hear your call,
give our hearts to your obedience,
serve and love you best of all.

Reading: Mark 1:14-20

Reflection:

This morning's gospel call of the disciples to become fishers of men is very well-known, but perhaps not quite so well understood.

At its most simplistic it sounds a bit like a mission to build numbers. Don't catch fish - treat *people* like fish - hook them, net them, catch them with baited words - fill the pews and when the pews are full, build another bigger church and fill that too. I am sure that is what the unfortunately misunderstood word "evangelism" has come to mean for whole branches of the Church. And yet if you listen carefully, that is not what Jesus said - and nor does it correspond with what actually happened with the disciples. That is not what Jesus taught them to do.

And did they need teaching? To a non fisherman, being offered fishing lessons probably seems completely superfluous. Throw a net into the water you catch fish. Bait a hook and throw it into the water, you catch a fish.

What is there to learn?

Well, as any professional fisherman will tell you, even when fishing only for fish, there is a lot to learn. The fishermen in Jesus time had to learn to fish at night when the nets would be harder for the fish to see - and when the fish might be attracted to a light in the boat. Certain types of fish only feed at certain times and are attracted to very specific bait. Some types of fish are found at specific depths and even at specific temperatures and at specific times of the year. These days it is even more of a science. Modern fishermen now use sea surface temperature maps generated from satellites to identify the warm patches where the fish congregate. And that is only one of a host of things a fisherman needs to know

"Come with me and I will show you how to be fishers of men (sic)".

In Mark's account, that was what Jesus was saying. But that doesn't mean simply preach at those we might invite. We have to be concerned for them as individuals, and these days we would mean men and women and note they are individuals facing unique situations, rather than as scalps or trophies.

For Jesus it was never going to be easy to use these fishermen for the tasks of the kingdom. We read in the gospels that these disciples were wilful, they were slow to understand and at times they were not in tune with what Jesus was trying to accomplish. On the other hand as they lived and worked with Jesus, they seemed gradually to wake up to what it was that Jesus was asking them to do. Of course they had doubts, and you might wonder why this did not cause Jesus to give up on them. But perhaps it was in fact that these doubts justified their selection because doubts are essential to honest thinking. As Tennyson wrote in his poem dedicated to his late friend, Arthur Hallam, In Memoriam :

Our little systems have their day;

They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

... and later in the same poem.....

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

We cannot turn Jesus' teaching into a simple formula that leaves no room for thought or doubt or we may overlook the way Jesus himself approached others.

Jesus showed by illustration and actions that the so called heretics of his day, the Samaritans, should be treated as individuals and that if for example the despised Samaritans showed compassion, this was to be genuinely valued. His disciples are called to share these same attitudes in living out their mission.

Jesus showed by his actions he was more interested in the spirit of the law than the detail. If compassion was called for, this for Jesus took precedence over any imagined conflict with religious custom. In learning the Jesus way, Jesus' focus on liberation and on renewal, had to become part of his disciples' activity. This too was part of effective fishing.

Presumably his followers also have to see that a concern for justice is part of what we now call the Christian message. We can for instance see that since Jesus showed a real focus on concern for the poor, that we who claim to follow Jesus, but who just happen by accident of birth and opportunity to be living in the rich West, we also need to learn to be awake to the injustices visited on the poor. Why else might the poor be uninterested in what we have to offer if we are not genuinely concerned with their plight?

With lepers now far less common, today's untouchables may well be those trapped in addictions. Our modern-day Samaritans may just as easily be those of other faiths or atheists speaking words of ridicule.

One of the sad things about traditional Christianity is that it is slow to react to change and is often left behind when trade policies or environmental issues are being debated. To win hearts and minds, at a minimum, religion must be seen as relevant to current issues. This is why a strong presence of the church has to be involved in debates like genetic engineering, like climate change, like food production, like sustainable energy policies. When for example the Catholic Church waited until 1991 before admitting Galileo was right(!?), and took almost to the same date to pronounce on Darwin it is another way of telling the general population that the Church is happy to be left behind in the modern world.

Conversely when Christian agencies are among the first to set up aid in a disaster area, or when the current Pope weighs into the current problems, the Christian message wins the right to be heard.

Perhaps all of us who are called to discipleship have to learn that we too have to take a message of responsive action as well as words if our evangelism - our fishing - is to have any integrity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian executed in 1945 for his resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany; his words continue to tug at the heartstrings is because of his self sacrifice. I don't know whether Bonhoeffer thought of himself as a fisher of men (and women) - yet from the number who claim to have learned their faith from his example, he appears to have mastered his part in the fishing trade.

In his day Jesus called a cross-section of men and women to mission. Today the need is probably as strong as ever, since the need for compassion, for justice, for those concerned for

others and a concern for the planet itself is as urgent as ever. The call for those prepared to share the tasks for the kingdom, may have changed in form - and the specific tasks and challenges change year by year and even day by day. How the fishing is to be done in a modern age must be continually relearned, but we remember that the gospel only has our present generation to depend on - and as for all the generations in the past, the success of this gospel depends on.....well... those like us.

Prayer:

Eternal God,
you are the maker of us all, and we are your creation,
people formed in your image, as individuals, as community;
formed and fed and furnished with understanding of who you are

and of who and whose we are.
We worship you today in recognition of your calling,
of your communicating,
of your caring to invite us to share in your creative and healing work.
We are here because we have heard you speak in us and through others.
Help us, dear Lord, to ever respond to you
and your invitation to your grace...
Lord hear our prayer...

God of all our moments, of our days and our nights,
you speak and you act in the world around us,
not only to call all people to you,
but also to direct and guide us in the way of healing and wholeness.
Awaken us Lord, to hear what you would say to us.
Help us to open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts to your presence.
Help us to know when it is your voice we are hearing
and it when it is our prejudices and desires to which we are paying heed....
Lord hear our prayer...

Lord, we pray that your church may rise up with renewed commitment
in answer to your call,
that your people may be instruments of your grace and love....
Lord hear our prayer....

We pray for those who consider themselves inadequate
and dismiss or avoid your calling in their lives.
Give them a new vision,
a vision in which you are their strength and their hope...
Lord hear our prayer....

We pray for those who, in answering your call,
must leave the known for the unknown,
the oasis for the desert, the comfortable for the uncertain.
Grant them courage and steadfast faith...
Lord hear our prayer....

We pray too, today, O Lord, for those in want and need -
for those of us and of the larger community who suffer in body or in soul.
Lord, hear our pray.....

Loving Father, bless us all with an abundant faith,
a fruitful ministry, a joyful life.
Bless us and all those who gather together to continue the work of Jesus,
who came to heal, save, and deliver us all,

Hymn 558

Will you come and follow me
if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown
in you and you in me?

Will you leave your self behind
if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare,
will you let me answer prayer
in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide
if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around
through my sight and touch and sound
in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.
In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.

Benediction

Jesus stands and asks:
“Who do you say I am?”
We join millions who have gone before
and say: “the Messiah”

Jesus stands in front of us
and tells us the realities of discipleship
We join millions who have gone before
in the challenges of living as disciples.

Jesus stands before us
and offers food and drink for the journey.
Fed and nourished,
we go out into the world to live and serve.

Jesus stands before us, shining in glory,
and will be with us to the end of the age.
Thanks be to God.

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