



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

Sunday 15th August 2021

Call to Worship:

This is the day the Lord has made
Let us rejoice and be glad in it
It is good to give thanks to the Lord
For his love endures for ever

Let us share with God and with one another our hopes for the world:
a world in which all people are treated with tolerance and respect;
a world whose resources we gladly share with each other and with the generations to come;
a world in which it is possible to live together in peace and love;
a world of freedom, justice and harmony;
a world of justice, compassion and hope.

Prayer/Meditation:

God of all creation
who gives life to every being
who is mindful of humankind in all its diversity
and whose divine image is shared by all people,
granting different gifts and talents to shape life in this world:
we ask for your Spirit to unite us
where we face lack of understanding and disunity
among faiths, among communities, among nations.

We ask for your Spirit to unite us
in the face of the conflicts, hatred and violation of life
experienced in so many regions of the earth
and we bring to you the pain of the victims.

We ask for your Spirit to unite us
in these times of sickness and infection,
when the world is paralysed by fever and fear
and your people are united only by their anxieties,
and we bring to you the suffering of nations.

We ask for your Spirit to unite us
wherever fear prevents us from caring for our neighbour,
from meeting people of different ethnicities, cultures
and faith communities with respect
and we bring to you the brokenness of human relationships.

God of all creation,
in Christ we are reconciled,
and so we ask for your uniting Spirit
to help us to overcome all our divisions
that we may live in peace.

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: Romans 12:1-21

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Hymn 531

Lord of all hopefulfulness, Lord of all joy,
whose trust, ever child-like, no cares could destroy,
be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,
your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.

Lord of all kindliness, Lord of all grace,
your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,
your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.

Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

Reading: Matthew 16:21-26

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

The Cross and Self-Denial

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Reflection:

The Christian Church is an ancient and venerable institution. For two thousand years it has fulfilled the spiritual need of a growing proportion of the human family, even though sometimes its influence on the world has not been for the good.

Yet in spite of all its weaknesses and failings, the church has continued to help people - particularly those whose lives seem otherwise to be miserable and without hope. We might think, as an example, of those victims of the slave trade in the 16th to the 19th centuries, snatched from their homes and put to work in dire conditions in a foreign land who, in the decades before the abolition of slavery, clung on to the Christian faith as their only hope. Those slaves who sang songs about a God who would one day come and set them free from their misery, who would carry them away to a better place. Such was the poverty of their lives that they expressed their faith in terms of a heavenly kingdom after death when they would be freed from their pain and suffering. So bad were their lives that they could see no hope of comfort in this world.

For the abject poor and those without hope there must have been a great attraction in a religion that promised an after-life of rest and rejoicing. And, although we have used slavery as an example, there are millions in the world today where the same is true. Homeless, jobless oppressed people who can see no hope for a better life in this world, and who come to put their faith in the promises that the Church offers them for a better future. What's in it for such people? Hope.

But what about us here in the affluent West, in a society where everyone has the right to be cared for, where, although the care offered is often woefully inadequate, no-one should be left to starve or freeze to death. What's in the Church for us, who are not so desperate to be relieved of the burden of life, who can see a stable future ahead of us, and who have the food, shelter and clothing that we need, we who are paid adequately for the work we do and live in a society where the exploiters and oppressors are finally brought to justice?

It is perhaps no surprise that the decline of the Christian church in this country has coincided with the increased affluence of most of the population. Records show that church attendance has been declining in fits and starts for over a hundred and fifty years. The decline has been uneven, because there have been revivals in times of national crisis like the first World War. But in the twentieth century the decline grew more rapid. This is paralleled quite closely by the benefits to society that have been brought by industry, science and technology. At first industry brought oppressive working conditions which over the years were improved with the

building of model villages like Bourneville or Port Sunlight - and over the years the church declined. In the twentieth century science and industry advanced faster than ever before, and the church declined as never before.

Could it be, perhaps, that the provision of secure employment and comfortable conditions - and the establishment of a welfare state - have answered our needs to the point that religion has become unnecessary? That when we ask the question about the church - what's in it for me? - the answer comes, 'Nothing. I have all I need without having to fall back on the promises of religious faith.'

Let's take a look at this morning's scripture readings and see if they can shed any light. In Matthew chapter sixteen, Jesus is saying to his disciples: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*' This, it has to be said, is not very encouraging reading for anyone who is asking 'what's in it for me?'. It sounds a bit like Winston Churchill's speech to parliament in May 1940 when he said, 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.' Nor is this the only time in the gospel when Jesus suggests that being a follower of his is not an easy proposition. 'Don't become a follower if you're not prepared to make a commitment', he says at one point, and goes on to suggest that kings and politicians don't make big decisions without first thinking about the consequences. He tells a story about a rich man having a feast, and one by one his invited guests drop out because they have things to do, more important things, important to them anyway. So it would seem that, whatever is in the Church for us, it is not something that we should take on lightly, because there will quite possibly be difficulty along the way.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, has an interesting word to say about all this. He speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ. He says, *'We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.'*

Now, here we are getting close to an answer to the question, 'What's in it for me?' Jesus' response is to say that those who follow him share in his mission, and quite possibly share with him the disappointments, hardships and persecutions, and in order to truly follow they have to give up personal hopes and aspirations of comfort and wealth and security and many of those things that today we find so important and necessary. For Jesus, it seems, all that his followers gain is the chance to share his mission and an invitation to the banquet of the Kingdom of God when the mission is complete.

But Paul gives us an answer. When we are part of the Church, we are part of the Body, 'individually, we are members one of another'. The Church is often rather glibly referred to as a family, but for Paul that's what it is, or in fact it's a body of people even closer than a family. United in a common mission, members of the church are all together part of the same thing, each playing a part in the mission of the Kingdom of God. Not simply sitting back and hoping that one day things will be better for them, but committed to the gospel that proclaims that things can be better for everyone. Not sitting back and saying, 'I have everything I need now, so I'm satisfied with life', but rather acknowledging that the Kingdom does not arrive when we have all we want, and that in a world of need and suffering there is still a lot of work to do to bring true quality of life to millions of suffering people.

And because we are all part of the same thing, we look out for one another. Because human life, even in the most affluent of circumstances, is not always an easy ride. There is illness, there is unexpected financial hardship, there is bereavement, there is loss and there is loneliness. As part of the Body together we support, encourage and build one another up. And *that*, if anything, is what's in it for us; to be a part of a community that cares.

First and foremost we are part of the church because we want to *give* ourselves to the mission of the Kingdom. A consequence of our commitment to give is the benefit of *receiving* the same love and care that we offer to others.

It may be that another factor in the church's decline over the years is that the Christian faith is getting more difficult. It is not now, if it ever has been, simply a system of belief to which we can say yes or no. It is a way of living together as the Body of Christ; a way of working together for the Kingdom of God; a way of sharing together in the trials and troubles of every member; a way of receiving the help we need as we work out our own mission and service; and, above all, a way denying ourselves but trusting in the community of God's people and uniting to realise Jesus' mission of a New World of life and freedom for all people.

What's in it for me? A vision of hope, not just for me, but for everyone.

HYMN 497

Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart
and a discerning mind:
give, as I play the Christian's part,
the strength to finish what I start
and act on what I find.

When, in the rush of days, my will
is habit-bound and slow
help me to keep in vision still
what love and power and peace can fill
a life that trusts in you.

By your divine and urgent claim
and by your human face
kindle our sinking hearts to flame
and as you teach the world your name
let it become your place.

Jesus, with all your Church I long
to see your kingdom come:
show me your way of righting wrong
and turning sorrow into song
until you bring me home.

Prayer

You may, like me, have recently been enjoying watching the Olympic games, and admiring both the athleticism, the dedication and the comradeship and respect of participants from all over the world. The 'Olympic Creed' was written by the founder of the modern Olympic games, Pierre de Coubertin, and I was interested to discover that his words are based on a sermon he'd heard in church.

The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.

Perhaps the same can indeed be said about the Christian faith.

Let us pray:

Loving God, we pray today for women and men engaged in all areas of human endeavour and improvement. We give thanks for those who have provided excitement, entertainment and example as they have worked, trained and competed to achieve the highest standards of physical achievement in sport.

We pray for those engaged in the fields of technology and communication, whose skill and curiosity have enabled us to keep contact with loved ones all over the world, to have instant access to all kinds of information and learning, and to move towards a cleaner and less damaging relationship with the natural world.

We pray for those whose calling is to care for the sick, and those who strive through scientific research to find means of curing the world's deadliest diseases. For doctors, nurses and carers, and for all whose priority is the wellbeing of others.

We pray for those whose working lives are providing us with the necessities of life, those who produce, process, deliver and sell the food we eat and the clothes we wear; those who ensure that we have clean water to drink; and those who supply the power that keeps us warm.

We pray for those in our world who are without the necessities we take for granted, whose endeavour is not to be the fastest, the highest or the strongest but whose priority is simply to remain alive and healthy.

And we pray for those closest to us, those who remind us that, while we live in an electronic, technological world, we live also in the human world, the world of relationships, the world of care and compassion, friendship and love.

And we pray for ourselves. May we endeavour day by day to be what we are created to be, seeking not victory but faithfulness, not triumph but grace, and running the race fairly and honestly until the kingdom of God is fully come.

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Hymn 496

Fight the good fight with all thy might;
Christ is thy strength and Christ thy right;
lay hold on life, and it shall be
the joy and crown eternally.

Run the straight race through God's good grace,
lift up thine eyes, and seek his face;
life with its way before us lies;
Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.

Cast care aside; and on thy guide

lean, and his mercy will provide;
lean, and the trusting soul shall prove
Christ is its life, and Christ its love.

Faint not, nor fear, his arm is near;
he changeth not, and thou art dear;
only believe, and thou shalt see
that Christ is all in all to thee.

Benediction

May the love of God
which gives life to the world, sustain us;
May the bread of life, Jesus Christ,
feed us with the food that endures to eternal life;
May the power of the Holy Spirit
nourish and strengthen us in faith.

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