



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 22nd August 2021

Call to Worship:

We come to worship this morning in different places.

O God, do not be far from us.

We come to worship this morning for different reasons.

O God, do not be far from us.

We experience the presence of the Spirit in different ways.

O God, do not be far from us.

We hear Jesus' words with different ears.

O God, do not be far from us.

“Deny yourselves.”

O God, do not be far from us.

“Take up your cross.”

O God, do not be far from us.

“Follow me.”

O God,

**we thank you for drawing near to us
in our places,
in our lives.**

Prayer/Meditation:

Beauty is your dwelling place,
God of the starry hosts!
My spirit yearns and aches
to make all my life worship.
My mind and heart sing for joy
in the presence of the living God.

Like the common sparrows,
we want a home under your eaves.
Like swallows we will build our nest
where we may raise our young.
Close to your altars, God of hosts,
near you, our most regal Friend.
Happy are those who live with you,
every moment is a song of praise.

Happy people draw strength from you,
their heart is set on your highways.
As they travel through the valley of tears

they make it a source of refreshment.
They find streams of hope and renewal,
and pools filled with spring rains.
They go from strength to strength
and see God on the mount of prayer.

God of the starry hosts, hear us,
turn and listen, God of Jesus.
See how small are our defences,
shine on us with the face of Christ.
One day in your house is better
than a thousand anywhere else.
I would rather be your doorkeeper
than a pampered guest of the wicked.

God is both our sunshine and shelter,
freely giving grace and honour.
No helpful gift is held back
from those who walk lovingly.
O God of the starry hosts,
happy are those who trust you!

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 2:12-16

Hymn 56

Creating God, your fingers trace
the bold designs of farthest space,
let sun and moon and stars and light
and what lies hidden praise your might.

Sustaining God, your hands uphold
earth's myst'ries known or yet untold;
let water's fragile blend with air,
enabling life, proclaim your care.

Redeeming God, your arms embrace
all now despised for creed or race;
let peace, descending like a dove,
make known on earth your healing love.

Indwelling God, your gospel claims
one family with countless names;
let every life be touched by grace
until we praise you face to face.

Reading: John 6:60-69

Reflection:

The question addressed on a recent radio programme featuring an atheist and a bishop was about how we cope with the traumas and difficulties of the human condition. The bishop of course wanted to look at the human condition from a Christian perspective. He noted that religion has for many centuries been the foundation on which people have built their ethical and moral standards, their relationships with the rest of society and indeed their very outlook on life. It has been religion that has very often steered the progress of humanity.

The atheist agreed with all of this and, being a rational person who was prepared to see the good about religion as well as the bad, acknowledged the significant beneficial contribution that religion has made to human development. Her argument was that it is no longer necessary, and that belief in God is redundant for all practical purposes in today's world.

It was an interesting debate, and all the more interesting because the atheist and the bishop found substantial areas of agreement - mainly that humans need *something* to underpin their lives and serve as a foundation on which their attitudes, relationships and responses can be built. That something, claimed the atheist, could be a religious faith, but *need* not be. She suggested that a passion for the well-being of all humanity - humanism - could be just as strong an influence on people than any belief in God.

This raises a very interesting issue about the ways in which we believe the things we do, and the reasons why we believe the things we do. For many people of faith - Christians and of other faiths - the choice is between what is true and what is false. We take it almost for granted that what we believe is true (we wouldn't want to align ourselves with anything we thought might be *untrue*), and from there it's a short and perfectly logical step to come to the conclusion that someone who believes something different must be wrong. Faith, then, becomes a matter of truth against falsehood. We can see that throughout the history of the Christian Church. Some of the Church's darkest moments have come when it has insisted that its understanding of human life and faith is the only true understanding; and it may be that, even in these more tolerant times, we nonetheless think of ourselves as defenders of truth against the falsehoods of secularism and other faiths.

When we look at our faith and its relationship with other beliefs as conflict between truth and falsehood or right and wrong, then we virtually exclude any element of choice. How could it be right for anyone to choose any expression of faith other than ours when ours is right and others are wrong? And is it not therefore part of our calling as guardians of the truth to encourage or persuade other people to join us in our beliefs? To warn people of the folly of embracing any other faith than ours? Indeed, to believe that only when all people share our beliefs with the world be a completely safe, completely just, completely peaceful place?

Maybe the whole question is much more complex than trying to find what is true and, having found what we believe to be the proper expression of truth, aligning ourselves with that and then believing that we have the truth. Let us suppose that in our own thoughts and experiences of the world, we have realised that the question of peace is of fundamental importance, because only in a peaceful environment can human potential be fully realised; and we can say the same thing for justice, and for love and kindness and consideration and selflessness - all the qualities that make for a good fulfilled life for all people. And then we try to find a way of expressing our hope and our desire and our passion for those qualities. In Paul's letter to the Romans, in the part we read this morning, we find Paul making the startling suggestion that even the Gentiles (that is, people of other faiths than Paul's, or of no faith) may be living in obedience to God's law simply by following their conscience.

Some people will be humanists, they will see no need for any kind of religious faith and no need for any kind of organisation like a church. Others will decide that that religion of some kind is the most appropriate expression of their beliefs, and being part of a like-minded community is a helpful way of finding support and encouragement when life becomes difficult; some will prefer a religion that provides guidelines or even rules for living that will help them to know which attitudes and actions are appropriate and which are not; others will prefer a more free kind of faith community that encourages its members to explore for themselves the big questions of life. The point about all of it is that, having identified what are our basic beliefs about human existence, we then choose a way of expressing those beliefs and sharing them with other people.

In our reading from the gospel according to John this morning, we heard of a small incident in which a number of Jesus' disciples made the choice to leave him. They made their choice, and they went, without apparently, any words of condemnation from Jesus. They were, like everyone Jesus encountered, free to decide for themselves what they thought about him, and to make a commitment to follow or not as they decided.

But those who decided to follow did so because they felt they could do nothing else. When Jesus turned to Peter and asked, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Peter replied, 'To whom could we go? You have words of eternal life.'

Peter, it seems, was so captivated by Jesus and his teaching, so utterly convinced by what Jesus said and did, that he couldn't think of anyone he'd rather be with.

So there is revealed perhaps in this little incident the process of commitment to discipleship. There is first a choice - to follow Jesus or not to follow Jesus - then there is a decision - to make a commitment to him or not to make commitment to him. And that commitment became the life-changing experience for Peter and the other disciples and many who have followed Christ since that time.

So where does all this leave us with our atheist and our bishop? It warns us of the danger of thinking that Christianity is the sole possessor of truth and goodness. We can

find truth and goodness aplenty even in the godless world of humanism; we can find truth and goodness in many if not all of the world's faiths. But by our upbringing, our culture or our own exploration into faith, we have chosen the way of Jesus Christ. And having made that choice, we have continued to explore, now in company with other Christian people, the teachings of Jesus about the Kingdom of God, the example of Jesus in relationships with others, the understanding of Jesus of the love of God, and we have seen that, for us, Christianity is a rich and full expression of the view we have of the world, the hopes and dreams we share for the future of the human family, and the truth we perceive of God and the world.

So we have chosen to be Christian, and having done so, we have made the commitment that Peter and all the others made - to not just accept the Christian faith, but to cling to it, to make it the centre of our lives. For we believe with a passion that it can be the way to a new and better world.

We share substantial parts of our worldview with our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu brothers and sisters, we share our hopes with them for peace and justice and love - and with our humanist brothers and sisters too. But we have chosen to express those hopes in a Christian way, because we have seen in Jesus something that resonates with us, something that calls to us, something to which we are willing to make a commitment, because we believe that the Christian way is our way to the world we hope for and desire for all people.

HYMN 525

He comes to us as one unknown
as, by the Galilean lake,
he came to those who knew him not:
he speaks the same words, 'Follow me',
and comes to set us to the tasks
he will fulfill in our own time.

As he commands and we obey,
he will reveal himself to us
in conflicts, toils and sufferings
encoutered in his fellowship.
In our expreience we shall learn,
as deepest mystery, who he is.

Prayer

Creator God, we thank you for the amazing diversity of your creation.
So much life, expressed in different forms, living in a huge variety of ways.
We thank you that this diversity is expressed in human life, people all made in your image, yet
living, believing and hoping in different ways.
Many gather together, expressing shared beliefs, as part of faith communities.
We give thanks for churches, gathered communities of people of Christian faith witnessing to the

way of Jesus Christ.

In the richness of your creative diversity, we give thanks for faith communities who gather together to express shared beliefs that may be both similar and different to our own. We confess that this diversity sometimes makes us feel uncomfortable, unsure and reluctant to meet with people of other faiths.

Help us to be Christ-like in meeting those of other faith with openness, warmth, welcome and affirmation.

Help us to have conversations that balance listening and speaking, that enable both involved to grow in understanding and which lay, or build on, foundations of trust.

If we have the opportunity to work alongside people of other faiths, help us to take it, for when we work alongside others, we come to know them.

Help us to be Christ-like, not only in what we say, but also in what we do.

When we have the opportunity to witness to Christ, give us his grace to do so and to allow people to choose what their response will be.

When we witness to Christ, give us the grace to listen to others witness to their faith.

We pray for people of all faiths and none who have fled from their homes because of war and violent conflict.

We pray for those who have left their own country and who seek refuge and safety in other countries.

We pray for families who are homeless, or living in temporary camps. We pray for the nations who enjoy peace and security that their governments and people may respond with compassion, generosity and wisdom.

In our listening, speaking and activities with people of other faiths, may we discover the joy and encouragement of similar approaches, understandings and practices and be ready, recognising great diversity, to accept that we may not agree, but we can be friends.

So help us to follow Christ, stepping out to meet people of other faiths and beliefs, greeting them and treating them with the love and compassion shown by Jesus to all he met.
in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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 605:

Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
Christ, our Head, who, throned in glory,
for your own will ever plead,
fill us with your love and pity;
heal our wrongs, and help our need.

As you, Lord, hast lived for others,
so may we for others live;
freely have your gifts been granted,
freely may your servants give.
Yours the gold and yours the silver,
yours the wealth of sea and land,
we but stewards of your bounty,
held in trust as from your hand.

Come, O Christ, and reign among us,
King of love, and Prince of peace;
hush the storm of strife and passion,
bid its cruel discords cease;
by your patient years of toiling,
by your silent hours of pain,
quench our fevered thirst of pleasure,
shame our selfish greed of gain.

Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
in your love you prayed the Father
that your people should be one,
grant, O Christ our hope's fruition:
here on earth your will be done.

Benediction

In all the paths we walk
may God hold us steady and close.
May Christ Jesus bless us and every place we enter.
And may the Spirit give us length of days and fullness of life.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be wth each one of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more.
Amen

