



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

Sunday 29th August 2021

Call to Worship:

Come all who are weary,
weary of wealth, of poverty, of power, of struggle, of division
Come all who are heavy-laden
with too much, with too little, with anxiety, with fear, with anger
Come all who have hope
for liberation, for peace, for freedom, for the kingdom
Hear these words
“See, I am making all things new.”

Prayer/Meditation:

Gracious God,
as a mother loves her child, so you love us.
For that great truth
we praise and thank you.

We owe our very lives to you.
You have watched over us from our birth,
tenderly nurturing us,
showering us with love.
When we have needed you, you have been there.
For that great truth
we praise and thank you.

You have given us strength in times of need,
comfort in times of distress,
encouragement in times of despair,
guidance in times of uncertainty.
Whatever we have faced, you have been with us.
For that great truth
we praise and thank you.

Gracious God,
we have not always appreciated your love,
all too often ignoring what you would teach us,
disobeying your instructions,
taking you for granted and wandering far from your side.
Yet through it all your love has remained constant.
For that great truth
we praise and thank you.

God of all Living and Loving:
How pleasant it is when women, men, and children
live together in unity!
How noble is your creation and the world that you have made!
How blessed we are to receive the gifts of life and love!

We are thankful for families,
where scattered piles of stuff testify that we live fully in the moment;
where the noise of laughter and the silence of sadness are freely shared;

We are thankful for families,
where we find sanctuary from danger and judgment;
where words of love and openness are the rule of life.

We are thankful for families,
where our differences are the spices of life;
where our unity is something that we can always take for granted.

We grieve for families,
where violence and rejection are living realities;
where hearts are broken, and dreams are shattered.

We grieve for families,
where walls of protection become fortresses of isolation,
where language is a weapon of destruction and hate.

Help us to understand,
those families whose identities are different from ours;
the ways of loving, parenting, partnering
and working together for peace.

Help us to dare,
to stand strongly against hate and divisiveness;
to encounter our differences with love and respect.

This we believe:
that love is stronger than hate;
that hope is stronger than despair,
and that good is stronger than evil.
In the name of the One who is Loving and Living,

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 148

Hymn: 187: Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Reading: Matthew 6:7-18

Reflection:

I have encountered many many Christians, often church members of faithful church attendance and long standing, who have expressed a problem with prayer. It seems that, for many church people, the most difficult thing about being a Christian is the whole business of praying. For some, it has been *how* to pray: what words to use, if any, what kind of frame of mind to be in, what circumstances are best for offering prayer. Should one be alone in the silence? Should one go to a special place or pray at a special time? Should one speak out loud or simply pray in silence?

For others there are deeper questions: What is prayer all about? What is its purpose and what is its effect? Does prayer make any difference and, most crucially, how does it work?

In many ways, prayer is something we take for granted. It is something so fundamental to the Christian faith that we feel inadequate and embarrassed if we have questions about it. From the very moment we are old enough to be prised from our parents and taken into Sunday School or Junior Church, we find ourselves in situations where a minister or leader will say the words 'let us pray'. We know that we're supposed to adopt a reverent pose, kneeling down or hands clasped in front of us - almost always we are advised to close our eyes. And we are probably taught that prayer involves talking to God. We may have heard children's talks in church over the years that involve telephones and satellites and other metaphors of communication designed to explain to us what prayer is and how it works, but for many people there is an uneasy feeling that these simple images, while they might be fine for the elementary Christian education of children, leave a lot of questions unanswered and a lot of doubts unresolved.

Much of the Bible takes prayer just as much for granted. Paul tells his readers to 'pray constantly', but gives no advice on how that's to be done. Only in the Lord's Prayer do we find anything like in-depth advice on prayer, and so this week, and in the few weeks to come, we will have a close look at the Lord's prayer to see if we can find some enlightenment not just on the subject of prayer, but on the mission priorities of Jesus and the religious culture in which he lived and worked.

We will look over the next few weeks at the various clauses of the Lord's Prayer to see if we can discover what the words meant to Jesus and his followers and what they might mean to us today.

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name.' There are three nouns and one verb in that short sentence, and really every one of them deserves a sermon of its own. What did Jesus intend to convey, when he suggested that his disciples should pray to

'our Father', and what do we imagine today when we use the image of God as Father. There are certain obvious points. A Father in society of Jesus' time was one who creates, provides and disciplines. In a male dominated society it is the father who is the head of the household, who makes the decisions, and whose word is final. Yet a Father also has a duty to provide and to care for his family, to protect his children from danger and harm and to offer them a secure environment in which to grow up. It takes little imagination to see that this perception of fatherhood - to our minds rather primitive - would be not unlike the same society's perception of God - also rather primitive - that God can be seen as a divine father, the ultimate creator and the ultimate provider. And this father, furthermore, is the father of all people and all things. Psalm 148, a hymn to the creator, paints a picture of God in terms so much broader and more sweeping than the word 'father' can convey. In the psalm, God is responsible not just for people, but for all things, even monsters and fruit trees, and all places, the earth and the sea. This God described in the Psalm is so big and so all-encompassing that the word 'father' - a word that we use to describe a human man - becomes somehow too small and too tainted by human weakness to properly describe God.

As with almost every word we use to describe God, 'father' is no more than a metaphor, and, as with all metaphors, it is partial and incomplete. So when we say the Lord's Prayer, we are doing so, hopefully in the knowledge that the God to whom we pray is more, far far more, than the word 'father' can convey. We use it as a convenience, not as an accurate description. So we might say that the category in which we put that word is not the 'taking it literally' category, but in the 'extract the underlying meaning' category. We know what it means, but we also know how much more it means.

'Our father, which art in heaven'. Heaven is a hugely difficult concept for us. It wasn't so difficult of the people of Jesus' time; they believed that God lived somewhere else. We can't believe that heaven is a place, a physical place that is a happy land far far away and that's where God lives. Our experience tells us that if God is to be found anywhere it is in the nitty gritty of our own world; when we pick up our prayer telephone to talk to God the area code is 01206; God dwells in our midst and also in heaven, which we call God's Kingdom. Again we can turn to Psalm 148 and see where God's kingdom is. It is in the sun and moon and stars, in earth and ocean, in fire and hail, snow and ice, with kings and commoners.

In order to come even close to describing God, we must not define God by where we think heaven might be, but rather define heaven by where God is. To say that God lives in heaven is almost to put God in a box, but to say that where God is, *there* is heaven, is to release God into the complete breadth and depth of the universe.

'Hallowed be thy name'. Again we can go to Psalm 148 to see why that should be. From the great powerhouses of the stars, to the frightening violence of storm and tempest, to the beauty of mountains and hills, to the variety of land and sea creatures, to the detail of tiny insects, to the social and cultural mix that is humanity - all are

included in the creation of this God. And in the face of this spectacular and awesome universe, with all its power and all its mystery we say, 'Hallowed be thy name.'

Next Sunday we will say, 'Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

HYMN: 355: Jesus calls us o'er the tumult

Prayer

Living God, we praise you for all that is good and precious in human life; the value, potential and uniqueness of every individual.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for all those whose humanity is abused and exploited - victims of violence, torture and rape,

children drawn into the world of prostitution,

people addicted to drugs,

those living under corrupt and oppressive regimes.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those whose humanity is diminished by prejudice and discrimination, subjected to insults, intimidation, hatred and suspicion, day after day denied justice, time and again deprived of the opportunity to prove themselves.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those denied the chance to fulfil their potential, whether through lack of education, insufficient resources, or denial of their human rights.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those whose lives are blighted by need, burdened by debt or unemployment, oppressed by poverty, hunger and homelessness, crushed by natural catastrophe or personal disaster.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those who have lost their belief in their own worth, overwhelmed by self-doubt, beset by inner fears, their confidence broken, their faith in the future destroyed.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those who mourn at the loss of loved ones,

life suddenly seeming empty of meaning
and stripped of joy, and we pray for those who battle against sickness and disease,
unable to live life to the full, and fearful as to what the future may hold.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

Living God, grant that the day will come when the worth of all will be recognised,
the rights of all respected,
the good of all pursued,
and harmony among all enjoyed.

Reach out in love, and show us how we can respond to the needs around us.

For our family of humankind

hear our prayer.

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: 458: The Son of God proclaim

Benediction

Eternal light shine in our hearts.

Eternal goodness deliver us from evil.

Eternal power be our support.

Eternal wisdom scatter the darkness of our ignorance.

Eternal pity have mercy on us

that with all our heart and mind

and soul and strength we may seek Your face

and be brought by Your infinite mercy into Your holy presence

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