



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 8th August 2021

Call to Worship:

In the darkest valley,
at the banquet table;
in the hard work of life,
at the moments of ease;
in our day-to-day reality,
at times set aside-
like this time, now-
for worship, for listening, for paying attention;
with every step we take:
goodness and mercy follow us;
our cups overflow.

So come and let us worship and lift our hearts . . .
Not because the world is good and last week was filled with joy,
but because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it,
the God of the whole Earth.

Come let us worship and raise our voices in praise . . .
Not because our lives are all sweetness and light,
But because even those who walk in darkness
can see a great light,
the light of Christ

Come let us worship and bow down . . .
Not because God gives us what we want,
But because God gives us what we need -
the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Prayer/Meditation:

When nothing is right,
when we are weary and lost,
when clouds dull the sky,
help us to be still.

When our cries are unheeded,
when no effort bears fruit,
when the sun sets,
help us to be still.

When love is over,
when hope is gone,
when darkness covers the land,
help us to be still.

When sickness spreads through every nation,
when all the world is worried and afraid,
when work dries up,
and futures are uncertain
help us to be still.

For in being still,
in refusing to panic or despair,
we shall come to know that God is there,
suffering alongside and with us,
waiting to show us stepping-stones through the swirling waters,
and to help us sing a new song.

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: Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Hymn 275: God's glory fills the universe

Reading: Mark 6:6b-13

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷ He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹ If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Reflection:

There's a popular understanding of Christianity that it's all about knowing the answers to all of life's questions. 'Jesus is the answer' as the slogan goes.

I remember once being introduced to someone whose first words to me were: 'Ah, you're the minister, are you; maybe you'll be able to answer me this. Is it true that if you travel away from the earth in a straight line, you'll eventually arrive back at the point you started from?' Now, I do remember reading some book which said something about this - to do with Albert Einstein, I think it was, suggesting that the universe is curved and that a straight line will indeed eventually bring you back to your starting-point, but questions like this I think are more to do with cosmology or astrophysics than anything we're likely to have tackled in theological college. So needless to say I had to confess that I didn't know the answer, but what I thought was interesting was that this person who had no obvious church background or experience would assume that *that* was the kind of question that could be answered by a minister of the church. But, thinking about it, it's no more strange than the view that Jesus is the answer to every question or that the solution to any puzzle or problem can be found in the Bible.

Now I know that there are many Christian people who like to regard the Bible as almost a book of rules, certainly as a guide for living, but it does become very difficult to regard it in that way when you encounter the many ambiguities and even contradictions within its pages. For example we find Jesus saying that he has come not to change the Law but to fulfil it, and that not even the tiniest part of the law will ever pass away; but then we also have Jesus saying, 'the Law says that , but I'm telling you *this*. It seems that in the Bible we have not a comprehensive and detailed blueprint for a life of faith, but rather a book of clues to help us. And if we see the Bible in this way then it changes our whole outlook on what the Christian life is like. It's not about looking up the right answers and following the right rules in order to live a life of faith in obedience to God. It's not about answers at all; it's about living with the questions, knowing that there will always be things we don't understand and questions we can't answer. Think, for example, of the age-old question of evil. It's very simply asked: 'Why does a world created by a God of love contain so much evil and suffering and pain?' It's not so easily answered without making God look like some kind of tyrant. Why do we say that Jesus died on the cross to pay for the sins of the world? Easy to ask, but hard to answer without making God look cruel and unforgiving.

These, among many many others, are questions that, as Christian people we have to live with, and if we live with them believing that we should know the answers and that there's something wrong with our faith if we don't, then we will have a very difficult and frustrating time of it, we will feel inadequate, like failed Christians, and we may be tempted to give up our faith altogether because we simply don't know all the answers we think we should. But if we do feel under pressure to know all the answers, we should be aware that knowing the answers isn't a requirement that Jesus ever insisted on when he was teaching his disciples.

Look at what Jesus said to those he called. Walking on the shore of the Sea of Galilee he met a group of fishermen and he said, 'follow me'. Throughout his ministry he kept travelling around and he kept saying, 'follow me'. And when they followed, he didn't teach them all the answers, he took them on a journey on which he taught them about the Kingdom of God, and even then he didn't teach them in a way that equipped them to know the answers; he taught them by giving them clues, telling them stories which began with the words, 'the Kingdom of God is like this'... And he would go on to tell a story about a woman who had lost some money or about a farmer who was sowing some crops, or about a man who was mugged on a mountain road or about a shepherd who had lost one of his sheep, or about a wedding reception, or about a boy

who runs away from home, or about people who work in a vineyard or about people building barns or houses.

He didn't gather people to him and give them classes, rather he travelled and they went with him. We see many clues in the gospels that suggest to us that being a follower of Jesus is much more about travelling with him than about learning answers from him. His whole ministry was one long journey through towns and cities from Bethlehem where he was born to Jerusalem where he died, and it was as he travelled that he pointed things out to his disciples that they might learn from: the way the farmers sowed their fields, the way the Pharisees said their prayers or the way people treated the poor.

And he sent the disciples out on their own journeys too. We read this morning from the gospel according to Mark of his sending them out into the towns and villages to tell the people there what they knew about the Kingdom of God.

Today we, as the disciples of Jesus in our own place and time, are sent into the world to continue the journey with Jesus, and we can do so confidently because we know that we follow one who is, as the letter to the Colossians says, the image of the invisible God. We acknowledge that we cannot know God in every detail, that we cannot know all the answers about God and the world, but we rejoice that in Jesus of Nazareth we have the greatest clue of all about what God is like, for we believe him to be the most God-filled person that ever lived, and if we want to know what it is to live a truly Godly life, a life lived the way a life should be lived in perfect relationship with God and the world, then it is to Jesus that we must look and listen.

So, just as the first disciples did all those centuries ago, we follow Jesus on his journey to the Kingdom of God. There will be many questions for which we can find no answers, and many times when we feel that we are too stupid, too inadequate, too ignorant or too selfish to truly walk with Jesus. But we can be encouraged by the example of the first disciples who often got things wrong or became confused and were often selfish, that knowing everything is not what it's all about at all. It is about remaining faithful to Jesus even when we don't quite understand what's going on in our lives or in the world around us. It's about acknowledging that in Jesus we see the image of God, and so it is above all to him we should look for inspiration and encouragement in our faith. It's about realising that the bible contains the words of God but it is not the object of our worship, so we cannot expect it to have all the answers, but we must still take it seriously because within it are all the clues we need to serve God and to follow Christ.

And finally, there will be times when we will be expected to have the answers; there will be times when people will ask us (or we may even ask ourselves) why does this or that happen; why does God permit this or that; why is there injustice, cruelty and suffering; when will the Kingdom of God come.... And we won't know the answer to any of it. And we might feel ashamed or inadequate because of that. But there is nothing to be ashamed of or to feel inadequate about in simply saying 'I don't know.' We are on a journey of discovery with Jesus and there are many things we have not discovered yet. We journey with Jesus into the mystery of God, learning a little each day, finding clues and following them; rejoicing that in him we see the image of God; enjoying the adventure and not worrying that we don't know it all.

HYMN 318: Not far beyond the sea

Prayer

Merciful God,
In love You created us,
and in love You sustain us, day after day.
So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to You,
knowing that You will hear and respond.

We pray for those who are estranged from spouse or family,
friends or neighbours;
who find it difficult to forgive past wrongs done to them;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who for years have carried feelings of guilt or regret
for something they did or something they neglected to do;
who find it difficult to ask for forgiveness or forgive themselves;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those who find themselves far away from You,
struggling to overcome their doubts or disillusionment,
and who wonder how to find their way back;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those watching someone they love try to cope
with serious illness or injury,
and who long for comfort and healing;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For the many others in our world who are suffering this day—
from grief, or loneliness, hunger, poverty, violence or illness;

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Sustain all those who look to You in hope.
And strengthen us—Your people—
so that we may be a light to all those who find themselves in darkness.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

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 549: One more step along the world I go

Benediction

We are called with all peoples into God's presence,

and we are sent out into the world:

We are not too young or too old,
we are not too rich or too needy
to bring good news to those who will hear,
to give a hand to the broken-hearted,
and to live out freedom and forgiveness
through the gifts we have been given.

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