



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

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

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Call to Worship:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,  
**to sing praises to your name, O Most High:**  
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,  
**and your faithfulness by night,**  
to the music of the lute and the harp,  
**to the melody of the lyre.**  
For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;  
**at the works of your hands I sing for joy.**

Prayer/Meditation:

We approach our worship today giving thanks that worship is part of our lives, and the church community a place we can feel confident and secure whatever our mood or circumstances. When we are sure in our faith and confident in ourselves and in our God, in worship we can affirm the truth of what we believe and what we are; when we are troubled by doubts and uncertain of the value of faith, in worship we can be reassured and strengthened; when we are happy with our lives and content in our circumstances, in worship we can give thanks for the blessings we enjoy; when we are unsettled and wishing for more from life; in worship we can be challenged and inspired; when we are gladdened by the beauty and the wonder of the natural world, in worship we can give thanks; when we are depressed and shocked by the conflict, cruelty and hatred we see every day, in worship we can find the strength of love. May our worship today meet our needs, may it be an inspiration, a comfort and a challenge; may it be an offering of all that is good in us and a cleansing of all that is wrong with us; may our singing, our speaking, our praying and our listening be an expression of the people we are and an affirmation of the faith we profess, and may the Spirit of Christ be known to us, making us more acutely aware of the mystery that is God and more conscious of the love that surrounds us, that, our offering of worship done, we may feel renewed, refreshed and ready to serve God in every part of our lives.

We believe that we are called to love our neighbours as we love ourselves; to testify to the reality of our faith through the love we show to others. It sounds like a wonderful idea, but so often when we come down to putting it into practice we find that we are not up to it.

We acknowledge our failure to live up to that calling, the lost opportunities and wasted moments, the angry words and unkind comments, the thoughtless deeds and careless actions - all the ways we have denied God through what we have done.

We acknowledge those times when we have ignored those in need - too preoccupied with our own affairs, too concerned with our own comforts, too protective of our own interests - all the ways we have denied God through what we have failed to do.

We acknowledge the times when we have brought sorrow rather than joy, hurt rather than healing, despair rather than hope, doubt rather than faith.

We seek forgiveness for the love we have failed to show, the care we have failed to express, the support we have failed to give, the pardon we have failed to offer.

May we take the opportunity for cleansing and renewal; may we attempt to put failure and wrongdoing behind us; may love be recreated and restored within us, so that we may learn to love others with the forgiving unconditional love that we see in Jesus, and may our eyes be opened to the presence of the spirit of God around us and within us that we may see the truth and value of love, and may we go out in the name of Christ to live and work as he has taught, and to love as he has shown.

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: Exodus 3:1-6

Hymn 71: O God of Bethel

Reading: Matthew 6:7-18

Reflection:

It isn't clear from the English text of the Lord's Prayer whether Jesus was giving his disciples a few words of advice about the way they should be praying, or dictating a script to them that should be followed to the letter. The translations which claim to be the most literal just have Jesus saying 'pray like this', which of course could be interpreted in either way. There is no record of Jesus using the words himself as a prayer but nonetheless, the church has taken these words of Jesus and has been using them in public worship probably since Christians first began to gather together. So long have they been used, and so long have we been using them in our own personal experiences of worship, that the words probably roll off our tongues without needing any careful thought behind them. So over these few weeks, we're trying to take some time to examine, clause by clause, those ancient words to attempt, not just to uncover their meaning, but to explore their relevance to us and our world.

One of the difficulties of taking the Lord's Prayer in that way is the same as the difficulty we have of looking at only a few verses of scripture in sermons week by week. We have to be careful not to lose the context, and to make sure we are aware that there may be relevant verses on either side of the ones we are addressing. And that is true of the bits of the Lord's Prayer we're looking at today: '*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*' This phrase of course follows on immediately from the one we looked at last time - *Thy Kingdom come* - and can be seen as a development of it.

We suggested before that Jesus saw God's Kingdom as something that was close, not far away, and could indeed be seen in the world around. In the stories Jesus told and in the life he led, in his relationships with those around him and in his unstinting dedication to his mission we see the kingdom of God at work. So if the Kingdom of God is not something so distant as to be almost unattainable, then how is it to be achieved? How and when can God's Kingdom come in our time and in our churches? *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. This is, if you like, the next part of Jesus' mission manifesto. Those parts of the Kingdom of God that are already present and visible, Jesus seems to be saying, are present and visible because they are places where the will of God is being done. God's will being done in heaven. The challenge of the

prayer then, is the desire for God's will to be done on earth - in our own circumstances, among our own society and in our own time.

That's reasonably straightforward. God's Kingdom will come when God's will is done. The hard part, of course is to discover how we can know what God's will is. We are all well aware that a great part of the world's strife and suffering over the centuries has been caused by people and groups of people claiming to have insight into the will of God, and therefore feeling justified in imposing their beliefs on others. If it is the will of God it must be right for the world, and therefore if it entails a bit of conflict and killing along the way, then that's only because the end justifies the means.

It would seem from Jesus' words to be a crucial part of establishing the Kingdom of God, that it is above all where God's will is done, yet history shows how difficult it is to know the will of God and how disastrous the results can be if wrong assumptions are made.

In a simpler time, perhaps, we may have been more ready to take someone else's word for it. In our reading this morning from the Old Testament book of Exodus there was no difficulty in accepting that God spoke directly to Moses, outlining in quite some detail God's plan for the people. Moses would go off up a mountain, have a person-to-person conversation with God, come back down and explain to the people what the will of God was for them. From chapter three of Exodus through to chapter fourteen, almost every chapter begins with the words, 'Then the Lord said to Moses.' The will of God was easy to know and understand, because the will of God was communicated directly from God's mouth to Moses' mind, and what Moses was able then to relate to the people was nothing less than the will of God.

Imagine if today someone said that they'd had a direct conversation with God. Even a prominent leader of Christians - Pope Benedict or the Archbishop of Canterbury. They are likely to be met with mockery and ridicule, because our understanding of God is different now. However we are to determine the will of God in today's world, it is not through the personal statements of any individuals no matter how respected they may be.

Similarly, it is difficult for us to turn to the Bible for a comprehensive explanation of God's will, to use it as a guide book for life in the twenty-first century, for we know something of the background to much of the scriptural writing, and realise that a letter, for example, written by Paul to encourage faithfulness in the face of persecution may have a general relevance in revealing the faith and beliefs of the early Christians, but won't be so much help in trying to determine the details of Christian life today. The cultural gulf is so wide, the society in which we live is so different, so much time has passed, and the challenges and decisions we face today so far removed that it is impossible to look at some of the detailed advice Paul gives about, say, worship or family life and say: 'That is the will of God for us.'

This once again illustrates, as if we need to be reminded, that living a Christian life today is not an easy thing to do. We have a delicate balancing act to perform, holding, on the one hand, to the scripture and tradition of the Christian faith, the doctrines and beliefs of the church that have been developed and adjusted over the centuries and handed down to us by our ancestors in the faith; and, on the other hand, maintaining a faith that is real and alive and relevant for the twenty-first century, a faith that is credible in an age that is so full of miracles of technology that it would have been beyond the imagination of the people who wrote the Bible or those who established and nurtured the Church in earlier times.

So when we gather month by month for church meetings, or when we meet every year in a General Assembly, or when the various branches of the church convene in synods or conventions or whatever their particular ruling bodies may be - or when as individual Christians we are faced with difficult and potentially life-changing decisions about money, or employment, or family life - we do so seeking the will of God. We do so bearing in mind this prayer that is central to the life of every Christian and every Christian Church - *Thy will be done*. But we do

so knowing that, in our seeking out the will of God, we need to rely on more than the guidance of the past - either from church leaders or even from the Bible. Where do we find God's will?

A trivial example: Suppose on arrival at church one Sunday morning you are slightly later than usual. You drive into the church car park and discover that there is but one parking space left. You know that nowhere in the Bible does it say: *Thou shalt not park in the Minister's space*, so you have to base your decision on something else.

Faced with any decision in church or personal life, we can only approach the problem by looking again at the teaching of Jesus, and by asking a series of questions. We know fairly clearly the thrust of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God. We know from the many stories Jesus told, what life in the Kingdom of God is like, we know how people treat each other and we know what the priorities are. Justice, peace, valuing other people, even those we don't like, putting the good of others before our own desires, bringing the good news of the kingdom to others, serving instead of being served, expressing love in all our relationships. All these things and others must be the basis for our seeking the will of God. So when we are faced with any decision about which we feel we need guidance, then our guide is those priorities. We look at each possible outcome and say: 'Is it just? Is it loving? Does it hurt anyone? Does it help or hinder the common good? Is it selfish?' And having considered all possibilities, we make our decision. Some Sundays you might feel justified in parking in the minister's space; other Sundays you might feel that the minister has more need of it.

Seeking the will of God is one of the many reasons it's important for a Christian community to worship together Sunday by Sunday. The will of God is not handed to us on a plate; the Bible is sadly not a book of instructions for every eventuality - life would be so much easier if it was. But week by week, by immersing ourselves in the ongoing life and worship of the church, we become more and more familiar with the personality and the mission of Jesus, and through his example and teaching, we come to discover the way to seek God's will. It's a joint effort in which we are all involved; it is part of the work of the Church, and no wonder that it is such a central part of the Lord's prayer, for it is in that seeking and exploring that the work of the Kingdom is achieved. *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Next time we will explore how God provides us each day with our daily bread.

HYMN 578: Lord of light, whose name outshineth

Prayer:

We give thanks for the constant presence of God in our lives - whether we see and acknowledge it or not; for the encouragement, strength, challenge and renewal that come to us day by day.

We give thanks for the experiences of priests and prophets, judges and patriarchs, disciples and apostles, all those of whom we read in Scripture whose lives were changed by a new-found faith.

We give thanks for the Church all we share within it - through music and prayer, preaching and worship, mission and service.

We give thanks for the natural created world - the people we meet, the sights we see, the sounds we hear and the experiences we go through.

We give thanks for the image of God in Jesus. We see it in his life and work, hear it in his preaching and teaching, experience it in his death and resurrection, and feel it in his living presence.

We give thanks for the Spirit of God within us, inspiring, comforting, teaching.

And as we give thanks for God's gifts, so we pray also for those for whom God seems far away, silent and powerless.

We think of those known to us who are facing difficult times - battling with illness, wrestling with depression, anxious about the future, grieving for loved ones - those for whom life is a

puzzle, even a burden, and who long to find hope and some way of making sense of their confusion.

We think of those who feel far from God - burdened by doubt, overwhelmed by temptation, crushed by failure - those who want to know God, but who find it hard to see or hear God in the cruelty and conflict of the world; those who seek to serve but are weighed down by a sense of their own weakness, their lack of faith and their repeated mistakes.

We think of those who seek guidance - who feel unsure of the way ahead, uncertain of their ability to face the future, unclear about what they should be doing or what their choices might be; all who are asking God to lead them forward, yet who still have no clear sense of their own calling.

We think of the poor and the weak, the vulnerable and disadvantaged in society - those denied their rights, their dignity, their freedom, their livelihoods - all who long for a time when peace will be established, but who have given up believing it ever will be.

We know that there are many in the world crying out for help from God who seem to receive no response - some because they do not expect to receive any, some because they are not ready or willing to listen, some because they do not understand or recognise the voice of God when they hear it, but many genuinely and unurgently longing for an answer. May they find what they seek, receive what they need, and may we be moved to speak the right words, do the right things, offer the right responses; listen, act, pray, speak and give at the appropriate times, that we may fulfil our small part in God's mission of bringing comfort and peace, hope and love. In Jesus' name. amen

Hymn 345: Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah

Benediction

May we run and not be weary.

May we rise up on the wings of eagles.

May we know without doubt

that the everlasting God goes with us!

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