



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

Sunday 10th October 2021

Call to Worship:

God touches the world,
and the world changes.
God touches us,
and we are transformed.

In the brightest of day,
in the deepest of night,
on mountain,
in valley,
everywhere.

In this time, together,
we invite God
to open our eyes
to the transformation
of our lives.

And through the change -
we worship God.

Prayer/Meditation:

Let us give thanks for the remarkable gifts
of God's creating and redeeming love,
the loving that casts out all fear.

For the love that frees us to ask questions and explore,
to frame doubts and investigate new possibilities,
to build theories and then cross-examine them.
We thank you, God of adventurous love.

For the love that enables us to marvel at our own existence,
to ponder and remember,
recognize our own needs
and affirm our own knowledge and purpose.
We thank you, God of determined love.

For the love that helps us to communicate with one another,
to express trust and respect,
share heartaches and visions,

to convey love and mercy.
We thank you, God of reconciling love.

For the love that inspires us to warmly encourage those around us,
to affirm and build up, comfort and enlighten.

We thank you, God of nurturing love.

For the love that liberates us to celebrate the world around us
in poetry and song,
to delight in shapes and colours, intricacies and patterns,
awesome forces and deep mysteries.

We thank you God of visionary love.

For the love that encourages us to express something of our faith;
for creeds and prayers, hymns and readings,
discussion groups and sermons.

We thank you, God of creative love.

Above all else we thank you
for the love that allows us to admit
that we have no words in which to adequately describe
the process of faith in Christ,
the awesome worship of our God,
and the holy wonder of the Spirit.
We thank you for that point where
our love becomes wordless adoration.
Through Christ Jesus,
who is the pure glory of your loving.

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: Psalm 104:1-13

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honour and majesty,

² wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

³ you set the beams of your^[a] chambers on the waters,

you make the clouds your^[b] chariot,

you ride on the wings of the wind,

⁴ you make the winds your^[c] messengers,

fire and flame your^[d] ministers.

⁵ You set the earth on its foundations,

so that it shall never be shaken.

⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
⁷ At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
⁸ They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
⁹ You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.
¹⁰ You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
¹¹ giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
¹² By the streams^[e] the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
¹³ From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

Hymn 95

God is love: let heaven adore him; God is love: let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before him, and exalt him with one voice.
He who laid the earth's foundation, he who spread the heavens above,
he who breathes through all creation, he is love, eternal love.

God is love, and is enfolding all the world in one embrace;
his unfailing grasp is holding every child of every race;
and when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod,
that same sorrow, that same aching wrings with pain the heart of God.

God is love: and though with blindness sin afflicts and clouds the will,
God's eternal loving-kindness holds us fast and guides us still,
Sin and death and hell shall never o'er us final triumph gain;
God is love, so Love for ever o'er the universe must reign.

Reading: Matthew 13:44-51

⁴⁴ 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.'

Reflection:

It is perhaps hard to think of the church as fashionable or trendy. It's more likely that we think just the opposite of the church, that in a rapidly-changing world, where the latest trends often fill us with baffled confusion, the church is an anchor of stability where we can retreat from the madness and console ourselves with the familiar, but the world of theology and spirituality does have its fads and fancies just like any other area of human life.

When I first went to theological college at the very end of the 1970s, Liberation Theology had just passed its peak. Liberation Theology had originated in South America, was taken up by theologians from Africa, and dealt with the relationship between God, the Church and the poor and oppressed. It looked at Jesus' words to the poor and about the poor, and highlighted the ideas of freedom and release from oppression.

After Liberation Theology came Feminist Theology, Green Theology, and a revival of Celtic Theology, each having a period of popularity which produced many studies and books before making way for the next theological trend. It is a bit unfair, maybe, to describe these as fads and fancies, because each of them has made a lasting contribution to the church's understanding of itself, and has emphasised an important aspect of Christian theology which needs to be kept in mind in order to achieve a balanced understanding of God's world and our place in it.

An approach to theology that is currently popular is what has become known as 'narrative theology', which is concerned, very simply, with telling stories. Narrative theology is in many ways a response to trends in our society. The church is coming to realise, as are many traditional institutions, that there is less and less of an interest in or a hunger for large organisations which present people with a ready-made set of beliefs, which they are encouraged to accept as they are. Many people want to relate their beliefs and understandings to their own lives and lifestyles, to hold to political or religious views that are meaningful to them, and discard religious or political views that they feel are wrong or irrelevant. This makes it difficult for churches and political parties and any organisation which presents a set of beliefs for people's acceptance or rejection. A lot of people may be, for example, happy with the Christian idea of helping people in need, but unwilling to accept the Biblical understanding of creation, or the divinity of Jesus, or the doctrine of the Trinity. It's the same in the world of politics. Reading any party manifesto we will find things with which we agree and things to which we are opposed. Party membership, like church membership, is in decline, because people are reluctant to ally themselves to the whole package.

Into this scenario, where even Christians might include elements of Buddhism or Hinduism into their world view, comes narrative theology, and attempt to understand God and the world by listening to each other's experiences, by hearing each other's stories.

In one sense, this is nothing new. The Bible is full of stories, told and written in societies where stories were the means of communication the nation's history, where stories were the way of explaining the way the world is, where stories were the means of understanding the relationship between societies and their gods. There was, in ancient times, no other way of conveying information but to tell stories. No writing, printing, no radio, no electronic communication - only the telling of stories. And much of the Bible is the written record of what had started out as stories told by one generation to the next.

In Psalm 104, for example, we find a poem that expresses the story of God's creative power. It's a well-known Psalm which, like a lot of scripture, we can easily allow to wash over us without really taking it in. But there is at least the possibility that its impact is renewed and strengthened when we regard it as someone's story. Long, long ago in the mists of prehistory, there was someone who was so moved by the power and splendour of the natural world that

they had to express their story in this poetry. This person saw power greater than anything humans could achieve, saw the thunder and the lightning, the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the mountain streams, the vegetation and the wildlife, and realised that there was something great behind it all, something this person knew as The Lord. And this poem is this person's story. And how much more alive the Psalm becomes when we stop looking at it as a statement of religious faith or even as a bald description of the faith of a society, and start looking at it as one person's response to the world around them.

When we look at the New Testament, the same is true. The life of Jesus of Nazareth is wrapped up in stories. Indeed, the gospels *are* a story, or a number of stories, written by people who had heard the stories about Jesus and thought they were so important that they needed to be recorded for all time. And again they are stories that come alive as soon as we realise that's what they are - stories. Scholars of the New Testament tell us that some of the episodes we read about from Jesus' life may be records of things that Jesus actually said or did, while others may be embellishments of real events and others may be made up to present a picture of who Jesus was and what he was doing. When we look at the gospels from the point of view of narrative theology, the historical accuracy doesn't matter. We're not reading the stories to learn history; we're reading them to share the experience of those who are telling them, to put ourselves in the shoes of people whose lives were changed when they heard the stories that Jesus told.

For that's another thing, of course. Jesus' teaching technique was based on stories; stories to which people could relate. Again and again he began his stories by saying 'the Kingdom of God is like this'. And the people who heard them, used to living in a story-telling society, knew they were stories. No-one said of the shepherd with the lost sheep, 'Where did he live?', or of the Woman with the lost coin, 'What was her name?', or of the prodigal son, 'How far did he travel?'. They were just stories, told to illustrate a truth about God and about the world and about God's Kingdom.

The question that arises now, of course is, 'Does this all make any difference? Does this idea of narrative theology have any impact or relevance to us in the church?' Well, yes it does.

Anyone who attempts to tell us the facts, as they understand them, of God and the world is likely to be viewed with suspicion because what they have to say may mean very little to us, may have very little to do with our own experience, and may be presented as if it were the only true thing in the world. We are far more likely to be responsive to someone who says, 'listen to what happened to me', 'here's my story'.

And so it is that when we try to find ways of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom we won't likely get very far if we simply read up on traditional Christian belief and theology and then try to pass it on to other people. In proclaiming the Good News we are called to be witnesses. A witness is not a teacher, not someone who has learned something from a book and passes it on to others, not someone who has studied a subject and offers the benefit of their learning to others. A witness is someone who has seen or heard or experienced something themselves and relates that experience to others. A witness is someone with a story to tell.

Narrative theology, then, for all it may be a trend or a fad, is a way of looking at the Bible through the experiences of the story tellers and finding it coming alive for us, and it is a way of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom with energy and personal relevance - a way of letting us tell not just the story of God and the world, but *our* story too.

HYMN 319

Thanks to God whose Word was spoken in the deed that made the earth.
His the voice that called a nation, his the fires that tried her worth.
God has spoken: God has spoken: praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose Word incarnate human flesh has glorified,
who by life and death and rising grace abundant has Supplied.
God has spoken: God has spoken: praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose word was written in the Bible's sacred page,
record of the revelation showing God to every age.
God has spoken: God has spoken: praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose word is published in the tongues of every race,
see its glory undiminished by the change of time or place.
God has spoken: God has spoken: praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose word is answered by the Spirit's voice within.
Here we drink of joy unmeasured, life redeemed from death and sin.
God is speaking: God is speaking: praise him for his open word.

Prayer:

God, your faithful love surrounds us,
and we give you thanks
for the gift of life, and the gift of new life,
and for the many ways you sustain and nurture us.

We come before you this day,
some of us tired and hungry,
looking for your word to sustain us,
your spirit to comfort us.

Some of us come bruised and sore,
looking for healing,
longing for wholeness.

Some of us come despairing,
wondering what has happened
and where the joy of life has gone.

Some of us come with heavy hearts,
praying for young people harmed by those who should protect,
praying for those who look different and so are suspect,
praying for a world on edge, tense with fear and hate and violence.

We come,
looking for good news in the midst of the world's bad news.
We come,
seeking forgiveness for our wrongs,
seeking to know your presence when we feel so alone,
seeking to know your heart and will for a world with so much need.

In the silence, we offer you our prayers, and we listen for yours.

Let your grace rain down on us, O God.
May we be surrounded by your love, your peace, your hope.

Open our eyes and our hearts to see you in unexpected places,
guide our hands to show your love.

You are a God of surprises,
a God of peace, a God of hope,
a God of love.

When peace is fragile, **stay with us, Lord.**
When tempers are raised, **stay with us, Lord.**
When atrocities occur, **stay with us, Lord.**
When forgiveness is rejected, **stay with us, Lord.**
When talks break down, **stay with us, Lord.**
When agreements are broken, **stay with us, Lord.**
When darkness weighs upon us, **stay with us, Lord.**
When we cannot see you, **stay with us, Lord.**
When burdens feel too heavy, **stay with us, Lord.**
When hope seems faint, **stay with us, Lord.**
When we are weak, **stay with us, Lord.**
When faith seems difficult, **stay with us, Lord.**

For all who have lost hope, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who suffer, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who are sick and in pain, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who are struggling, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who have been badly hurt in life, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who are grieving, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who are depressed, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who feel rejected, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who feel unloved, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who are oppressed, **walk with them, Lord.**
For all who are anxious, **walk with them, Lord.**

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.

Hear our prayer, loving God, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 574

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!
God's saving news to all the nations take:
proclaim Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord and King,
that all the world his glorious praise may sing.

Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all;
he will in grace respond to all who call:

how shall they call if they have never heard
the gracious invitation of his word?

Go forth and tell! The doors are open wide:
share God's good gifts-let no one be denied;
live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,
your ransomed powers for his sole glory use.

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, arise!
Go in the strength which Christ your Lord supplies;
go till all nations his great name adore and serve him,
Lord and King for evermore.

Benediction

Let us go, confident in the knowledge of God's steadfast love for us, assured of the healing
touch of Jesus upon us and emboldened by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within 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