



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 17th October 2021

Call to Worship:

We are called from the ends of the earth,
we are called from the centre of our lives.

Men and women, young and old,
rich and poor, strong and weak.

We are called into God's love
to yearn for justice and to pray for peace.

The world belongs to the Lord,
the earth and all its people.

How good and how lovely it is
to live together in unity.

Love and faith come together,
justice and peace join hands.

Lord, open our lips
and our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we begin worship now, hoping to grow, hoping to learn, hoping to be enabled to cope with the difficult challenges we face every day, hoping that, through our study of the gospel of Christ we might understand more fully the way the world works and discern with more clarity our place in it, hoping to catch the vision of a new and different world, a better world, the world Jesus teaches of.

Loving God, we address you as 'you' because our language has not the words to describe the relationship between God and creation. We know that we are not simply addressing another person, but rather are directing our thoughts and feelings and concerns outward beyond us and inwards to the depths of our hearts. We worship and pray not because we expect the world to be changed or our lives to be directed by some divine ordinance, but because we need to express the way we feel about ourselves, our relationships and the world we live in; we need to share together our faith that in Jesus of Nazareth we see a better way of relating to other people and a better way of understanding the world.

And we turn our thoughts now to our own weaknesses and omissions, not because we expect some magical cleansing of our souls, but because we need to face up to what is wrong with us in order that we might change. We pray for forgiveness knowing that we need to forgive ourselves and allow ourselves to start afresh.

And so we call on the purpose of God to enfold us now.

God, be present in our activity and our stillness.

We call on the presence of God to be with us now.

God, be present in our gathering and in our parting.

We call on the power of God to meet us now.

God, be present in our thinking and our speaking.
Faithful God, you are loyal to your people always,
forgive our betrayals of you and of each other.
Covenant God, you remember your people always,
forgive our forgetfulness of you and of the poor and the broken.
Active God, you love your people always,
forgive our failure to do your will and to cherish creation.
Living God, be present in power to fulfil your purpose.
How complex life is,
Always we face challenges that seem beyond us.
We are caught in a web of relationships
Which too often become sterile,
Or irritating
Or just a formality.
We face work which is demanding
Too often with impatience
And little joy
Watching the clock.
We hear the cries of a broken world,
Too often with despair
Or a sense of futility
As though we can do nothing to help.
And so we seem to ourselves
Shallow people
Just ticking over the calendar
And not going anywhere.
That is not what you created us to be.
Grant us the spirit of hope infusing our lives,
So that what we have been
May not determine what we shall become.
In Christ, may we draw closer to you
In constant pilgrimage.

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: Jonah 2:1-9

Hymn 108:

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.
God leaves us free to seek him or reject him,
he gives us room to answer 'yes' or 'no.'

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,

wide as the wind, and an eternal home.

We long for freedom where our truest being
is given hope and courage to unfold.
We seek in freedom space and scope for dreaming,
and look for ground where trees and plants can grow.
Chorus

But there are walls that keep us all divided;
we fence each other in with hate and war.
Fear is the bricks and mortar of our prison,
our pride of self the prison coat we wear.
Chorus

O, judge us, Lord, and in your judgment free us,
and set our feet in freedom's open space;
take us as far as your compassion wanders
among the children of the human race.
Chorus

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

Reflection:

Each of our two Bible readings today is a story about a man of faith, and each reveals, in a different way, the existence of doubt in their minds. The relationship between faith and doubt is something that probably worries every Christian from time to time. There are inevitable questions that come into the minds of even the most faithful Christians. What if my beliefs are in some way mistaken? What if the religion in which I've been putting my faith for my whole life turns out to be flawed in some way? What if I'm wrong?

Jonah had his doubts when he was called by God to go to the city of Nineveh and prophesy against it. So much so that he decided to run away rather than fulfil his calling. It's not that Jonah had any doubts about God. We remember that the story of Jonah was written for a people who were familiar with the notion of prophets who spoke directly to God. There was no suggestion, as there would be today, that such people were suffering from delusions, hearing voices, or trying to deceive people with their claims. No, there was no doubt that Jonah was in contact with God, and no doubt therefore of Jonah's faith in the existence and the presence of God. This is clear from his prayer, which we read, while he was in the unpleasant predicament of having been swallowed by a big fish. It was, he says, God who brought him to this by casting him away, out of God's presence, and it is only God who can rescue him from it.

Jonah's doubts were not about God, but about the wisdom of God's dealings with the people of Nineveh. Jonah had been called to prophesy destruction to the people for their evil, but he knew perfectly well that God would relent and forgive if the people repented. Sure enough they did, and Jonah felt that he had been made a fool of because his prophesy had failed to come true. And he sulked about it for the rest of his life.

Jonah was never in any doubt that God was with him, but he doubted God's wisdom and disagreed with God's love and forgiveness.

Peter is a far more complex character, and here in chapter 14, Matthew sums up Peter's character in a little episode set out on the lake. As usual with stories of miracles, we are better not to get in to discussion about whether they happened in the way the gospel describes, or indeed if they happened at all. Did it happen? and Did it happen like this? are not the questions that Matthew is answering.

In this little episode, Matthew paints a picture of the kind of disciple Peter was. There is no doubting his faith. There he is with the other disciples out on the lake in their boat. The weather is rough, and they see Jesus walking towards them on the water. Peter's faith in Jesus is such that he expresses no surprise at seeing this miracle, but rather, having seen it he wants to be a part of it. There seems no doubt in his mind that if Jesus can walk on water then he can too, so he says, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He steps out of the boat and walks towards Jesus, but the wind is so strong and the water is so rough that he becomes afraid and begins to sink. He calls out, 'Lord, save me!' and Jesus reaches out and catches him. Then Jesus says a strange thing, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

Jesus' words seem strange to us because we generally interpret this story to mean that it is Peter's faith in Jesus that keeps him afloat, as it were. When his faith in Jesus suddenly slips, then he begins to sink and has to be rescued. But that can't be the case because when Peter is sinking it is Jesus to whom he calls for help. If his faith in Jesus was shaken, why would he call to Jesus for help. And if his faith in Jesus remained strong enough to know that it was Jesus who could help him, then what were his doubts?

Peter's doubts were not about Jesus, but about himself, and although the scenario of walking on water is not something we are familiar with, we can nonetheless identify with Peter's feelings. He has set out from the relative safety of the boat into the unknown. He has set out at his own request with the encouragement of Jesus. And he has very quickly reached a point where he is asking himself, 'What on earth am I doing? This is just foolish and dangerous!'

Peter's doubts, then, were not about the power or presence of Jesus, but about his own ability to trust Jesus in a dangerous situation; Jonah's doubts, we remember, were not about the presence and power of God, but about the task God had called him to undertake.

For many Christians today, however, doubts are much more fundamental than that. Our world of science and technology seems to leave little room for God and, even worse, our secular society seems to have little need for God. The vast majority of people, at least in our part of the world, seem able to live happy and fulfilled lives without having to resort to faith. For many, indeed, it's not a case of faith versus doubt - more that faith in God is primitive and unnecessary. And it's living in such a society that sometimes leads Christians to have their doubts. There has developed in recent years a whole industry of atheism in which non-believing scientists have produced book after book (and probably made lots of money) casting doubt of the validity of Christianity.

And though it may sound harsh to say it, that's probably no bad thing, for it forces us to look again at our faith, and at the God in whom we put our faith, and to struggle again with what it means to have faith, what it means to be Christian, and what it means to serve God's Kingdom in today's world.

It is good for us from time to time to take a look around our society and see what other people think of our faith, and there are two kinds of people in particular that we can learn from. The first can be found among any group of people, and often in television dramas and soap

operas . Christianity is seen as something of a joke; people who attend churches are regarded as old-fashioned and irrelevant; Christianity is a minority-interest hobby that has nothing to say to the world at large. What we learn from this group of people is that our faith has nothing to say to them, at least in the way we currently express it.

The second group of people to look at is one which can be found easily on the Internet. It's Christian people whose faith is so strong that it becomes certainty. For such people there is never any doubt in their mind about the truth of what they believe. They know that they are possessors of the truth, and it therefore follows that anyone who disagrees with anything they say must be wrong. This strength of conviction is in some ways admirable but, as a quick trawl of Christian websites on the Internet will easily reveal, it can all too easily lead to intolerance and bigotry, judgementalism and arrogance. Not, I'm sure, something we would aspire to.

Look again at Jonah and at Peter. They had their faith, but they also had their doubts. It was in the process of working through their doubts that they arrived at the truth. It was hard for both of them; it led to unpleasant experiences for both of them. But the outcome for both of them was that they served God's will, and they came to understand more clearly the nature of their own faith and their relationship with God.

For us it is the same. We need not be afraid of doubts and questions, but rather welcome them as tools to explore and strengthen our faith, that we too may be able more clearly to understand the nature of our own faith and our relationship with God.

HYMN 490:

Beyond the mist and doubt
of this uncertain day,
I trust in your eternal name,
beyond all changes still the same,
and in that name I pray.

Our restless intellect
has all things in its shade,
but still to you my spirit clings,
serene beyond all shaken things,
and I am not afraid.

Still in humility
we know you by your grace,
for science's remotest probe
feels but the fringes of your robe:
love looks upon your face.

Prayer:

We pray for ourselves and others, for the church and for the world.
We pray that your Kingdom may come, but there are those who cannot hear because their world
is filled with the sounds of suffering and for them there is only bad news.
We pray that your Kingdom may come, but there are those for whom healing is a forlorn hope or
just an impossibility.
We pray that your Kingdom may come, but still there are millions living in the shadow of hunger
and death while other live extravagant wasteful lives.

We pray that your Kingdom may come, perhaps without really knowing what we mean by it; happy to live with the knowledge that prisons throughout the world are filled beyond capacity. And so in our prayer of intercession we remember those to whom we are called to bring good news. We remember those who suffer; those for whom each day brings more bad news; those whose relationships with others bring them not love but misery; those whose work is not an expression of their talent or skill but an endless struggle to provide for themselves and their dependents.

God of the poor, may your Kingdom come.

We remember those who are deprived of even the essentials of life; who live in poverty so desperate it is hard for us even to imagine; who live with pain and sickness because no medical help is available to them; who have to rely on their children to be providers.

God of love, may your Kingdom come.

We remember those who are trapped by poverty, unable because of their circumstances to realise dreams and ambitions; and those who are trapped by their wealth, unable to relax, fearful of future loss.

God of justice, may your Kingdom come.

We remember people in our own community and our own church, and think now in a moment of silence of those known to us who need our prayers ...

As we pray for others, let us not think that our prayer is a fulfilment of our calling to mission; let us not believe that by words alone we can bring good news; let us not rest believing we have done our bit.

Transforming God, may your Kingdom come.

May our prayer be the starting-point of our proclamation; may our thoughts about the plight of others be the seeds of generosity, the beginning of service, the catalyst of caring; may our prayer go with us out from here into the world and may we ourselves be its answer; in the ways we treat other people; in our attitudes and responses to those who are different from us, in our understanding of those who are culturally and geographically far from us, and in our desire to serve the kingdom of God by serving others.

God of Good News for all people, may your Kingdom come.

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 625:

God of freedom, God of justice,
God whose love is strong as death,
God who saw the dark of prison,
God who knew the price of faith:
touch our world of sad oppression
with your Spirit's healing breath.

Rid the earth of torture's terror,
God whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest,
God who shed the tears and blood;
move in us the power of pity,

restless for the common good.

Make in us a captive conscience
quick to hear, to act, to plead;
make us truly sisters, brothers,
of whatever race or creed;
teach us to be fully human,
open to each other's need.

Benediction

Let us go into this week as people of God's Kingdom
encouraged by the love of God
clothed with the nature of Jesus
reinforced by the strength of the Holy Spirit.

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