



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 24th October 2021

Call to Worship:

Sing to God a new song!
Sing to God, you lands!
Sing to God; bless God's name!.
Proclaim God's salvation day after day.
Tell God's glory among the nations;
Tell God's wondrous deeds to all people.
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.

Prayer/Meditation:

Speak with authority
in our lives, Christ.
Speak to us today,
and to what is in us,
so that we might be whole.

Speak to us today,
with love,
with hope,
and with strength,
so that we might hear you,
and know, deep inside,
that we are your people,
and that you are our God.

Loving God,
whose touch can heal the broken places of life,
touch us today...

God of peace,
whose spirit of peace can quiet our spirits
of confusion and despair,
reassure us today...

Forgiving God,

whose call to repentance promises grace upon grace,
place your mercy in our souls today...

You who heal the sick and liberate the imprisoned,
who bring justice in the midst of oppression
and strength in the midst of weakness,
pour out your spirit of power upon us today.

Open our hearts to new faithfulness,
redirect our waywardness,
and hold us gently in your goodness.

We confess our need to you,
and we turn to you with hearts filled with hope,
remembering the promises you have made to us.

May your name be glorified in us and through us.
We ask it through Christ Jesus,
your only begotten son,
he who is our Lord and our Saviour,
our brother and our friend.

Loving God, we join together today for worship on this spot where generations have worshipped before us. We come once more reminded of the love of God that surrounds us, the grace that has been shown to us in Jesus, and the purpose to which we have been called.

We come to offer praise, to encounter God in creation and fellowship and to commit ourselves to the service of the kingdom.

We come to give thanks, to rejoice in all that we enjoy and all that we are, to respond to God's goodness and generosity to us and to offer our love in return.

We come to make our confession, to admit our faults and failings, to recognise our weakness and to seek forgiveness.

We come to pray for ourselves, to seek guidance, to explore the nature of God and to find the strength we need to live as people of faith.

We come to pray for others, our loved ones with all their joys and sorrows, our world with all its suffering, and the Church as it seeks to express compassion and love.

We come to make our offering, to bring our time, our money, our talents, our service, and ourselves.

We bring now our prayers of confession, remembering times when we have fallen short of our own hopes and intentions, and times when we have seemed far from God, wholly concerned with our own contentment and well-being.

Those times when we have been unable to see God in the world around us, and we have blamed God for not being present with us - while all the time we have not been looking.

Those times when we have been unable to hear the voice of God speaking to us in the voices of those around us and in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and we have blamed God for being silent - while all the time we have not been listening.

Those times when we have come close to cursing God for being inactive and allowing all kinds of distress and suffering - while all the time we ourselves have done nothing.

Those times when we have claimed God for our own, giving thanks for the benefits we enjoy - while all the time forgetting the suffering of others.

Those times when our prayer has been offered in the form of a demand, and when we have been disappointed to have been denied what we wanted. We regret the blundering stupidity of our life of faith, our confusion, our lack of understanding. May we have the honesty and integrity to acknowledge that we don't understand everything, don't have the answers to everything, can't put everything right; may we instead be moved to continue the journey, seeking day by day to learn more, to understand more fully, to worship more meaningfully and to serve more effectively, knowing that we are forgiven people, released from guilt by the universal love of God.

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: I Corinthians 12:1-13

Hymn 707: O come, and let us to the Lord

Reading: Luke 4:21-30

Reflection:

When Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth and began to teach, the local Jewish community was quite proud of him. After all, they had heard of the things that he had done at Capernaum and were convinced that he was some sort of prophet from God. They believed that Jesus was about to shower them with God's blessing because, after all, he was one of them, so of course that is what he would do. Besides, they agreed with what he was saying - at least at first. But as long as they were pleased, they were proud and they wanted to bask in the light of special favour from God. And they could hardly be blamed for wanting to enjoy the blessings of this one whom they believed to be a prophet of God. 'Don't blame me,' they might have said, 'for wanting God to fulfil the promises he made to our people in the past.'

Then Jesus started talking about the blessing going not to those in his midst, but further abroad, to gentiles. He uses stories of Elijah and Elisha where God healed and included people that were not part of the usual fold. He teaches that God's liberation is more inclusive and abundant than the exclusive covenant that the people in the synagogue believed God had with them. With this, everything changes.

It is interesting how the mind can turn quickly when we do not agree with someone. We may feel that a political leader, a teacher or a friend is wonderful until they say or do something that isn't exactly what we believe or approve of. Then we are shocked or angry. After all, we like to congregate with like-minded people because it feels good to be part of a group that we understand and that we think understands us as well. When someone who we feel belongs to us says something contrary or challenges the current status quo, we are often quick to turn on him or her. It is one thing for an outsider to say or do something divergent, but a whole other game when it is one of our own. 'Don't blame me,' we might say, 'for reacting against one whom I trusted as a friend but has betrayed me through words or actions.'

This is where we find Jesus in our gospel story today - perceived by the people of his synagogue as betraying their confidence in him, treating their community, his own community, as nothing special when they might reasonably have expected his special blessing.

What angered the people was not just that he didn't treat his home town as special, but he actually seemed to be saying that it was inferior to other places. He had ministered in Capernaum and impressed everyone there, but now he was refusing to do the same in Nazareth. And, even more upsetting, when they challenged him about this, he said that it was deliberate, and he told of two of the great prophets of the past, Elijah and Elisha. Despite great need all around them among their own people, these prophets concerned themselves with outsiders. Elijah, at a time of great famine when all his own people were suffering, went to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon - an outsider. And in Elisha's time, Jesus says, there were many sick people, yet Elisha healed only Naaman the Syrian - an outsider. This enraged the people of Nazareth, and they turned from welcoming Jesus with eager anticipation of what he might do among them, to violent hostility.

'Don't blame us!' they might have said, 'for wanting from a prophet what one might expect of a prophet'.

As is so often the case when a violent reaction ensues, the townspeople's anger was perhaps roused because they knew at some level that Jesus was speaking the truth - and they hated it. They were comfortable in their faith and in their synagogue, and they wanted to be affirmed, not challenged. When the unheard-of inclusiveness of Jesus' message became clear to them, their commitment to their own community and the boundaries they had put up between themselves and those who were on the 'outside' overtook the joy that they initially had in receiving a prophet of God in their midst. They were blinded by indignation and did not want to believe that God's grace is not subject to our lists of who is in and who is out. It cannot be tamed by our human desire to be special. Often, this very grace scandalizes us so much that we are simply unable to receive it for ourselves. Thus begins a vicious cycle: if we are unable to receive such grace, how, then, can we share it with others? We cannot.

This is the parable that we discern in the story of the people at Jesus' home-town synagogue. They were so focused on what they believed God's blessing should look like - just for them - that they missed the opportunity of grace that Jesus was bearing. The gospel says that they "were filled with rage" and "drove him out of town." How dare Jesus tell them who should be included? How dare Jesus tell us?

Part of becoming a maturing Christian is learning how to put our boundaries and expectations aside in order to listen to what God's are. This is difficult work and it is lifelong. In our epistle reading today, the Apostle Paul is encouraging the churches in Corinth to live and love in the radical way that Jesus teaches. They are embroiled in a conflict about which spiritual gifts are the greatest. To help them understand, Paul reminds them that all their gifts are gifts of one and the same spirit. 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good', he says.

And the important phrase here is 'the common good', a phrase that's specific enough for us to know that God's gifts to us are not for using for our own benefit, but vague enough to allow us to decide for ourselves just what 'common' means in this context. Is the common good the good of our families and our circles of friends? Is the common good the good of our own church fellowship here in this place? Is the common good the good of the community in which we live? or of the whole town? Is it the good of the community of the United Reformed Church? Or of all Christian Churches? Or of all faiths? Jesus provided the answer in the synagogue when he refused to fulfil the people's expectations and challenged them to redraw their boundaries.

Our understanding of this is perhaps illustrated by our own churches practice when it comes to charitable giving. We try to ensure that local, national and international causes are supported so that what we have to offer is not restricted to those groups closest to home but is, like the grace of God and the gifts of the Spirit, given to all kinds and conditions and nationalities of people, so that in some small way we might reflect the inclusiveness to which

God calls us and not fall into the trap of the people of Nazareth in expecting gifts to be for only their own.

Being a Christian isn't easy. Neither Jesus nor Paul ever tell us that it is. It requires things of us, as it says in one catechism: "The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God." This is a full-time job that shapes our lives. Inevitably we will stumble and fall; inevitably we will lose sight of the common good, and we will seek God's blessing for ourselves and we will cry, 'Don't blame me for wanting to enjoy the comfort and the grace of God in my life'. And we will have to be brought out of ourselves again and again and reminded that we have no right to any special consideration and treatment over and above the love of God for all people. And we will have to be reminded that all we give and all we do, all the work and effort, all the sacrifice, all the worship, all the prayer - is not for our benefit, for any blessing we might want. This Christian life calls us to live, to die to ourselves and be resurrected with Jesus over and over and over again. With each time, our love gets a little bit wider, we know grace that much more vividly, and we are able to follow Jesus a little bit more down the road of love.

HYMN 605: Son of God, eternal saviour

Prayer:

Gracious and loving God,
as we come to you in prayer
we lay our heart before you.

we admit to you our own shortsightedness.
But you already know,
we think more of our self than my neighbor next door,
let alone our neighbor that lives around the world.
we get so caught up in the needs in our own house
we forget to think about, much less pray for
people whom we've never met.

As we try to pray for starving children
in countries we cannot place on a map,
as we attempt to join in solidarity with women
being sold into slavery,
as we struggle to comprehend the motivation of men
who abuse or neglect their families,
the chasm between our quiet, sheltered life
and their lives of turmoil becomes clear.
we struggle even to SEE the other side of the divide.
How, O God, can we believe that we know how to pray for their needs,
when we honestly have no idea what those needs may be?

And so, humbled, we come before you now,
placing our faith wholly in you,
trusting that you know those needs
which are obscured to our short-sighted eyes,
believing that in your love and mercy
you will reach out and touch the lives we cannot comprehend.

As we pray, Holy One, we feel your call on our life.
As clearly as the disciples mending their nets,
“Come, Follow me.”
our soul resonates with the challenge to shift our focus,
from figures and statistics, to women and men.
we know with every fibre of our being
that you are calling us to be part, somehow,
of your healing, life-giving touch,
both in our community and around the world.

Lord of Life,
may our squinting glance
across the chasm of miles, language and culture,
our desire to see your will done on earth as it is in heaven,
our prayer for our neighbor,
not end with these words,
but continue day by day, moment by moment,
in our actions.

Loving God, we confess our frustration and failure to understand this world we live in. We pray for wholeness and reconciliation, yet day after day we hear of killings and *bombings and terrorism, and we confess that the more* we hear of these terrible things the less we are shocked by them. Violent death has become part of the daily life of the world, and we are frightened by it and frustrated that there seems nothing we can do about it. So we push it to the back of our minds, forgetting or ignoring the fact that the death of even one soldier in Iraq, or of even one civilian the victim of a bombing results in a lifetime of mourning, pain and regret for family and friends. Loving God, we confess our selfishness and failure to practice what we preach. We pray for justice and fairness, yet so often we are content to pay for products and services provided through the exploitation of the poor and weak. We know that our society prospers at the expense of those who have no voice, that people live in poverty to provide us with luxury, but we push that to the back of our minds so that we may enjoy our chosen lifestyle, forgetting or ignoring the fact that some aspects of our lifestyle are only available to us through the pain of others.

Loving God, we confess our reluctance to change. May we be inspired, through our awareness of the world, through our worship, and through our relationships with others, to be more committed to the Kingdom of God, more ready to make sacrifices for others, and more faithful to the gospel of Christ that, even through the small contribution we can make, the world around us may be transformed, fear and cruelty banished, pain and suffering eased, and people brought to an understanding of our reliance upon one another in a world that is healed and restored to wholeness. In Jesus' name.

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 650: God with humanity made one

Benediction

Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Send us out to live lives that glorify you
Help us to be people of peace
Empower us to recognize your call
In our families
In our communities
In our work places and schools
In our churches and in our world.

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