



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

Sunday 31st October 2021

Call to Worship:

The invitation is given to every person by Jesus Christ:

"Come to me! Follow me! Be my disciples!"

**We come to this place, to this time,
at the invitation of Jesus Christ.**

In the name of Christ,
we accept the invitation to discipleship.

In the name of Christ,
as his disciples, we worship and praise God.

In the midst of a world where cruelty abounds,
we proclaim the God of Compassion.

In the midst of despair that threatens to swallow up
whole lives, whole peoples,
we proclaim the God of Hope.

In the midst of indifference and apathy,
we proclaim the God of Love.

Come, let us worship together
and share our witness of God's living presence in the world.

Prayer/Meditation:

O God, you come to us in unexpected places
In isolation, behind closed doors
On dusty roads, as we go from place to place
In video chats with friends and telephone conversations with loved ones.
You come bringing us peace, where there is no peace
You come bringing us hope when everything seems hopeless
You come bringing us courage when we are afraid.
Come and be among us now, in every place where we are.
Open our eyes to see you, open our hearts to know you.

Holy God, we come together to worship,
a people who would like to think that we love you

with all our hearts and souls,
with all our might,

but there are so many other things in our lives
that clamour for our attention
that we often relegate you to Sundays
and Wednesdays,
and times when we want you to rescue us.

Most of us really do want you to be the one
in whom we live and move and have our being.

We really do want to hear your voice
above all of the other voices in our lives.
But we get bogged down in the daily routine.
We forget who we are.
We forget who you are.
We forget what the church is supposed to be.

O God, You who are always doing a new thing,
we confess that we sometimes close windows
against the fresh air of new ideas,
against the noise of other people's worries,
against the winds of change.

God of every place and time,
we confess that we often draw the curtains
against people who are different,
against world news or community concerns.

Forgive us our insulation in our locked homes,
our shuttered churches,
the security systems on our hearts.
Open up our lives,
and let your Spirit blow through

So here we are, standing before you today,
with our human weaknesses
and our short attention spans,
asking that you would make yourself known to us,
that you would help us to recognize
the presence of the Holy,
that you would continue to challenge us,
inspire us,
and make us into the people we were created to be.

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: Acts 4:32-37

Hymn 107:

The love of God comes close
where stands an open door
to let the stranger in,
to mingle rich and poor.
The love of God is here to stay;
embracing those who walk his way,
the love of God is here to stay.

The peace of God comes close
to those caught in the storm,
forgoing lives of ease
to ease the lives forlorn.
The peace of God is here to stay;
embracing those who walk his way,
the peace of God is here to stay.

The joy of God comes close
where faith encounters fears,
where heights and depths of life
are found through smiles and tears.
The joy of God is here to stay;
embracing those who walk his way,
the joy of God is here to stay.

The grace of God comes close
to those whose grace is spent,
when hearts are tired or sore
and hope is bruised and bent.
The grace of God is here to stay;
embracing those who walk his way,
the grace of God is here to stay.

The Son of God comes close
where people praise his name,
where bread and wine are blest
and shared as when he came.
The Son of God is here to stay;
embracing those who walk his way,
the Son of God is here to stay.

Reading: I Corinthians 16:1-13

Reflection:

We may sometimes think that the Church is an anchor of stability and tradition in the midst of an ever-changing world, or a community in which we can find shelter from the winds of change and the whims of fashion. But in fact the church, whether we define it as the worldwide community of Christian people, by denomination, or as our own local congregation, is in a constant process of change. Think back to the church in which you were brought up (or the church you first attended), and remember what the building was like, remember what the atmosphere of the worship was like, how the worshippers were dressed, what the style of the worship was like, what you were taught about the Bible, about God, about the relationship between God and the human family. Think of how many people were in the Church and what kind of welcome was offered to strangers and children. Think of the hymns you used to sing.

It is almost inevitable that your churchgoing experience today is very different. You may not think it has changed for the better, but it's almost certain that it will have changed.

There are those who say that the fact of evolutionary change in the church is a sign of corruption and decay, and that what will rescue the church is a return to the purest, most original form of Christianity we know, that which is described in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. There, it is sometimes claimed, we find the earliest and therefore the most authentic expression of the Christian church, and over the years many new movements and denominations have attempted to model themselves on the church of Peter and James and Paul - mostly without startling success.

And the reason for that is that, by the time the book of Acts came to be written, the church was already well into its process of evolution. It describes a group of followers of Jesus struggling to express their faith in him through the structure of a community, struggling with the challenge of how to be a church without having any real idea of what it was they ultimately were trying to establish. 'No-one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ... and it was distributed to each as any had need.'

We need only think of some of the lessons that Jesus taught his disciples during the course of his ministry to see that this experiment in communal living was an attempt at working out his teaching about the Kingdom of God in the context of a community or church. His emphasis on loving and caring for others; his instruction to the rich young man to go and sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor. Here was a church led by men who had known Jesus and travelled with him and heard his teaching about God's kingdom trying to put into practice the things he had taught. It was a brave attempt at living out God's Kingdom, but as a business plan it was doomed to failure. It was simply unsustainable.

In the short term there would have been plenty of money to sustain the community and to help the poor, but as more and more people came to be dependent on the community, because they had sold everything they had, so it would have become more and more costly to care for everyone. The community could only be sustained by increasing numbers joining it and bringing their wealth with them, and of course there was a limit to that. The church soon ran into financial difficulty and had to appeal for help, and in Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians we find him encouraging generosity among the gentile Christians to support the church in Jerusalem.

This financial situation was one of the many points of tension between the Jerusalem church under Peter and James, and the gentile churches under Paul; they were divided too about observance of the Jewish law, about rules involving food, and worship, and sexual ethics, and all these struggles were part of the church's ongoing evolution. New Testament scholar Michael Goulder suggested that, not only were Paul and the gentile churches ultimately to come out on top, and therefore bequeath their particular brand of Christianity to the world, but the

Jerusalem church dwindled away to nothing, leaving behind it just this record in the book of Acts which is sometimes taken as a pattern for an authentic pristine Christian church but which is in fact just the record of a failed experiment.

In the natural world, the development of life has been a story of slow evolution punctuated by sudden rapid change caused by events such as meteor impact or ice age; in the story of human development it is the same, slow change for most of the time, then drastic change that is often described as 'revolution' - political, industrial or cultural.

The story of the church is no different. In the church's story there are two kinds of event that change things drastically. One is schism, the dividing of a church into two or more parts, often in conflict with one another; and the other is Reformation, when it is perceived from within the church that serious changes need to be made. We think of course of *the* Reformation of the 16th century, when Martin Luther objected to the church's practice of selling indulgences, and which turned out to be both schism and reformation.

Since then, as we know, the Church has continued to evolve. The Reformation opened the floodgates for the formation of myriad new churches and denominations and the shape of the church today is one of many facets, angles, doctrines and beliefs - not all compatible with one another. But the church continues to evolve and change.

Even within our own denomination emphases have changed over the years. In recent years there has come a much closer and more careful studying of the gospels with a view to discovering as far as possible what it was that Jesus was actually saying and teaching. There has, in many churches, been a drift away from the emphasis on personal salvation and a return to the perceived emphasis of Jesus on what we call the social gospel - caring for the poor the sick and the needy, standing up for justice and peace, working for a church that offers a welcome to all people, whoever they may be and whatever they may have done.

And what's the lesson in all this? It is perhaps a reminder that any account of the church's mission, whether it be in the book of Acts of the Apostles or in the work of the reformers, is but a snapshot of a single point in the church's development. And so is the work we do here in our church week by week and year by year. We are not called to preserve the church of our youth, nor are we called to restore the church to some former golden age. No, we are called to walk together, explore together, and follow together the call of the Spirit of Christ.

We may not know where that will lead; we may find ourselves walking down unfamiliar paths; we may find ourselves in places we'd rather not be; but we will keep moving, for that is what the church has always done in its desire to serve Christ; we will keep evolving, keep changing, keep moving, in the faith and in the hope that new challenges will bring new opportunities and that the light of Christ will guide us on our way.

HYMN 318:

Not far beyond the sea, nor high
above the heavens, but very nigh
your voice, O God, is heard.
For each new step of faith we take
you have more truth and light to break
forth from your holy word.

The babes in Christ your scriptures feed
with milk sufficient for their need,
the nurture of the Lord.

Beneath life's burden and its heat
the fully grown find stronger meat
in your unfailing word.

Rooted and grounded in your love,
with saints on earth and saints above
we join in full accord
to grasp the breadth, length, depth and height,
the crucified and risen might of Christ,

Help us to press toward that mark,
and, though our vision now is dark,
to live by what we see;
so, when we see you face to face,
your truth and light our dwelling-place
for evermore shall be.

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.

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

Hymn 637:

The Day of the Lord shall come, as prophets have told,
when Christ shall make all things new, no matter how old.
And some at the stars may gaze, and some at God's word,
in vain to predict the time, the Day of the Lord.

*The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;
the lamb with the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;
and nations no more for war shall study or thirst.*

The Day of the Lord shall come - a thief in the night,
a curse to those in the wrong who think themselves right,
a pleasure for those in pain or with death at the door;
a true liberation for the prisoners and poor.

Refrain

The Day of the Lord shall come and judgement be known,
as nations like sheep and goats come close to the throne.
Then Christ shall himself reveal, asking all to draw near
and see in his face all faces once ignored here.

Refrain

The Day of the Lord shall come, but now is the time
to subvert earth's wisdom with Christ's folly sublime,
by loving the loveless, turning the tide and the cheek,
by walking beneath the cross in step with the weak.

Refrain

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