



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

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

Sunday 21st November 2021

Call to Worship:

Kindle in our hearts, O God  
**the flame of love that never ceases;**  
That it may burn in us, giving light to others.  
**May we shine for ever in your temple,**  
set on fire with your eternal light,  
**even your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Among the poor, among the proud, among the persecuted, among the privileged,  
**let there be peace, O Lord.**

With gentle touch, with an angry word, with a clear conscience, with burning love,  
**let there be peace, O Lord.**

Within us, without us, behind us, before us, in this place, in every place, for this time, for all  
time,  
**let there be peace, O Lord.**

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, today we come again for worship to give thanks for all that we enjoy and to seek forgiveness for all that is wrong, to search for understanding and to find strength of faith.

We are glad to be part of this Christian community that supports and nurtures us as we struggle day by day with the challenge of faith and the realities of the world, and we give thanks for the love that upholds us, the care that reassures us and the mission that challenges us.

We are glad to be part of the worldwide family of Christian people that binds us together with people of all nations and cultures, teaching us of the breadth and depth of God's love and showing us different ways of responding to the call of Christ to engage in the mission of the Kingdom.

Yet glad though we are to be a part of the church, our gladness is mixed with unease, with disappointment, with guilt, even with fear as we look around us and see that the world seems as uncertain and dangerous place as it ever was. Despite our message of peace and justice, despite the gospel of indiscriminate love, and despite the similar teachings of other faiths about love and respect, we seem to live in the midst of increasing hatred, violence and war. Daily we hear of death and destruction, of stubborn refusal to consider the other's point of view, of personal and national selfishness that will allow nothing to stand in its way.

The world is in need of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation, and we pray that these qualities of the kingdom might come; that humanity might be seen as more important than nationality or religion, and that the One God of Christianity, Judaism and Islam might be worshipped and served in peace and mutual respect.

We cannot repent on behalf of others, but we can seek ways of contributing to the peace of the world. We can hold in our thoughts and our prayers the misery of war and the anguish of loss. Through us and through people of all faiths and people of goodwill of no faith, may God's kingdom come and God's will be done.

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: Joel 3:1-11

Hymn 200:

The kingdom of God  
is justice and joy,  
for Jesus restores  
what sin would destroy;  
God's power and glory  
in Jesus we know,  
and here and hereafter  
the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God  
is mercy and grace,  
the prisoners are freed,  
the sinners find place,  
the outcast are welcomed  
God's banquet to share,  
and hope is awakened  
in place of despair.

The kingdom of God  
is challenge and choice,  
believe the good news,  
repent and rejoice!  
His love for us sinners  
brought Christ to his cross,  
our crisis of judgement  
for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come,  
the gift and the goal,  
in Jesus begun,  
in heaven made whole;  
the heirs of the kingdom  
shall answer his call,  
and all things cry 'Glory!'  
to God all in all.

Reading: Micah 4:1-4

Reflection:

The prophet Joel talks about visions and dreams, though it's not at all clear in which context he's talking. Of all the books of the Bible, the prophecy of Joel is one of the most mysterious. There is nothing in the book to indicate who Joel was or who he was writing to or under what circumstances.

It seems he may have been writing to the people of Judah, but he is not mentioned by any of the other prophets, and so the only information there is about him is what is contained in his own book. He prophesied to Judah and Jerusalem, and seems to have been unknown beyond that local area.

It is not clear *when* he was writing either, scholars admit that there is no way of knowing, and their guesses cover hundreds of years. There is no internal reference in Joel to any event that can be used to pinpoint its date.

Many scholars think Joel may be one of the older, if not the oldest, book of the prophets, but that is just speculation. It does share some phrases in common with the book of Ezekiel, but no-one knows whether Joel borrowed them from Ezekiel or Ezekiel from Joel.

But if Joel's book is obscure and difficult, his message is quite familiar. It is about a promised time of peace that is coming when God will bless his people with plenty.

*You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God. I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

Like many of the prophets, Joel speaks of a time when all war and want shall come to an end and there shall be peace and plenty for all his people. What is interesting about Joel, however, is the way in which this peace and plenty will be achieved.

*Proclaim this among the nations: prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. Beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning-hooks into spears; let the weakling say, I am a warrior.*

These words, of course, sound quite familiar to us. They are a reversal of the words we find in the prophet Micah which is often read out at Remembrance Services.

But Remembrance Sundays come and go, and other than talking about the need for peace and the futility of war, we don't actually DO anything to change our lives, to bring about peace, to actively seek peace instead of war, in our world. And we can do it. YOU and I can bring peace to this world.

*Micah wrote: God will settle disputes among the nations, among the great powers near and far. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again. Everyone will live in peace among his own vineyards and fig trees, and no one will make him afraid. The Lord Almighty has promised this.*

It would seem that Joel and Micah are taking a completely opposite tack in their prophecy of peace and prosperity.

For Micah, writing only a few decades before the birth of Jesus, peace is achieved through the destruction of the weapons of war and the channelling of resources into the manufacture of tools not weapons.

Joel, possibly writing a thousand years earlier, seems to be suggesting that peace is achievable through war; that it is through the destruction or subjugation of the nation's enemies that peace can be brought about.

Jesus of Nazareth, unlike the anti-Roman zealot's of his day and the international politicians of today, did not promote war to get rid of oppression but rather love. How can love

beat the system, they asked him. How can love, stop an army from destroying a people and a culture.

The Lord's answer was that by turning swords to ploughshares and spears to pruning hooks, by loving our enemies doing good to those who would harm us, we can overcome evil and violence because it's hard for someone, anyone, to hate you if you are being pleasant to them and making their life good. How can anyone hate you for this?

And so, I commend to you the dreams of Micah and the teachings of Jesus as the answer to the world's problems because centuries of experience should tell us that the prophesying of Joel, the ethos of the Romans, and the modern reliance on gunboat diplomacy just don't work. Why do we always follow the warring of the Joel rather than the peace of Micah?

When someone is threatening us, it's easier to fight back than to sit down and to try to solve the problem. But we ourselves can bring about change. We ourselves *can* bring about change.

If we firmly believe in the teachings of Jesus and live our lives as though those teachings were important to us, if we learn to treat those who would harm us with love and understanding, then our families, our communities and our towns - our whole world - could eventually become more peaceful places to live.

We can't expect to change the world overnight, but we can begin by changing the way we live *our* lives, and the way we think about and treat other people. If we put God at the centre of our lives, if we behave towards others the way we'd have them behave towards us, if we think before we speak, smile rather than snap back.

If we do those things, if we let the Holy Spirit work in us and through us, with the love of Jesus Christ as our guide then we'll begin to see small changes that can, eventually, influence those around us.

If we all do that, transformation from conflict to peace, from suspicion to trust, from hatred to love, is possible. Jesus showed us how - all WE need to do, is follow. Amen.

HYMN 474:

Brother, Sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you  
in the night-time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;  
I will share your joy and sorrow  
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven

we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we've known together  
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, Sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

Prayer:

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

Hymn 626:

Judge eternal, throned in splendour,  
Lord of lords and King of kings,  
with thy living fire of judgement  
purge this land of bitter things;  
over all its wide dominion  
spread the healing of thy wings.

Still the weary folk are pining  
for the hour that brings release;  
and the city's crowded clangour

cries aloud for sin to cease;  
and the homesteads and the woodlands  
plead in silence for their peace.

Crown, O God, thine own endeavour;  
cleave our darkness with thy sword;  
feed the faithless and the hungry  
with the richness of thy word;  
cleanse the body of this nation  
through the glory of the Lord.

Benediction

May the love of the Father,  
the compassion of the Son,  
and the presence of the Spirit,  
gladden our hearts  
and bring peace to our lives and to our world,  
this day and all days

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
go with each one of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more.

Amen