



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 12th December 2021

Call to Worship:

Give thanks to God, and call upon His name!

For God is great, and God is here!

Spread the news of what God has done throughout the world.

For God is great, and God is here!

Sing praise, and shout for joy:

For God is great, and God is here!

Let's worship God together!

Prayer/Meditation:

There are only a few days left. Around us we can see the excitement being wound up to fever pitch. For some this is the climax of excitement, the fulfilment of the time we have been anticipating all these long weeks. The time is almost here. For some others it is a climax not of excitement but panic, as we suddenly realise what still has to be done in preparation and how little time there is left to do it. The time is almost here. For others this may be a climax of apprehension and nervousness, as all the preparations have been made, the gifts wrapped, the dinner ingredients stowed in the fridge. There is nothing more to do now but wait and hope that all the plans are accomplished successfully and that the season indeed turns out to be one of love and peace among the family, and not a cause of tension or conflict. The time is almost here.

For some this time may be a climax of boredom with all the glitter and fun, whose greatest hope is that it will all be over and life will go back to normal. The time is almost here.

For many it will be no climax at all, but just another day: those of no faith and no interest, those of other faiths overwhelmed with 'in your face' Christianity; and for some it will bring difficult memories of happier Christmases past.

For us, here, in church, this day is a climax of faith and hope, as we re-tell the story of Jesus' birth and look forward to the holy night when a saviour is come. May our focus be upon him at this time; may our joy and excitement arise out of love for God and one another, and may our worship this day reflect our anticipation of the coming of the one is Immanuel - God with us.

The time is almost here ...

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: Isaiah 12:2-6

Hymn 128

The Lord will come and not be slow,

his footsteps cannot err;
before him righteousness shall go,
his royal harbinger.

Mercy and truth that long were missed,
now joyfully are met;
sweet peace and righteousness have kissed,
and hand in hand are set.

Surely to such as do him fear
salvation is at hand;
and glory shall ere long appear
to dwell within our land.

Rise, God, judge thou the earth in might,
this wicked earth redress;
for thou art he who shall by right
the nations all possess.

The nations all whom thou hast made
shall come, and all shall frame
to bow them low before thee, Lord,
and glorify thy name.

For great thou art, and wonders great
by thy strong hand are done;
thou in thine everlasting seat
remainest God alone.

Reading: Luke 3: 7 - 18

Reflection:

Here's a little story from the United States that I found online: A certain farmer was out the front of his house fixing a fence when a police car came up his drive. An officious police officer climbed out and announced he was there to search the farm for possible cannabis plants. "OK by me" shrugged the farmer, "but you had better not go into that paddock over there".

"Listen!" snapped the policeman, "I am going anywhere I like and you can't stop me". He pulled his warrant card out of his pocket and waved it in the farmer's face. Then he tapped the badge on the side of his arm. "See this badge, Mate, That says I can go anywhere I like! Couldn't care less what you don't want me to see in that paddock". "Well suit yourself", said the farmer. And he walked away to continue with his fence maintenance.

A moment or two later he heard some panicked shouting from the paddock and saw the policeman running for his life followed by the farmer's snorting bull. The farmer dropped his tools and ran across to the fence. "The badge, the badge!" he shouted. "Show him your badge!"

It's not just a mildly funny story. It's a parable for us when we realise it isn't just arrogant police officers, but we too who might need to be reminded who we really are.

John the Baptist pointed out that, just because the Jewish people of the time called themselves the chosen people and just because in their history they had wise outspoken prophets, that didn't excuse them from forgetting their promises to follow what they believed their God had been calling them to be. It is not just a two thousand year old story of John the Baptist reminding people of the ideals of their faith. The same applies today.

Christians may claim to be people of the Kingdom but if we keep a score of wrongs, don't forgive our enemy and fail to welcome the stranger in our midst then we are not much different from an arrogant policeman who doesn't live to serve and protect. A Church membership certificate gives us no special right to fail to respond to the message of the one whose coming we celebrate.

As described in the reading from Luke, John the Baptist didn't pull any punches. Luke's version of John the Baptist would be most unlikely to be offered a preaching spot in our Churches today. Addressing those who come to worship with "*You brood of vipers!*" is not the standard preaching advice from our modern theological colleges.

Luke reports John warning metaphorically that the *axe is lying at the foot of the tree....* Then talking of the coming Messiah *...his winnowing fork is in his hand....but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

Then he moves from the warning of the future to the present of his hearers. John the Baptist finds there a mismatch between religious ideals and practice. So the people who have plenty are told to share what they have with those who are without. The tax collectors he warns to only take the officially assigned amounts, the soldiers are exhorted not to take advantage of those they oversee.

These are not only practical suggestions they also offer a way of life which would have seemed radically different for his listeners from the expected order of things. Should we be surprised that in Jesus' day the normal course of events, (as perhaps it is for many today) has a vast majority holding on to what they have with no thought that their faith would encourage them to do anything different? In John the Baptist's day, tax collectors were well known for their ability to skim some off the top, conquering soldiers were feared precisely because extortion and oppression were part and parcel of society at the time.

John the Baptist didn't just ask people to repent only with words to get them ready for Jesus - he told them in effect what actions would be required of them to have their repentance seen as legitimate. The repentance John talked about then was far removed from token confession and the traditional synagogue prayers of repentance. Luke's version of John the Baptist's teaching was the more direct injunction to "*Put your money where your mouth is.*"

True, the world has moved on. Extortion and hypocrisy may no longer be as blatant. But the same challenge to check to see if our background of faith matches what we would hope that others would see in us may still apply. So for a moment think what John the Baptist might notice if his modern equivalent was look honestly at our present personal and collective life and faith as members of a Church.

I suspect a modern day John the Baptist would not have to look too far to find plenty of areas where we as a Church have been turning a blind eye to some fairly serious issues.

For example, will the food banks have enough food for the pressures of Christmas? Is there enough food? And if not, why not? And even when we give generously to food banks, what are we saying or doing about the fact that they are needed in the first place?

So what would John the Baptist be drawing to our attention if he were to see our world with his eyes today? Would he find ours to be churches with a lively and relevant faith? Would our modern John the Baptist see a community where we genuinely do watch out for one another and welcome strangers into our homes, and offer a fair deal for minorities in the community.

I am sure that a modern John the Baptist would definitely find some amongst us who have taken up the message of Christ. All who make a genuine effort to live the gospel would be perfectly justified in seeking to reconnect with the Christ child this Christmas. I am equally sure a modern Baptist figure would also find amongst us those whose superficial token faith

diminishes the message, and perhaps we all need still need to hear the a modern version of John the Baptist's voice calling to awaken our conscience.

Perhaps we are all sometimes the saint and sometimes the sinner.

John the Baptist wasn't on about the need for pious sentiment. At least according to Luke, John claimed the only way to become prepared was to show our behaviour to be consistent with our faith. It is only then he tells the people that they will find hope. This is the season of Advent. It is also a season where a wild-eyed John cuts through our festive preparations with an urgent message of honesty and practicality. The Christ child can indeed be found in Christmas so we turn to the Baptist John who tells us how to go about our preparation. The response is ours to find, not just with words - but with reshaped lives and hearts.

HYMN 135

Joy to the world,
the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world,
the Saviour reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let thorns infest the ground,
or sins and sorrows grow;
wherever pain and death are found
he makes his blessings flow,
he makes his blessings flow,
he makes, he makes his blessings flow.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Prayer:

God of love and justice,
we come to you this day as your servants,
gathered to offer our prayer.
As we continue this Advent journey,
help us to focus on you and the coming of your son, Jesus.
Amidst the commercials, the cooking, and the company,

help us to remember the true meaning of this season:
that you would come to us in the flesh and forever live among us.
Even as we share the joy we find in you with one another,
we are mindful of those for whom joy is hard to find,
for those who don't have enough clothes,
for those who don't have enough food,
for those who don't have enough (or any) shelter,
for those who don't have enough protection and justice.
We confess that there really is "enough" for everyone,
but it is our fault that the "enough" is hoarded by few at the expense of many.
Help us to bear the good fruit that the Baptist called us to bear,
being mindful of those around us without during this season of giving.

We pray this day for those longing for spiritual renewal.
We would ask that your Holy Spirit invigorate us
that we may provide for others first
before expecting them to provide for us.
Come to this place and encourage us to do the work
to which we were baptized.
Help us to proclaim the Good News in word and in deed.

We pray this day for the hope we have found,
the peace we seek,
and the joy we will receive in your Holy name.
May we bring hope to the hopeless,
peace to the restless,
and joy to those who crave it.
We pray this day, either out loud or in our hearts, for those dear to us...

Gracious God, may the joy we find not be a commodity to be hoarded
but a gift to be shared with one another.
We thank you for your presence among us,
your creation around us,
and your providence within us,
as we continue this blessed journey.

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 573:

God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

From utmost east to utmost west, where human feet have trod,
by the voice of many messengers goes forth the voice of God:
'Give ear to me, you continents, you islands give ear to me,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea'.

What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase
love and justice throughout the world, the reign of the Prince of peace?
What can we do to hasten the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea?

Let us go out in the strength of God, with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world:
sin and sorrow let us fight to set their captives free,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

All that we do can have no worth unless God blesses the deed
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God awakens the seed;
yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

Benediction

Let us rejoice in the Lord always,
showing gentleness to all,
let us not be anxious,
but make our needs known to God
by prayer, and with thanksgiving;
and may the peace of God
guard your hearts and minds
in Christ Jesus.

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

