



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

Sunday 2nd January 2022

Call to Worship:

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;  
**I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.**  
I will be glad and exult in you;  
**I will sing praise to your name, O Most High**

Around the world people gather to break bread and pour wine.  
**We gather with them in heart and mind.**  
Around the world the broken body is made whole.  
**As part of that body we join in its unity.**  
Around the world the Banquet of God is prepared for the table.  
**We, who share in the banquet, come eagerly to be fed.**  
Let us worship together, let us share God's bounty.

Prayer/Meditation:

We come to worship today, as we always do, with a mixture of feelings. We are thankful for the season of thanksgiving just past, for the celebration of the birth of Christ, for the challenge and inspiration of the story of the nativity, and for the new shades of meaning we have found within it. But at the same time we are sorry that we have failed to be changed in any serious way by the good news we have heard.

We are thankful for the time of rest and relaxation we have enjoyed, the opportunity to be with family and friends at this holiday season. But we are sorry that we have not done more to bring rest and relaxation to those round about us, that our holiday time has been a working time for some, and that our timer for family and friends has been for some a time alone.

We are thankful for the worship we have offered over the Christmas season, and for the sense of God's presence we have felt in our church and in our lives at this time. But we are sorry that we have not done more to encourage those around us to share in our worship, nor proclaimed more clearly the Christmas gospel in our everyday contacts with other people.

We are thankful, many of us, that the festive season is over for another year, and that life is returning to normal. But we are sorry that we find it so difficult to keep in our hearts all the year round the message of Jesus' birth that God is with us.

We are thankful to be part of this community of God's people gathered to worship on this day, thankful for the music of praise we sing and thankful for the opportunity to listen for the word of God. But we are sorry that we so often fail to live our lives according to the words we hear in this place, sorry that when the music of worship dies away our sense of fellowship and community dies away with it.

And we are thankful for this varied and exciting world we live in, for the challenges that face us day by day and the love, respect and care we receive from those around us. But we are sorry that the variety and excitement of our lives is taken so often for granted, and that we so often take other people for granted.

May we truly appreciate all we have and give thanks in all circumstances, and may we be forgiven those lapses and oversights that so often make our lives dull and uninspiring; may we value what is good, reject what is bad, and give thanks every day for life with all its richness, comfort and love

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: Exodus 1:8-2:10

Hymn 178

Who would think that what was needed  
to transform and save the earth  
might not be a plan or army  
proud in purpose, proved in worth?  
Who would think, despite derision,  
that a child should lead the way?  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,  
monarchs scorn and angels sing;  
such a place as none would reckon  
hosts a holy, helpless thing;  
stabled beasts and passing strangers  
watch a baby laid in hay:  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science span  
the past from which we move,  
yet experience questions whether  
with such progress we improve.  
In our search for sense and meaning,  
lest our hopes and humour fray,  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

Reading: Matthew 2:7-23

Reflection:

For us, New Year is a time of new beginnings. Although in one sense a new year is no more than the changing of numbers on a calendar, in another sense it is a cultural and psychological gateway through which we pass and which somehow separates us from the events and the worries of the previous year and enables us in some way to leave behind at least some of our old baggage and travel forward lighter, and with a lighter heart, to whatever as yet

unknown challenges and adventures await us in the year ahead. So it's appropriate, then, that our readings for this Sunday - the second Sunday of Christmas and the first of the new year - are also about new beginnings. This Sunday we might regard as the end of Christmas, but it is also the beginning of something else.

Perhaps in our minds the nativity story begins in Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, an engaged couple, still living in their parents homes and enjoying a fairly uneventful life whose highlight for the moment might be the planning of a wedding. And perhaps in our minds the nativity story ends after a series of adventures and miracles with Mary and Joseph in a stable in Bethlehem with an ox and an ass and a camel, sitting proudly by their newborn son who is lying in a manger and being visited by shepherds who have come down from the hills and exotic wise men who have travelled much further. All having made their way to the Bethlehem stable in response to something they have heard or seen, and all there to offer worship and gifts to the child who, so they understand, is going to turn out to be something very special. And there the story ends with Mary saying nothing but pondering all these things in her heart.

Maybe the story ends there in popular understanding because straight after that scene Matthew and Luke go their own separate ways, with Luke telling a story of Jesus being taken to Jerusalem to be dedicated in the temple (and meeting Simeon and Anna there), and Matthew telling a very different story in which Jerusalem is to be avoided at all costs and Jesus is taken to Egypt to escape the cruelty of king Herod who wants to protect his throne by having all boys under two put to death.

Up to the scene in the stable it is quite easy to read Matthew's story and Luke's story in parallel and treat them as if they are two versions of the same story; we are even quite comfortable weaving them together to make a single narrative out of them. But we end all our nativity plays and pageants, and our readings in church over Christmas at the nativity scene, because from then on it is far more apparent that Luke and Matthew are telling two completely different stories that are much more difficult to weave together and still make sense.

In our Christmas worship, we concentrated mostly on Luke's story. Now let's turn to Matthew, and follow Jesus and his parents as they flee from Jerusalem and make their way to Egypt.

It was all the fault of these mysterious wise men from the east, really. It seems they were wise enough to follow a star from some distant land in the east, but were unable to track it for the last few miles and had to stop and ask for directions. They then did something that seems, at least from our perspective, very *unwise*. They went to the king and asked, 'Where is the one who is born to be king?' Maybe they thought the king had just had a son. In any case, it was their giving the game away that led to Herod's paranoia. They promised to return and let Herod know where the child was, but they didn't. Herod's paranoia grew until he ordered a mass killing. So afraid was he of any threat to his power that he was willing to order a mass execution of children. Matthew tells us that Joseph was warned about this by an angel in a dream, so he took Mary and the baby and, under cover of night, escaped from Bethlehem and went to Egypt where they remained until Herod was dead. Matthew says that this was to fulfil the words of the prophet that 'Out of Egypt I called my son'. Matthew appears to be reading a little bit more into the words of the prophet here than the text really allows. He is quoting from Hosea, whose words are the beginning of a poem which recounts the history of the people of Israel: *When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son.*

Nonetheless it is characteristic of Matthew to constantly make connections between the life of Jesus and the words of the Hebrew scriptures. Indeed, when we turn now to the story of Moses in the book of Exodus, we can see how Matthew has skillfully told his tale in a way that portrays Jesus' early years as a reflection of the early years of Moses.

The most striking similarity, of course, is the way in which both Moses and Jesus were, as infants, rescued from death at the hands of a jealous and insecure king. Jesus, as we have seen, was spirited away at night to escape Herod who was afraid that a new king had been born who would in time overthrow him. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was equally afraid that he would lose his power, not through one person but through the increasing strength and number of the slave-nation which lived among his people. Both kings ordered the slaughter of innocent children, and both were foiled by the escape of boys who would grow up to change their world.

It cannot be a coincidence that Matthew tells his story in a way that so closely parallels that of Moses. If we were to read beyond the nativity story and look at the baptism of Jesus, his early ministry and the sermon on the mount, we would see that Matthew builds in more and more of these similarities until it becomes hard not to draw the conclusion that he is deliberately telling his story in a way that is designed to remind his readers of Moses.

And of course that is exactly what he *is* doing. Matthew's book is a gospel, not a biography. He is telling us not only about how Jesus lived and what he did and said, but also he is telling us about who he believed Jesus was, and for Matthew, Jesus was the new Moses. Just as the story of Moses was the story of a new beginning for the people of Israel - the beginning of a life of both freedom and struggle - so the story of Jesus' birth and escape to Egypt is the story of a new beginning for the world - also the beginning of a life of freedom and struggle.

In the centuries that elapsed between the new beginning of Moses and the new beginning of Jesus, Israel developed and evolved as any nation will. It had periods of war and periods of peace, it had good rulers and bad, it had a religious establishment which gradually strayed further and further from its original calling. And so another new beginning happened: the coming of Jesus to restore and refresh the relationship between God and God's people.

And perhaps for us, in Jesus, that renewal and restoration can be a new beginning every year if we need it. Our secular celebration of the change of the numbers on the calendar, coinciding with our study of these particular passages of scripture on this particular Sunday of the year, can reinforce in us the promise that in Christ all things are made new. So that, as the life of the nation of Israel was given a new beginning with the birth and rescue of Moses, and *another* new beginning with the birth and rescue of the infant Jesus, so there is the potential for new beginnings for us as well, as we invite the spirit of Jesus to make things new in our lives, our church and our world this new year and every new year.

Hymn 549:

One more step along the world I go,  
one more step along the world I go,  
from the old things to the new  
keep me travelling along with you:  
And it's from the old I travel to the new;  
keep me travelling along with you.

Round the corner of the world I turn,  
more and more about the world I learn;  
all the new things that I see  
you'll be looking at along with me:  
And it's from the old I travel to the new;  
keep me travelling along with you.

As I travel through the bad and good,  
keep me travelling the way I should;

where I see no way to go  
you'll be telling me the way, I know:  
And it's from the old I travel to the new;  
keep me travelling along with you.

Give me courage when the world is rough,  
keep me loving though the world is tough;  
leap and sing in all I do,  
keep me travelling along with you:  
And it's from the old I travel to the new;  
keep me travelling along with you.

You are older than the world can be,  
you are younger than the life in me;  
ever old and ever new,  
keep me travelling along with you:  
And it's from the old I travel to the new;  
keep me travelling along with you.

Communion:

Among friends, gathered round a table, Jesus took bread, and, having blessed it, he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, 'This is my body which is given for you.' In the same way he took wine, and, having given thanks for it, he poured it out and gave the cup to his disciples saying, 'This cup is the new relationship with God, sealed with my blood. Take this and share it. I shall drink wine with you next in the coming kingdom of God.'

So now, following Jesus example, we take this bread and this cup; the ordinary things of the world through which God will bless us.

Loving God, we give thanks for your love revealed to us in Jesus, and we thank you that through him, through his life and example, his death and resurrection, we can live in the faith that your kingdom will come, and that in life, in death and beyond death you are with us.

Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now, as we do now what you did in an upstairs room, breathe your Spirit upon us and upon this bread and this cup, that they be spiritual food and drink for us, renewing, sustaining and making us whole, and that we may be your body on earth, loving and caring in the world. Amen.

The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said: This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way, he took the cup after supper, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

*The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ.*

*The cup of blessing which we bless, is the communion of the blood of Christ.*

Prayer:

Loving God, as we have received these gifts of bread and wine,  
you have fed us with the spiritual food of the body and blood  
of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Thank you for assuring us of your goodness and love,  
and that we are members of his body.

**Renew us by your Holy Spirit,  
unite us in the body of your Son,  
and bring us with all your people  
into the joy of your eternal kingdom;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

And now hear us as we bring our prayers for others: for those who look forward in this New Year to new developments in relationships, to new baby in the family, to a new job or a new beginning - bless and shield them on their way.

We pray for those who find it hard to look forward, to those whose lives are blighted by fear or despair, those chained by addiction, those caught in pain or disability, those struggling with illness, those saddened by loss - that they may know new strength, new hope, new purpose, new peace.

We pray for those who will face new challenges and opportunities - that they may be able to meet them with wisdom and courage.

We pray for those who work and battle daily to bring health and peace to people and to nations - that they will find new strength and vision.

We pray for those at war, under oppression, or in poverty - that they may know the chance of a new beginning.

We pray for our own family and friends, especially those away from home and who are much in our thoughts at this time - that your love will bring them closer to us.

We pray for the church throughout the world - that your faithful people everywhere are revived and renewed by the contemplation of this holy and hope-filled season - and for your church here, that in this community of faith we may walk forward together into the year ahead with hope and resolution, sharing one another's needs, bearing one another's burdens, listening to one another's concerns and insights, and deepening our common witness and service, so that we might play our part in bringing your kingdom a little closer to this world.

God of all life, at this new beginning, we give thanks for all those who have lived with us here and are now in your loving eternity, beyond the constraints of earthly time and space. Keep us ever in mind of them, that we may follow them, just as they followed in the steps of Jesus.

May your spirit, which sang in them, sing in us until the Kingdom of Heaven rules on earth.

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 603

Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,  
urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,  
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:  
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for that Word, the Word of life which fires us,  
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,  
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:  
Lord of the Word, receive your people's praise.

Lord, for our land in this our generation,  
spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:  
for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,  
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

Lord, for our world when we disown and doubt you,  
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,  
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:  
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us -  
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,  
past put behind us, for the future take us,  
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

Benediction:

God, bless each of us as we travel on. In our times of need may we find a table spread in the wilderness and companions on the road. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with each of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more. Amen