



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

Sunday 15th May 2022

Call to Worship:

God stretches out the heavens
and shapes the earth.
Come and give thanks!

God raises up the mountains
and pours water into the seas.
Come and give thanks!

God calls forth plants from the soil
and forms animals in infinite variety.
Come and give thanks!

God breathes upon us
and fills us with life.
Come lift your voices in praise!

God gives our lives meaning
through laughter and tears.
Come lift your voices in praise!

God touches our hearts
through family and friends.
Come lift your voices in praise!

God loves us and blesses us
with everything good.
Come and worship!

God loves us and overwhelms us
with never-ending generosity.
Come and worship!

God loves us and surrounds us
with love in abundance!
Come and worship!

Prayer/Meditation:

Today again four people offer their worship.; we seek God in places of worship, in our own homes, wherever we may be; we focus our minds at this time of worship on the things of God; we seek play our part in the witness of the Christian community; and to share our faith with one another and with Christians throughout the world.

Our worship today, as every week, is part of our response to our experience of God in our lives and in the world around us. We approach worship with a mixture of feelings: feelings of wonder at the complexity of the world with its natural beauty, its amazing variety, its constant surprises, and its opportunities for relationships of love and caring which sustain us; feelings of thankfulness that we live in the time and place we do, that our material needs are met so abundantly, and that we are surrounded by family, friends, and brothers and sisters in Christ who nurture and sustain us through times of joy and times of tragedy; feelings of passion for the gospel of Christ because we believe that it is in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth that we come closest to seeing the nature of God, and that it is in his words and his actions and his promise that his spirit lives with us and among us that our spiritual needs are met and our lives enriched and fulfilled; feelings of doubt and confusion because we seem unable to comprehend the ultimate truths of the world, because we feel that we are floundering in a spiritual sea of uncertainty, because we sometimes think that as Christians and church members it is required of us to know all the answers, because we so often doubt our own faith and our own commitment to the kingdom of God; feelings of comfort and security because this is a place familiar to us where we can hear well-known words of comfort, sing favourite songs and meet with friends; feelings of determination to continue changing and growing in faith as we are challenged again with the call to serve God and contribute to the mission of the church, and feelings of inadequacy as we realise how great the task and how small our resources.

Whatever our own particular feelings at this time, may we find meaning in this time of worship, that we may go from here changed and more committed than ever to serve the kingdom of God.

Loving God, we praise you for your love shown to us in Jesus - love that goes on seeking us out; caring, guiding, protecting, forgiving, despite our lack of love and our failure to live as Jesus' disciples.

Loving God, forgive our feeble faith. Forgive us for caring so little about what the gospel means for us, so little about others, and so much for ourselves. Forgive us for turning the Christian faith into something we receive rather than something we share.

Loving God, may we live more truly as people of God. May we have a due sense of responsibility towards others - the poor, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, the oppressed, the lonely, the weak, the sorrowful.

May we recognise our responsibility towards God and the whole created world that we have been given, so that in everything we think and say and do, we may live for the Kingdom. And may we respond to God's love by loving God and by loving others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord

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: Leviticus 19:9-18

Hymn 473: God is love, and where true love is

Reading: John 13:31-35

Reflection:

[Y]ou shall love your neighbour as yourself... Leviticus 19:18

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. John 13:34

Here we have, from two separate stories and two separate times, the instruction to love each other. The first is from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, part of the instructions given to Moses, part of the Law, part of the Covenant. The second is from the Gospel of John, part of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples the night before he was put to death.

It's interesting to look at these two injunctions. We tend to think of the Old Testament in terms of a harsh Law and a vengeful God, and of the New Testament as telling the story of a loving God. We especially think of the book of Leviticus as that book that's full of rules - prohibitions and requirements.

It might be more helpful to call them by the names scholars now prefer, as the Hebrew Bible (or Hebrew Scriptures), and the Christian Bible (or Christian Scriptures). This can begin to do away with the sense that "new" is somehow better than "old." After all, both sources contain the story of the people of God and their efforts to understand their relationship with the Divine, and we find connection and meaning in the stories of both.

Yes, the Hebrew Bible does contain many disturbing accounts of conflict and conquest, of violence, and of harsh judgment. We struggle to recognize the God who would not only allow, but encourage, the violent takeover of peoples and nations; or the God who punished seemingly minor infractions with death.

But the Hebrew Bible also contains evidence of a loving God in many stories of God creating, rescuing, and providing for God's people—and in calling them back again and again through the words of the prophets. Even the details of the Law are less about exact behaviour than they are about how to live in community and how to treat one another. This reading today from Leviticus is not just about details, it's about right behaviour: it's about leaving the gleanings of the field and the fallen grapes of the vineyard for the poor and for the stranger. It's about taking care, as is so often stated in the Hebrew Scriptures, of the stranger, the orphan, the widow—the marginalized members of the community. This reading from Leviticus is about fairness and truth telling, about justice and ethical behavior—and it is also about love.

And it is this that Jesus is reminding his disciples. Again and again in the Gospels we hear Jesus talking about these same issues. About justice and fairness and ethical behavior and helping the poor and marginalized—about how these are the behaviours of the Kingdom of God. And it is Jesus who, when questioned on the Law, says that the greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbour, and that "on these hang all the Law and the prophets" Jesus is passing on the most basic and ancient foundations of his Jewish tradition, and he says it over and over again in many different ways, because it is also the basis of the Kingdom that he was encouraging his followers to make real—the Kingdom that we as Christians are to make real in this world, in the here and now.

We tend to get this all intellectually, as we argue over the fine points of Old and New Testament theology, and even as we attempt to bring into reality a social gospel, a liberation theology. But isn't it interesting how we always focus on the "love your neighbor" part of the

equation and skip over the “love yourself” bit? How is it that over the centuries we have come to believe that we can ignore that part, that we can only obey half of that command? How is it that love of self came to be equated with narcissism and selfishness, and that hatred of self came to be seen as the correct way?

The command says to “love your neighbour as yourself.” So how do we think we can love others if we never learn to love ourselves? How do we learn to cherish others and care for them if we never learn to do the same for ourselves? We live in a culture that devalues us and that worships death—a culture in which people drink and drug themselves into oblivion out of desperation, in which women and girls are taught to starve themselves or undergo dangerous procedures in order to fit some unrealistic media image of beauty and worth, in which people and relationships are sacrificed on the altar of “workaholism,” in which cyber-reality has replaced personal connections so we don’t have to deal with real people anymore, in which power at the end of a gun is ultimate power, in which the myth of safety is used to hold us hostage, in which war is seen as the only appropriate response. We live in a world that denies our basic human worth.

How are we to love ourselves when we are told and shown over and over again that we are unloveable? How do we reclaim our basic worth? How do we become whole, healed, holy people?

Here is where old and new merge: both speak to us of our value, of our worth, of God’s love for us. In the beginning, God looked upon the creation—which included human beings—and said, “It is very good.” Jesus said, “Blessed are you...” Yes, there are stories of violence and betrayal in the Bible and in our lives; yes, we make mistakes and act out of fear and hatred; yes, we too often destroy ourselves and each other and the rest of creation—but ultimately, our story is one of love and redemption. Ultimately, our story is Easter.

In both testaments, God calls people back again and again. Even when we don’t know it or hear it, God knows—and calls us “Beloved.” As God’s creation we have intrinsic worth. God does not ask us to dismiss that or to reject that, but to deeply accept it, to open ourselves to it—and to care for ourselves and honour ourselves as worthwhile; to nurture ourselves and our gifts, and to work to bring forth the Kingdom.

It’s like the advice given to new parents to nap when the baby naps, or to new employees in a bustling workplace. We tell them to care for themselves so they will have the resources to care for their babies, so that they will have the energy to do a good job. We must care for ourselves before we can care for others, we must fill the well before we can have anything to give. This is not narcissism or selfishness (which often come from fear and self-loathing), but self-love and wisdom.

Jesus cared for himself often by going off alone to pray and refresh himself, away from the crowds and the demands—this is a consistent image of him from every Gospel. Only then did he have anything to give to those who came to hear him speak, or who came to him for help. And, following his example, only out of the love and nurture and care that we provide ourselves—only out of that love can true love of neighbour come. Only by learning to love ourselves can we really learn to love each other. You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself...

Hymn 107: The love of God comes close

Prayer:

We remember that, before Jesus died, he prayed not just for himself but for others, and not only for his friends, but for all people, everywhere. He laid down his life not just for his friends, but for the sake of the kingdom, his mission being that everyone should come to know the love of

God. So we pray for our world of so much good and so much evil, so much joy and so much sorrow, so much beauty and so much ugliness.

We pray for those who have plenty and those who have little, those for whom life brings pleasure and those for whom it brings pain. We remember all who celebrate and all who mourn, all who look forward with confidence and all who view the future with dread.

We pray for people of faith and those of no faith; people who share our faith in Christ and people who express their faith in other ways. We remember those who look for truth and those who feel they can never find it; those who seek purpose and those who believe human life has no meaning or significance.

We remember the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the well-fed and the hungry, the employed and the unemployed, the free and the oppressed, the comfortably housed and the homeless.

Jesus said that those who mourn shall be comforted. We offer our prayers now for ourselves and others, remembering especially those who are in any kind of trouble or distress - of whom there are so many. Our world seems filled with pain, need and sorrow; the same world that Jesus came to transform, a world that he cared for so deeply that he gave his life for it.

We bring to mind the causes of so much suffering - the sin of greed, denying the many their share of the earth's riches to the benefit of the few; the sin of waste, wantonly squandering the world's God-given resources without thought for the future; the sin of intolerance, dividing families, communities and nations through a refusal to speak to or even acknowledge people of different opinions, nationalities or faiths.; the sin of pride, thinking too highly of ourselves and too poorly of others; the sin of indifference, caring too little about God, too little about anything.

We pray for those who pay the price of human folly - the poor and the hungry, the homeless and dispossessed, victims of war and violence, crime and cruelty; the distressed, isolated, crushed and forgotten, all who are deprived of love and denied hope.

In a moment of silence let us contemplate places we have been or places we have heard of, people we have met and people we have only read about, situations we have experienced and circumstances we can barely relate to, offering our own prayer for the life of the world

And as we think of the whole world, so we think of people and situations close to home, as now in silence we remember those whom we love, recalling their hopes and dreams, their worries and concerns; giving thanks for all they mean to us, naming them in our hearts....

And finally we pray for the family of the church, giving thanks for our place in it and for the influence it is able to bring to bear on the life of the world. May we be encouraged always to play our part in the church's life, that we, in our own way, however small that may be, may make our contribution to the life of the kingdom to which Jesus calls us.

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 620: For the healing of the nations

Benediction:

Let us go now in peace,
for Christ has called us to live in peace
among our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let us go now in courage,
for Christ has called us from the places of our life
to be agents of transformation and partners in healing.

Let us go now in joy and thanksgiving,
for Christ is our light!

Let us go now as one body,
to love and serve God as we love and serve the world!

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