



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 22nd May 2022

Call to Worship:

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Prayer/Meditation:

Let us take a moment to reflect on the days that have passed since last we met for worship. Have they been for us days of confidence or uncertainty? a days of peace or stress? days in which we have offered prayer? days when we have rejoiced in the company of family and friends? days spent alone? days that have refreshed and encouraged us us? days that have depressed or worried us? days that have been different from any other? days in which the pattern of our life has been unchanged? days in which we have learnt something? days in which we have helped someone? days in which our faith has guided us?

We bring this day and all our past days with us as we worship; we bring days which have passed slowly in tedium and days which have flashed by; days which have been monotonous routine; and days that stand in our memories as highlights of our lives; days which have passed without note and days which have changed us for ever. The sum of all our days past we bring with us; the total of all that we were and all that we have become we offer in worship, acknowledging that both we and our church are products of our past, yet called to face the future with hope and confidence in God's love.

But for now we concentrate on the present, gathering together all the strands of the past that have brought us together, giving thanks for what is good, expressing sorrow for what is bad, celebrating what is successful and admitting failure.

And we look ahead to the future - to tomorrow and all the days to come - praying that the forgiveness we seek and receive in our worship here will release us to be changed where we need to be changed and affirmed where we need to stay the same; that the words we speak and hear and sing here today will in some way strengthen us to face the days that lie ahead, that our worship will fill us with the energy and commitment we need to live each day as a disciple of Jesus. And may we find God in our worship this day; maybe not God as the prophets and kings and disciples encountered God in the Bible; maybe not God as we expect to find God, a Father, Judge and Saviour; but the God of our own experience, whatever that may be, whether a still small voice, a companion along the way or an eternal presence and power. May we find our God - the God we recognise in Jesus - and may our God be with us during and beyond our worship that we may know our lives now and always are upheld and surrounded by love and bound together with the lives of all people on earth.

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

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-4
 Colossians 3:12-25

Hymn 108:

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.
God leaves us free to seek him or reject him,
he gives us room to answer Yes or No.

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.

We long for freedom where our truest being
is given hope and courage to unfold.
We seek in freedom space and scope for dreaming,
and look for ground where trees and plants can grow.

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.

But there are walls that keep us all divided;
we fence each other in with hate and war.
Fear is the bricks and mortar of our prison,
our pride of self the prison coat we wear.

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.

O judge us, Lord, and in your judgement free us,
and set our feet in freedom's open space;
take us as far as your compassion wanders
among the children of the human race.

The love of God is broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind, and an eternal home.

Reading: John 2:13-22

Reflection:

In the United States of America there is a constitutional separation of church and state so that, in a nation which is founded on Christian principles, a nation which inscribes the words 'in God

we trust' on its currency, and in which the churches, or some of them at least, have significant influence in the election of political leaders, there is a deliberate policy to prevent the state interfering in church life and to prevent the church from influencing government policy.

The fact is that both religion and politics, especially in today's multi-faith and multi-cultural society, are such emotive and potentially contentious subjects that it is in the interests of both church and state to keep them apart.

And on the surface, this makes sense. Religion is seen by most people as a personal, individual conviction, a decision about belief and lifestyle that is no business of society in general, but is the choice of each person as an individual. Conversely, the political life of a nation has an effect on all citizens. Everyone has an obligation to abide by the civil laws of the nation and a responsibility to contribute to the political life of the country through their vote, regardless of what their affiliations might be. To have religion and politics connected, would run the risk of imposing a set of religious beliefs upon a large section of society who might be resistant to them. It seems to make sense.

But such a policy is not without its drawbacks and inconsistencies.

Many of the great commercial and industrial companies in the West have been founded and managed by Christians, yet it is so often those same companies that are guilty of flouting the law when it comes to employment practice, environmental issues or trade justice.

Company chairmen will happily and with a clear conscience attend church every Sunday while their employees are struggling to support their families on lower than minimum wages or are being denied basic workers rights.

It perhaps all stems from a shift in emphasis that the Christian religion has undergone over the years. That's a shift from Christianity as a community faith to Christianity as a personal faith. Our religion began as a sect of Judaism which, as we know, is very much a faith of the people rather than the individual. In the Old Testament it is always the people, the tribe, the family that is important. In this morning's reading from Isaiah we read of what is apparently God's plan for the peace of the world, and it is described exclusively in terms of nations; as indeed much of the Old Testament described the experiences of the whole people and its kings, leaders and prophets.

In more modern times, the church has taught that a personal relationship with God is the important thing, that a personal commitment to Christianity is the goal of all evangelism, and that the sum of individual faith will lead to a better society. This is patently not true. Abuses of law and morality continue despite the spread of Christianity throughout the world, discrimination and injustice are apparent in nations where Christianity is strong as much as where it is weak. Emphasis on personal salvation leads inevitably to a religion based on selfishness, where the priority of each individual is to obtain God's blessings for himself or herself, where any concern for others is almost a side-effect, seen as a consequence of personal commitment to God, but not as the primary (or even, perhaps a necessary) part of the Christian faith.

But a number of shifts of emphasis are again under way.

Firstly, it is coming to be understood that Jesus' priority was for the kingdom of God, and that therefore our faith, worship and service must be based on concern not for our own well-being, but that of others - and not others *after* we have taken care of ourselves, but others as much as

ourselves. In other words, we can again see the value of a religion which is based not exclusively upon personal salvation, but upon the older idea of a community of faith.

Secondly, there is a different understanding of what justice is. In Paul's letter to the Colossians there is advice about how people ought to treat one another, but this advice has been largely discarded in the modern world because, although it may have been perfectly acceptable in the first century middle East for wives to be subject to their husbands and slaves to their masters, we can see that such a structure of society is unjust. While we may be able to understand and accept the underlying message that all we do should be done as if serving God, we cannot accept the ways in which Paul suggests that should be done, by categorising people and treating them differently. People - all people - are people and should be treated as people regardless of the many physical, cultural, religious and other variations among them

And thirdly, our society is global. There are few places in the world we could not travel to in less than forty-eight hours, there are few nations or societies that we never hear news of or see television pictures from. Our world is no longer a small patch of territory to the East of the Mediterranean, or the countries bordering the Mediterranean and perhaps including southern Europe, as was Paul's world. Our world is no longer the Christendom of the Middle Ages - consisting of Europe and Asia. Our world is the whole world, our neighbours are people in Africa and America, the Pacific and the Caribbean, India and Australia. And as we know all too well, what happens in other parts of the world now directly involves us.

Among the church's four marks of mission is this: to transform unjust structures of society.

It seems an impossible challenge. How can we, as a small community of Christians, or even as the whole Christian church, change the way the world works; how can we make any difference in a world where governments and commercial enterprise between them seem to conspire to perpetuate oppression and injustice; and how can we do all this while steering clear of politics?

Well we can't, because it is the *structures* of society that are often unjust, and it is the structures of society that are established politically. You'll remember perhaps the television campaign run a few years ago by Christian Aid which said something along the lines of: 'give a man a fish a fish and he can feed his family for a day, but give him the means to catch his own fish and he can support them for a lifetime'. There is no doubt that what the church has traditionally done, and continues to do, supporting individual small projects and helping individual people in crisis and need, is a valuable contribution. But there is also the calling to make changes to the ways things are done and the ways people are treated that will ensure that the crises and need are less likely to arise.

We read from the Gospel according to John in which Jesus made what many would interpret as a political statement. By driving the money changers out of the temple, he was making a comment not on the practice of individuals, but on the practice of buying and selling in the Temple precinct.

At its heart the question of faith and politics is simple. If there is injustice evident, then is it, or is it not, the calling of Christians to work to remove it?

There is much we can do, individually and as a church. We can add our voice to those many others who support the various fair trade and trade justice campaigns; we can try to ensure that a Christian perspective is heard on issues which affect the lives and well-being of

others; we can protest when our own government proposes legislation which we believe to be unjust and discriminatory.

We can share our vision for the future of the world; a world of peace and justice where there is no discrimination, where there is no starvation and death in some parts while others waste and discard resources.

It is the church's vision - our vision - of the kingdom of God - and that involves seeking to change unjust structures of society in whatever ways we can.

Hymn 635:

Put peace into each other's hands
and like a treasure hold it,
protect it like a candle-flame,
with tenderness enfold it.

Put peace into each other's hands
with loving expectation;
be gentle in your words and ways,
in touch with God's creation.

Put peace into each other's hands
like bread we break for sharing;
look people warmly in the eye:
our life is meant for caring.

As at communion, shape your hands
into a waiting cradle;
the gift of Christ receive, revere,
united round the table.

Put Christ into each other's hands,
he is love's deepest measure;
in love make peace, give peace a chance,
and share it like a treasure.

Prayer:

Living God, we praise you for all that is good and precious in human life; the value, potential
and uniqueness of every individual.

For our family of humankind,
hear our prayer.

We pray for all those whose humanity is abused and exploited - victims of violence, torture and
rape,

children abused and neglected,
people addicted to drugs,
those living under corrupt and oppressive regimes.

For our family of humankind,
hear our prayer.

We pray for those whose humanity is diminished
by prejudice and discrimination,

subjected to insults, intimidation, hatred and suspicion,
day after day denied justice,
time and again deprived of the opportunity
to prove themselves.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those denied the chance to fulfil their potential,
whether through lack of education,
insufficient resources,
or denial of their human rights.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those whose lives are blighted by need,
burdened by debt or unemployment,
oppressed by poverty, hunger and homelessness,
crushed by natural catastrophe or personal disaster.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those who have lost their belief in their own worth,
overwhelmed by self-doubt,
beset by inner fears,
their confidence broken,
their faith in the future destroyed.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

We pray for those who mourn at the loss of loved ones,
life suddenly seeming empty of meaning
and stripped of joy, and we pray for those who battle against sickness and disease,
unable to live life to the full, and fearful as to what the future may hold.

For our family of humankind,

hear our prayer.

Living God, grant that the day will come when the worth of all will be recognised,
the rights of all respected,
the good of all pursued,
and harmony among all enjoyed.

Reach out in love, and show us how we can respond to the needs around us.

For our family of humankind

hear our prayer.

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 625:

God of freedom, God of justice,
God whose love is strong as death,
God who saw the dark of prison,
God who knew the price of faith:

touch our world of sad oppression
with your Spirit's healing breath.

Rid the earth of torture's terror,
God whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest,
God who shed the tears and blood;
move in us the power of pity,
restless for the common good.

Make in us a captive conscience
quick to hear, to act, to plead;
make us truly sisters, brothers,
of whatever race or creed:
teach us to be fully human,
open to each other's need.

Benediction:

We are the body of Christ.
May we have the heart of Christ,
tender for mercy.
May we have the eyes of Christ
to see a world in need.
May we have the feet of Christ
to bring good news.
Let us walk in peace!

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 all those we love, today and for ever more. Amen

