



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 29th May 2022

Call to Worship:

In the name of the restful Father,
In the name of the calming Son,
In the name of the peaceful Spirit,
May we and God be one.

We worship the God who inhabits our world
and indwells our lives.

We need not look up to find God, we need only to look around:
within ourselves,
beyond ourselves,
into the eyes of another.

We need not listen for a distant thunder to find God,
we need only listen to the music of life,
the words of children,
the questions of the curious,
the rhythm of a heartbeat.

We worship the God who inhabits our world
and who indwells our lives.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we give thanks for the opportunity again to join in this time of worship together; to share with our brothers and sisters in Christ in prayer and praise; to offer in worship all that we have achieved, all that we have experienced, all that has encouraged us and all that has hurt us since last we met. And we come also to offer our hopes and plans, our dreams and visions for the days that lie ahead. We come to continue our journey through the year, following, in our hearts and minds, the journey of Jesus through his life and ministry, going with him to places of joy and places of danger.

As we think back on the days that have passed since our last time of worship together, we give thanks for the many joys and blessings that have come our way since then; for the love and joy we have received from our relationships with others, for all that has brought us hope and encouragement, for the tasks we have completed and the achievement we have felt, for the laughter we have shared and for all the good things that have pointed to the presence of the Spirit in our lives.

And if there have been days of difficulty, strained relationships, hard words spoken; if there has been a sense of inadequacy or failure; if our words or actions have been based on our own desires rather than on the needs of others, then we seek forgiveness, pledging ourselves to walk in the footsteps of Christ, thankful for the renewal and re-creation that he offers, and determined to live in faith.

Loving God, we look forward to the week ahead. Some of us will look forward with eager anticipation, ready to face challenges, to receive blessings and to savour every minute as a gift from God. Some of us may be facing a difficult week full of obstacles and difficult decisions, of unpleasant tasks or work that is tedious and without joy. Some of us may be looking ahead to a week of routine in which every hour of work and leisure is planned and predictable. Whatever may be our prospects for the few days ahead, may they be lived with faith; may they be lived as if our life here was life in God's Kingdom; may they be lived with grace and peace, that our lives might be a reflection of the life of Christ, who calls us to follow him through darkness into light and to share in his resurrection life of justice, peace 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: Acts 17:22-31

Hymn 74:

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation:
Come ye who hear,
Brothers and sisters, draw near,
Praise him in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
Bears thee on eagle's wings, and through all troubles sustaineth:
Hast thou not seen,
All that is needful hath been
Granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee!
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee:
Ponder anew
All the Almighty can do,
Who with his love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath come now with praises before him:
Let the amen
Sound from his people again:
gladly for aye we adore him!

Reading: John 14:15-21

Reflection:

When it comes to our Christian faith, what do we know? What do we know and how do we know it? The children's hymn says, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' Is

it as simple as that? What we know is that Jesus loves us, and the reason we know it is because it says so in the Bible?

There are few people today, Christians or non-Christians, who are convinced by the argument that something is true because it says so in the Bible. Our society looks for more than just blind acceptance of the teachings of a book, however holy and ancient that book may be seen to be.

Paul, in his address to the Greeks said of God, 'he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged'. Paul wisely doesn't speculate about when that day of judgement might come, but how did Paul know that? What did Paul really *know* as he stood in front of the areopagus - the court of justice - and began to speak to the Greeks. Well for one thing he *did* seem to know his audience. Christianity was essentially a sect of Judaism, but Paul recognised that this would have no appeal whatsoever to the Greeks. Therefore he initially says nothing at all about Jesus of Nazareth. (Indeed it would seem from the previous verses that he had already tried that and the people were just confused, calling him a 'babbling and proclaimer of foreign divinities'. So perhaps learning from this experience, Paul does his best to proclaim the Christian gospel at least at first in language the Greeks can understand.) He doesn't pitch in straight away talking about Jesus and about resurrection - a notion that would have been alien to the Greeks. Instead he talks about a God who does not live in shrines and demand to be waited on night and day by hordes of faithful priests and acolytes. No, he says, this is a different kind of God, a God who is creator of all things. Who has created all the peoples of the world and put them in their various places where they will 'search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him'. And he says that this god might well be found, for is not far from each one of us, indeed it is in him that we 'live and move and have our being'.

All this is a much more Greek than Jewish way of understanding the nature of God. It is Paul translating his faith into language that can be understood by people of different background and different religious culture. And he found that if he presented his faith in a different way for different people, then it would travel quite well, and people like Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others would be convinced enough to join him.

Paul's example would seem to suggest to us that it is not only possible but necessary to present the gospel in ways that are understandable and meaningful to the people we are addressing at the time. Paul knew that if he had begun to speak to the Greeks about the coming of a Messiah, he would have made no converts at all.

In our society we know that there are many who are indifferent and many who are hostile to the Christian faith, who are immediately turned off by any hint of the supernatural or miraculous. Indeed there are many who have left the church over the years because it seems to have failed to speak to the modern world and has persisted in using obsolete theological language of salvation, atonement, justification, sanctification and so on, that means nothing to people today.

Like Paul the church needs to know its audience. It needs to know that, in general terms, there is less interest among people in our country today in personal salvation than in issues of justice and peace; less anxiety about life after death than about the plight of those whose lives here and now are little more than a living death; less value given to right beliefs than to appropriate behaviour. The fact is - and it is a difficult fact for us in the church to swallow - not so many people care about God or are interested in learning about Jesus, not so many people read the Bible or are even interested in having a look at it. But there *are* many, perhaps increasing numbers, who see the need for a just and equal sharing of the earth's resources, who see the injustice of a small number of wealthy nations living off the poverty and suffering of the majority of poorer nations. Perhaps it is *our* job in the church to be telling them that these issues of justice, poverty, forgiveness, sharing, reconciliation, were what Jesus of

Nazareth was all about and if that means we must drop a lot of the God-talk about Christian doctrine and ritual, then so be it. Jesus was all about the Kingdom of God and had little time for the religious establishment of the day. *We* are the religious establishment of the day today.

‘What do we know about faith, about the Bible, about Christian spirituality?’ What *should* we know? Actually, Jesus makes it quite clear that it’s not about knowing at all. Our spiritual health doesn’t really depend on how well we know the Bible, or how much we know about Christian belief and doctrine; our spiritual future doesn’t depend on us knowing the right answers to questions of life and death.

Ultimately the Christian gospel comes down to life in the Kingdom of God, and life in the Kingdom of God comes down to love. John’s gospel makes it clear that the priority of the number one priority of the community was love. It is love that sustains the Christian community; it is the presence of love that allows the coming of the Holy Spirit; and it is love that goes out from the Christian community and changes the world.

Not knowing, not even believing, but *loving* is the power behind the Christian community. Which is just as well, because we really *don’t* know, we really have more questions than answers, and it is both a relief and a rather scary challenge to discover that Jesus demands not our knowledge, but our love.

Hymn 653:

We cannot measure how you heal
or answer every sufferer’s prayer,
yet we believe your grace responds
where faith and doubt unite to care.

The pain that will not go away,
the guilt that clings from things long past,
the fear of what the future holds
are present as if meant to last.

But present too is love which tends
the hurt we never hoped to find,
the private agonies inside,
the memories that haunt the mind.

Your hands, though bloodied on the cross,
survive to hold and heal and warn,
to carry all through death to life
and cradle children yet unborn.

So some have come who need your help,
and some have come to make amends:
your hands which shaped and saved the world
are present in the touch of friends.

Lord, let your Spirit meet us here
to mend the body, mind and soul,
to disentangle peace from pain
and make your broken people whole.

Prayer:

Loving God,
In love You created us,
and in love you sustain us, day after day.
So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to you

We pray for the world around us,
for the many who continue to suffer and call out for help:
for those without enough to eat or drink;
for those caught up in violence and political uprisings;
for those picking up the pieces after a natural disaster;
for those desperate to find work to support their families.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

We also pray for family and friends who are suffering:
those afflicted or affected by the coronavirus plague,
those struggling physically or emotionally,
those working to overcome mental illness;
those facing challenges at home or at work;
those grieving the death of a loved one.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

God, You have called us to pray for our enemies;
to bless, rather than curse, those who deliberately seek to harm us.

We think now—

of those who have hurt us, physically or emotionally;
those who have stolen from us,
or cheated us of what was rightfully ours;
those who have spread rumours about us,
or turned our friends against us.

We ask you to bless them.

Open our hearts so that we may see them as you see them,
and be able to respond to them with your love.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

We pray for your church around the world,
that it might be a living demonstration of your kingdom:
offering hospitality to all,
ready to help in times of need,
showing love to friends and enemies alike,
seeking to live in peace with all.

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

God, we praise you for your faithful love,
and for the mercy you have shown toward us.

Open our eyes to recognize your presence in our lives.
Give us grace to hear your call,
and courage to follow without hesitation,
knowing that your way is the way that leads to life.

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 579:

Lord, thy Church on earth is seeking
thy renewal from above;
teach us all the art of speaking
with the accent of thy love.
We would heed thy great commission:
'Go now into every place --
preach, baptize, fulfil my mission,
serve with love and share my grace'.

Freedom give to those in bondage,
lift the burdens caused by sin.
Give new hope, new strength and courage,
grant release from fears within.
Light for darkness; joy for sorrow;
love for hatred; peace for strife:
these and countless blessings follow
as the Spirit gives new life.

In the streets of every city
where the bruised and lonely dwell,
let us show the Saviour's pity,
let us of his mercy tell;
to all lands and peoples bringing
all the richness of thy word,
till the world, thy praises singing,
hails thee Christ, Redeemer, Lord.

Benediction:

When fear and uncertainty circle around,
May we encounter the calming presence of Jesus.
When we feel isolated and alone,
May we encounter Immanuel, God-With-Us
When we feel frustration and boredom,
May we encounter the energising presence of the Spirit.
May we find our worth in our being as well as our doing.

May we savour the slowness and travel with care.
May the face of God turn toward us, and
May we find comfort in the warmth of God's love.

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