



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 19th June 2022

Call to Worship:

I will sing of the Lord's great love for ever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.

I will declare that your love stands firm for ever;
that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

May the peace of the Creator God be upon this world
binding all people together in unity and love.
May the peace of the forgiving Christ be upon this world
cleansing and restoring human relationships.
May the peace of the guiding Spirit be upon this world
replacing hatred with friendship and conflict with love.

Prayer/Meditation:

With open arms you welcome all who call on your name—
who acknowledge you as Lord, and look to you in faith.
No one stands outside the circle of your mercy and love.

And so we come to offer you our worship—
to declare that you are our God,
and that we are your people,
called and chosen by you from the very beginning.

Through the presence of your Holy Spirit
open our eyes to see you here;
open our minds to receive your truth,
and our mouths to speak and sing your praise.

For you alone are God—
worthy of all praise and worship,
now and to the end of time.

Almighty God,
we confess that we have taken your commandments
and turned them into rules.
We have criticised those who have fallen short
and selfishly proclaimed ourselves righteous.
We have failed to understand the spirit of the commandments
and the Way that was shown by you to live,
loving God and loving our neighbours.
Forgive us for turning your law into burdens
for others and ourselves,
instead of a Way to love and freedom in you.

We are loved.
Love is the Way.
When we love God, we love others.
When we truly lay down our life for others,
we lay down our life for God.
We give ourselves to God by serving others.
May we know that in God's love there is forgiveness,
healing, and reconciliation.

In your mercy, forgive us.
Remind us again of the deep love you showed toward us
when we were still in need—
a love so deep that it sent you willingly to the cross.

Show us how to love others as you have loved us.
Teach us your compassion,
so that we may be your hands and feet to those in need.

God, we remember with wonder and joy
that your spirit is reaching everywhere:
rejoicing in the liveliness of all living things;
touching what is wounded or ill with healing power;
gathering in the lonely, the lost, the least;
soothing ancient animosities;
creating and recreating a vision of hope.

Come now, Holy Spirit.
Let our worship rejoice in you,
and lift our hearts,
and bind us in one family of loving grace.

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: Colossians 3:1-11

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: Luke 12:13-21

Reflection:

Both of today's Bible readings draw a contrast between earthly things and things of the Kingdom. In Colossians, the 'earthly things' are immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language and lying, and they should all be put to death. In the gospel, the 'earthly things' are possessions, and Jesus tells a parable whose interpretation at first sight seems fairly obvious and fairly simple. It's the little parable that Jesus tells of the rich farmer whose harvests are so abundant that he is able to pull down his barns and build bigger ones to store all his produce. He believes that what he has stored away will provide an income for him for many years and so he starts to enjoy life instead of working. Not a good plan, Jesus suggests, because God says to the man, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

Now, the point of the story on the face of it would seem to be a warning against the accumulation of wealth, and indeed this passage of scripture has often been used in Christian preaching and teaching to emphasise danger of riches. There is no point in accumulating wealth because you never know the minute when 'your life will be demanded of you', you will die and all the wealth you have gathered will be of no use to you at all. Far better, then, than storing up treasures for ourselves is to be 'rich towards God' as the New Revised Standard Version puts it. Little comfort, it would appear, for people who are contributing to pension funds.

This parable is often quoted to warn against the danger of consumerism, the acquisition of bigger and better houses, cars, appliances, holidays and all the trappings of modern Western society.

And that's a reasonable and quite acceptable interpretation, and we could end the sermon at this point with that message - don't be too greedy - but if we look a little more closely into the context of the parable, and the words that Luke actually wrote, then we will find a couple interesting new angles to the parable.

First of all, take a look at where the parable is set within the narrative of Luke's gospel. Immediately before it, Jesus has been telling his disciples not to worry about what they are going to say if they are challenged about their faith. When they are called to give account of themselves, the Holy Spirit 'will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say'. So - don't worry.

In the middle of all this Jesus is interrupted by someone who obviously hasn't been listening very closely, because he takes Jesus off at a complete tangent by asking Jesus about his inheritance. Jesus responds with the parable of the rich farmer, and then immediately resumes his theme of 'don't worry', this time telling his listeners that they shouldn't be worried about the material things of life. Why should it be that Luke would allow the flow of the 'don't worry' theme to be interrupted by teaching about wealth?

Perhaps there is a connection. Maybe indeed the parable isn't about wealth at all. It is about *treasure*, and treasure is not necessarily wealth; treasure is what is ultimately important to us. Most of us will have somewhere in our homes articles of treasure. They may have no monetary value whatsoever: photograph albums full of family snaps, artefacts from our childhood, gifts we have received from people who are special to us. Items that mean nothing to anyone else; treasure that is treasure to us but just a lot of old junk to someone else. And it may be that the value of the rich farmer's produce lay not primarily in its monetary value, but in the fact that it offered him security - he was worried about his future and wanted to do something about it. So it may be that his motivation was not acquisitiveness or greed, but the simple human desire for somewhere to live, enough food to eat, and enough spare cash to relax and enjoy himself - exactly what any one of us would aspire to in retirement.

So we might ask, 'If that's the case, then what has the man done so wrong that Jesus condemns his behaviour?' After all, the fact that he is apparently going to die during the night does not necessarily mean that he was wrong to make provision for his future. What about his family? It's surely not wrong to provide for them even if he himself does not live to see the benefit of his saving.

And this brings us to the second new angle to this parable, the business of the man's death. Almost every English translation of Luke either says specifically that the man will die that night, or implies it very strongly:

This night thy soul shall be required of thee (King James Version); this night your life will be demanded from you (New International Version); you will die this very night (New Living Translation). But there's one translation that says something different, and it's interesting that it's a translation that claims to be a *literal* rendering of the Greek text that simply says what the Greek says, without trying to make it into elegant English or to contaminate it with interpretation that tries to express what the translator thought Jesus might have said. And that translation in verses 19 and 20 of Luke chapter 12 says: *and I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast many good things laid up for many years, be resting, eat, drink, be merry. And God said to him, Unthinking one! this night thy soul they shall require from thee, and what things thou didst prepare -- to whom shall they be?*

So that man accumulated a generous retirement fund of 'many good things' and God said 'tonight *they* shall require your soul'. It is, in this literal translation, the man's possessions that demand his soul. His possessions come to possess him.

Jesus' warning, in this interpretation, is not against wealth or even greed; it is against the possibility that possessions may take over, may become the most important thing in life and that the truly important things, summed up by Jesus in the expression 'rich toward God', may be neglected or forgotten. The message has just as much impact, if not more, without the need to infer the man's death at all. On the contrary, the man's life becomes impoverished and almost purposeless if all he is doing is hoarding, guarding and protecting the wealth that will bring him a secure future - a future that Jesus goes on to tell people not to worry about.

And that is a message that is surely very relevant today, especially in our affluent society where the danger of being possessed by possessions is so great.

It is hard to lose our possessions. A woman whose house had been damaged by flooding and who had lost all her furniture and much of the contents of her house told a news reporter: 'I

feel as if my life is over.’ The loss of possessions does not often lead to the loss of life, and the regarding of our possessions as an integral part of who we are does not often lead to a richer life. I’m sure we can all understand how easy it is to have our soul demanded of us by things, how things can become the most important part of a person’s life, how the loss of things could be for some tantamount to the loss of life - and that is just what Jesus warns against.

In fact, in the Kingdom of God the opposite is true. It is not the loss of possessions that brings poverty of the soul, but veneration of them, obsession with them. The gospel is not about things, it is about people and it is about relationships and it is about the Kingdom of God - about being ‘rich toward God’. Those are the gospel priorities, and while we know and are thankful that the ownership of possessions can make life comfortable and secure for us, we remain mindful always of the danger that our things can demand our soul from us, and when that happens, *then* our life is over, for the priority becomes our need for wealth, security, possessions, and not our passion for the Kingdom of God.

Hymn 586:

All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray our trust;
what with care and toil is builded, tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power hour by hour is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth, deep his wisdom, passing thought;
splendour, light and life attend him, beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore from his store new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty giver bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth, pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand at his hand; joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call one and all; ye who follow shall not fall.

Prayer:

Loving God, hear our cry of thanksgiving -
for the graciousness with which you hear
for the patience with which you listen
for the grace with which you care
hear our cry of thanksgiving...
for the ways you accompany us through deep valleys
for the ways you lead us to still meadows
for the ways you provide all we need
hear our cry of thanksgiving...
for transforming death into resurrection life,
for opening our eyes to recognize you
hear our cry of thanksgiving...

Loving God, hear our cry for help -
for those surrounded by the shroud of death
for those covered by the mantle of dying
for those hemmed-in by illness, visible or hidden
hear our cry for help...
for those weighed down with worries
for those carrying the burden of distress
for those overwhelmed by isolation
hear our cry for help...
for those who are weary
for those who are tattered and worn
for those who collapse from exhaustion
hear our cry for help...

Loving God, hear our cry for communities of faith -
that we celebrate the blessing of being together
that we embrace unity in the reality of distance
that we foresee a future side-by-side, hand-in-hand
hear our cry for communities of faith...
that we sense purpose beyond ourselves
that we perceive the needs of creation
that we stretch ourselves to respond
hear our cry for communities of faith...
that our ways be formed by your Way
that our lives be shaped by your Life
that our love be your Love
hear our prayers for the world....

Loving God, we are a world that is desperate for your grace.
When powers struggle for dominance,
and war, oppression and abuse result;
When groups of people oppose one another
because of ideology, religion or culture;
We need a God who is bigger than ourselves,
and our personal interests.
When people are disregarded and devalued
because of poverty, geography or disease;
When compassion and justice is withheld to some
because of who they are, what they have done or where they have come from;
We need a Saviour who is more compassionate than we are
who includes even those we would exclude.

When resources are mismanaged and abused,
and the world and its creatures are destroyed;
When motivation is scarce and creativity is in short supply
to address the challenges that we face;
We need a Spirit who is more powerful and more creative
than we could ever be.

Lord God, Loving Saviour, Empowering Spirit,
we offer you these prayers
because we need you so desperately.
Captivate us, call us and fill us,
that we may be carriers of your eternal life
to this world that you love so dearly.

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 606:

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
where sound the cries of race and clan,
above the noise of selfish strife,
we hear your voice, O Son of Man.

In haunts of wretchedness and need,
on shadowed thresholds dark with fears,
from paths where hide the lures of greed,
we catch the vision of your tears.

From tender childhood's helplessness,
from human grief and burdened toil,
from famished souls, from sorrow's stress,
your heart has never known recoil.

The cup of water given for you still
holds the freshness of your grace;
yet long these multitudes to view
the strong compassion in your face.

O Master, from the mountainside
make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
among these restless throngs abide;
O tread the city's streets again,

till all the world shall learn your love,
and follow where your feet have trod;
till glorious from your heaven above,
shall come the city of our God.

Benediction:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Send us out to live lives that glorify you
Help us to be people of peace
Empower us to recognize your call
In our families

In our communities
In our work places and schools
In our churches and in our world.

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

Amen