



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 14th August 2022

Call to Worship:

Blessed be the name of God from age to age,
for wisdom and power are God's.
God gives wisdom to the wise,
and knowledge to those who have understanding.
God reveals deep and hidden things,
God knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with God.

Into the dark places of the world where people are frightened and hungry
May God bring light and love
Into places where people are fighting; into places where people have no homes
May God bring light and love
Into the places where we feel unsafe; into situations that hurt us and scare us
May God bring light and love.

Prayer/Meditation:

God, before time began,
God, after all time ends,
God, of the present moment,
we worship you.

Before our earliest memories
you knew us;
after all memories shall cease
you will know us still.

Out of reach
of the highest endeavours of science;
undefined by the deepest workings of our brains,
yet to the humble heart,
the questing spirit,
the anguished soul,
the quiet mind,
you choose, in love and mercy,
to make yourself known.

Before such love,
such divinity,
what can we do

but wait in silence,
trusting in you
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Day by day
we struggle to achieve,
rarely stopping to ask
if our achievements match your will.

Day by day
we battle to communicate,
rarely remembering to check
if our communication is a channel
for your good news.

Day by day
we endeavour to control,
rarely pausing to ensure
that first we are controlled
by your Spirit.

Forgive the frantic fury
of our anxious lives;
speak to us
in the midst of the struggles
of daily living;
catch us now, we pray,
as we wait, together, on you.

Gracious God,
your love brings
life to dead souls,
light to dark minds,
strength to weak wills.

Show us how to search for you
in the midst of life;
help us to believe and trust
that no wrong we have done,
and no good we have failed to do,
is too great for you to pardon,
through Jesus Christ your Son...

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 34:27-35

Hymn 35

God is unique and one
Father, Sustainer, Lord!
Patterns of life were spun
by his creative Word.
Of his intention, love and care
we are with growing trust aware.

Love came to earth in Christ,
our common life to share;
choosing to be the least,
willing a cross to bear.
He died, he rose, that we might live
and all our love, responding, give.

The Holy Spirit moves
people to trace God's plan;
such inspiration proves
more than the mind can span.
Each listening heart is led to find
the will of God for humankind.

He shall for ever reign,
ruler of time and space;
God in the midst of life,
seen in the human face.
We give expression to our creed
by love in thought, in word and deed.

Reading: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Reflection:

It goes without saying that the Bible is of vital importance to the Christian faith. The United Reformed Church's statement of nature faith and order, which we recite in worship on special occasions such as ordinations says: The highest authority for what we believe and do is God's Word in the Bible. This makes Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, a religion with a book; a religion whose basic beliefs are derived from a collection of writings.

And because we set such store by the Bible, we tend to think of it as more than just a book. It is seen as the word of God for us, a view which has ancient precedent.

In the reading today from Exodus, we see what is perhaps the beginning of the idea of a holy scripture. It's part of the story of the rocky relationship between God and the people as they wander through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

Moses, you will recall, has been up the mountain and returned with the law etched on stone tablets, only to discover that while he was gone the people have turned away from their God and have started worshipping an idol. Moses is understandably furious at this, and in a fit of rage he smashes the tablets of the law on the ground and destroys the idol.

The Moses goes off up the mountain again and does some hard bargaining with God, and he is finally given another chance. He returns down the mountain with a new set of tablets on which he has inscribed the words of God's law. What Moses brings back down the mountain is a

covenant between God and the people in which God promises his protection and guidance in exchange for obedience to a short list of rules - the Ten Commandments.

As we would see if we read further on through the books of Exodus and Leviticus, it was not long before the ten simple rules of the original covenant were expanded and developed until they became a whole system for governing the religious life and indeed the day to day of the people. Over the years different kinds of writing as well as the laws came to be gathered into a body: the writings of the prophets, the history of the people, the poetry of the Psalms, and so on. All kinds of documents bound together in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and all, as the writer of 2 Peter reminds us, are useful.

We know too that the New Testament is made up of different elements. The oldest are some of the letters of Paul then the gospels, and then various other letters written by unknown Christians. And we remember of course that there were very many other Christian documents written and in circulation at the same time as the ones we are familiar with. The Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, various epistles and books of the Acts of some of the disciples. There came a point, however, sometime in the fourth century, when the Christian Church agreed on which documents should be canonical (that is, included in the Church's holy scriptures) and which should be rejected. I suspect that many if not most Christians today are unaware of the existence of many Christian writings contemporary with those in the New Testament but rejected by the church, or how some of the books of the New Testament such as the letter of the James and the Revelation to John only made it in to the Bible after long and often acrimonious debate. Since the fourth century, the church's scriptures have become the Holy Bible, unalterable and believed to be the inspired word of God, the authority for what we believe and do.

But what, then, of all the Christian literature that has been written since the fourth century. The Bible itself contains about 780,000 words (about three times the length of the longest of the Harry Potter books). How many million, how many billion more words have been written about the Bible, about the Church, about Christian life, faith and belief in the last few hundred years? If the Bible is the authority for what we believe and do, then should we perhaps restrict our reading to the Bible itself and ignore any subsequent Christian writing as unnecessary? Have the great Christian writers and theologians, St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, contributed anything of value to our understanding of our faith and life? And what about modern writers? And what, particularly, about the words of the hymn-writers we use to express our faith every Sunday in worship and who collectively provide more words for a typical church service than the Bible does? How should we view them?

Well maybe should view them as just as valuable as the Bible itself, if in a different way. The Bible, after all, for all that is our authority for faith and life, is nonetheless locked in its own time and culture. It is, to be blunt about it, foreign to us. It is only by discerning under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (as the URC's statement of nature faith and order puts it), that we can even attempt to understand much of what the Bible means for us. Now, there are many Christians who would say that the Bible, being the inspired word of God, is written for all people of all times and can be taken at face value in every respect; but the trouble with that approach is that it inevitably leads to distortions and contradictions. Is it really necessary, or even possible, to fully obey all the OT law, for example. Should we, as Jesus suggests, pluck out our eye if it offends us?

The Bible needs to be interpreted, and our faith needs to develop and evolve as the world changes around us. That is why Christian writing other than scripture is so important. We can illustrate this with the words of a couple of hymns, actually two translations of the same Easter hymn. The first translation was done at the end of the 19th century and includes the verse:

*Death's flood has lost his chill.
Since Jesus crossed the river:
Lover of souls, from ill
My passing soul deliver.*

The second translation was made in the 1960s, and says:

*Let every life be free
from all that would enslave it,
for risen again is Christ,
who came to earth to save it.*

Two texts on the same theme, derived from the same original, but very different. One showing the Victorian preoccupation with death and personal salvation, the other showing the more modern understanding of resurrection as a liberation from death to life. One, if you like, other-worldly, the other this worldly. Very different, but here's the thing. Each is firmly based on the Bible account of the crucifixion and resurrection, and on the writings of Paul and the other new testament authors. Each hymn, though their messages are very different, is grounded in an understanding of the New Testament, the highest authority for what we believe and do. I've long thought that there's a strong argument for taking our hymn-singing a lot more seriously. Our hymns are not just a selection of songs that cheer up an otherwise tedious hour of worship. Well - they may be that as well, but their primary purpose is to express our faith, to give every member of the congregation the opportunity to participate in worship by singing words together that say what we believe, that express our thoughts, feelings, hopes and visions for the church and for ourselves.

And hymn styles change, and it is right and good that they should, for they are written to express what we believe *now*. Some of our favourite hymns may have been written hundreds of years ago, and some of them may still be helpful and appropriate today, but many are not. We are no longer comfortable singing about plunging ourselves into a fountain filled with blood, for example, but we are more concerned with care for the environment, fair trade and human rights, issues about which the old hymns say little or nothing.

Our Christian writing, be that hymns, poetry, prayers or books, needs to be relevant and contemporary and even radical, and it needs to be grounded in the Bible, for it is only in exploring our faith in new ways and by reading and re-reading the Bible in new ways that the Bible can truly be the highest authority for what we believe and do, and not a dusty relic of a bygone age.

Hymn 483

We are your people:
Lord, by your grace,
you dare to make us
Christ to our neighbours
of every nation and race.

How can we demonstrate
your love and care
speaking or listening?
battling or serving?
help us to know when and where.

Called to portray you,
help us to live
closer than neighbours,
open to strangers,
able to clash and forgive.

Glad of tradition,
help us to see
in all life's changing
where you are leading,
where our best efforts should be.

Joined in community,
breaking your bread,
may we discover
gifts in each other,
willing to lead and be led.

Lord, as we minister
in different ways,
may all we're doing
show that you're living,
meeting your love with our praise.

Prayer:

God,
you have called us to be a people of prayer—
to continue the ministry of intercession handed on to us
by Jesus Christ Himself.

And so we come before you with confidence,
bringing our prayers for the world you love.

We pray for those who, like Jesus' disciples,
find themselves surrounded by high winds and stormy seas;
those who feel overwhelmed by events and circumstances—
the loss of a job,
the death of a loved one,
serious accident or illness,
chronic pain,
depression,
or loneliness
and who don't know where to turn.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like Joseph,

find themselves deeply wounded by people they love—
people they thought they knew and trusted—
and who are struggling to know how to respond.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like Peter,
are experiencing a crisis of faith;
who long to whole-heartedly trust in God
but are held back by questions and doubts.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like the prophet Elijah,
have fallen into despair;
who have begun to doubt God's presence and power;
or question God's call in their lives.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like Joseph,
have had their hopes and dreams crushed;
those whose lives have suddenly taken a different turn,
and who now wonder what lies ahead for them.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, it is not your will that any should suffer.
We offer our prayers for all those who hunger and thirst,
those who live in the midst of violence or poverty,
and those who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Through the life-giving power of your Holy Spirit,
make your sustaining presence known to all who are in pain or need,
so that they, too, may know your love and live.

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,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.

To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead us, Father, into freedom;
from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.

All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned:
pride of status, race or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life's brief span.

You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Benediction:
Eternal light shine in our hearts.
Eternal goodness deliver us from evil.
Eternal power be our support.
Eternal wisdom scatter the darkness of our ignorance.
Eternal pity have mercy on us
that with all our heart and mind
and soul and strength we may seek Your face
and be brought by Your infinite mercy into Your holy presence.
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.