



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 21st August 2022

Call to Worship:

Come, all who are thirsty, says Jesus our Lord:
come, all who are weak, taste the living water
that I shall give.

Dip your hands in the stream, refresh body and soul,
drink from it, depend on it, for this water will never run dry.
Come, all who are thirsty, says Jesus, our Lord.

As we come to Jesus, may we dream of a world made new,
Where together we shout for justice,
And as one we fight against oppression.
May we dream of a world made new,
Where together we seek God's righteousness
And as one we sing God's praise.
May we dream of a world made new,
Where together we climb God's mountain,
And as one we enter the promised land.
May we dream of a world made new,
Where together we proclaim the good news of God's kingdom,
And as one we enjoy its peace, and abundance and love.

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 glimpse 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. We say the Lord's Prayer together.

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: Isaiah 58:9b-14

Hymn 589: How firm a foundation

Reading: Luke 13:10-17

Reflection:

There are Christians around today still who view Sunday as the Christian sabbath; indeed, in some of the more remote rural areas of the country, the word 'sabbath' is used instead of the word 'Sunday'. And there are many who still observe Sunday as the Lord's Day - a day of complete rest and no work. Why can Christians sometimes be so protective of Sunday, the Christian sabbath, especially in the light of the story we read from Luke's gospel?

Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath, and is immediately criticised by the leader of the synagogue, who reminds the crowd:

There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day" (v. 14).

This synagogue official is portrayed as some kind of fanatic about the rules whose concern for sabbath observance seems to outweigh any common decency. Our first response may be to wonder how anyone could be so stupid.

This woman has been stooped over - unable to stand up straight - unable to look people in the eye for eighteen years. But having encountered Jesus for just for a moment, this woman was suddenly freed from her infirmity. Suddenly she could stand straight - look Jesus in the eye - breathe properly - walk and run. Hallelujah!!!

Everything that had been wrong for eighteen years was finally right. It was like being freed from prison. And we can be sure that the villagers were overjoyed to see what had happened. They knew what it was like to endure hardship, and they were thrilled to see this woman freed from the prison of her infirmity.

But the synagogue leader could only point out that Jesus had broken the rules! He had no words of praise, no commendation. All he seemed concerned about were the rules.

When Jesus cured this woman Luke says that "she stood up and began praising God"! How could anyone find fault with that? But the synagogue employee was annoyed that the rules had

been flouted. Why was he so upset?

The first thing in his favour is that the Fourth Commandment prohibits work on the Sabbath. It says: *Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work.*

But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

That's clear enough, isn't it! And it shows us that the synagogue leader was *not* just being a petty stickler for the rules, fanatical for doing the right thing whatever the circumstances. The Sabbath was a sacred time, a holy time, a time ordained by God. It wasn't all about rules; it was about obedient service to God. It was sacred.

Secondly, there wasn't any reason why Jesus couldn't heal this woman the next day. Sabbath rules also said that he couldn't travel, so he would still be in town. The woman wasn't going anywhere. She had put up with her infirmity for eighteen years. There was no reason why she couldn't survive one more day.

Thirdly, to observe the law was to honour God. As nearly as the synagogue leader could tell, Jesus was deliberately violating the law - and quite unnecessarily at that - and was therefore guilty of dishonouring the Sabbath - and dishonouring God. As Isaiah said "...if you refrain from trampling on the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my Holy Day...then you shall take delight in the Lord..." As far as this person could tell, Jesus did not appear to be 'taking delight in the Lord'.

And fourthly, the synagogue leader was responsible for making sure that people in his town observed the law. He had a job to do, and he was just trying to do it. But it may be the way in which he was doing his job that is the crux of the matter. He must have known perfectly well, as Jesus knew, and no doubt all those present knew, that there were exceptions to the sabbath law, one of which was that it was permissible to give help on the sabbath to someone who was suffering. It is tempting to think that the man was not so much concerned about upholding the sabbath law as about asserting his authority in the face of this healing intruder.

Jesus very simply exposed the man's hypocrisy by reminding him that it was lawful to look after animals on the sabbath - because they needed daily care - and explained that people - especially suffering people - needed care as well.

Isn't it, then, acceptable to free this woman from her bondage on the Sabbath? Isn't it acceptable to defeat ill-health on the Sabbath? Isn't it acceptable to show a little Godly compassion on the Sabbath?

In the gospel according to Mark, Jesus is reported as having said, "*The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath*"

This reminds us what the sabbath actually is. The Hebrew word *shabat* simply means 'rest'. the sabbath is a day of rest and its purpose is to provide time for re-creation and strengthening. It is not about obeying rules, it is not about following traditions, it is not even primarily about finding time for God, time to worship. It is about *rest*. Simple as that.

And this little story from Luke serves as a pattern or template for the way in which we may understand any of the church's laws or traditions. Our faith in Jesus does not take us down paths of blind obedience for the sake of it. Rather, it is our responsibility to be constantly examining all we believe and all we do in order to uncover the true purpose of our life in Christ.

The issues may be different. Now major issues aren't whether it is legal to heal someone on the Sabbath, but how we should deal with immigration - and issues of gender and sexuality - and the war in Ukraine - and poverty. Most of us have an opinion about each of those things - and that's fine. But it isn't fine when we behave as though it should be "Our Way or No Way" - when we care more about our opinions than about other people - when we no longer deal with other people in a charitable way.

In many ways Sabbath observance is, whether we like it or not, a dead issue. But there are many more issues that demand our careful thought and sensitive judgement, and demand an awareness of past church tradition and current Christian thought - lest we too be told, 'You hypocrites!'

Hymn 599: Christ for the world we sing

Prayer:

Creator God, we thank you for the amazing diversity of your creation.

So much life, expressed in different forms, living in a huge variety of ways.

We thank you that this diversity is expressed in human life, people all made in your image, yet living, believing and hoping in different ways.

Many gather together, expressing shared beliefs, as part of faith communities.

We give thanks for churches, gathered communities of people of Christian faith witnessing to the way of Jesus Christ.

In the richness of your creative diversity, we give thanks for faith communities who gather together to express shared beliefs that may be both similar and different to our own.

We confess that this diversity sometimes makes us feel uncomfortable, unsure and reluctant to meet with people of other faiths.

Help us to be Christ-like in meeting those of other faith with openness, warmth, welcome and affirmation.

Help us to have conversations that balance listening and speaking, that enable both involved to grow in understanding and which build on foundations of trust.

If we have the opportunity to work alongside people of other faiths, help us to take it, for when we work alongside others, we come to know them.

Help us to be Christ-like, not only in what we say, but also in what we do.

When we have the opportunity to witness to Christ, give us his grace to do so and to allow people to choose what their response will be.

When we witness to Christ, give us the grace to listen to others witness to their faith.

We pray for people of all faiths and none who have fled from their homes because of war and violent conflict.

We pray for those who have left their own country and who seek refuge and safety in other countries.

We pray for families who are homeless, or living in temporary camps. We pray for the nations who enjoy peace and security that their governments and people may respond with compassion, generosity and wisdom.

In our listening, speaking and activities with people of other faiths, may we discover the joy and encouragement of similar approaches, understandings and practices and be ready, recognising great diversity, to accept that we may not agree, but we can be friends.

So help us to follow Christ, stepping out to meet people of other faiths and beliefs, greeting them and treating them with the love and compassion shown by Jesus to all he met.
in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

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 601: Christ is the world's true light

Benediction:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way in the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward into ever-widening thought and action -
Into that Kingdom of freedom, dear God, let our world awake.

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