



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 28th August 2022

Call to Worship:

In the beginning before time, before people, before the world began,

God was

Here and now among us, beside us, enlisting the people of earth for the purposes of the
Kingdom,

God is.

In the future when we have turned to dust and all we know has found its fulfilment,

God will be.

Not denying the world but delighting in it, not condemning the world, but saving it, through
Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit,

God was, God is, God will be.

Prayer/Meditation:

God of justice, peace and righteousness,
come into our midst this morning

Breathe your breath,
your Spirit of prophecy,
your energy,
your enlivening,
your imagination on us.

Wake us up

Open our eyes

Unplug our ears

that we might hear

that we might see

that we might grieve

that we might dream

that we might follow the ways

of your extraordinary kingdom

God of justice,

we confess that in the pursuit of our own dreams and desires,

we have not always been civil, not always humane,

not always right.

Guided by your Spirit,

what we would like to do is change the world -

make it a little simpler for people

to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves

as You intended them to do.

Help us to be your witnesses,

by fighting for better conditions,
by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers,
the poor, of the destitute -
the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor,
so that we can, with your help, change the world.
Enlarge our hearts to love each other,
to love our neighbour,
and to love our enemy as our friend.
Lord, we pray for the power to be gentle;
the strength to be forgiving;
the patience to be understanding;
and the endurance to accept the consequences
of holding to what we believe to be right.
May we put our trust in the power of good to overcome evil
and the power of love to overcome hatred.
We pray for the vision to see and the faith to believe
in a world emancipated from violence,
a new world where fear shall no longer lead men to commit injustice,
nor selfishness make them bring suffering to others.
Help us to devote our whole life and thought and energy to the task of making peace, praying
always for the inspiration and the power to fulfill the destiny for which we and all people were
created.

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: Luke 14:1,7-14

Hymn 349:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Come unto me and rest;
lay down, O weary one, lay down
your head upon my breast.'
I came to Jesus as I was,
forlorn and faint and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
the living water; thirsty one,
stoop down, and drink, and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
and now I live in him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'I am this dark world's light;
look unto me, your morn shall rise,
and all your day be bright.'
I looked to Jesus, and I found
in him my star, my sun;
and in that light of life I'll walk,
till travelling days are done.

Reading: Luke 14:15-24

Reflection:

There's a legend about St Francis of Assisi in which the the Pope of the day decided to honour him by having him as a guest of honour at an official banquet. The day of the banquet arrived and Francis arrived at the door of the castle in his tattered brown robe. The doorman, obviously mistaking him for a beggar and, anxious that he was well out of the way before the important guests arrived, directed him to the kitchen. Francis, feeling quite at home in the company of kitchen hands and other beggars, not only welcomed the redirection but enjoyed their company and before long the kitchen crowd were sharing scraps of food and stories with Francis.

The absence of the guest of honour upstairs caused great consternation and servants were sent to find Francis. Eventually word of his whereabouts got through to the great hall and an apologetic messenger arrived to usher him, still with his kitchen plate in hand, through to his place of honour at the head table. Francis appeared totally unperturbed by the apparent earlier lapse of manners by his hosts and was soon cheerfully chatting with the Pope, Cardinals and Bishops - and was seen offering those around him at the top table a share of the scraps he had been given by his new friends in the kitchen.

Today we might feel we can smile at that system that could relegate a great man of compassion to the kitchen while at the same time welcoming the professional Church leaders with their status and high positions. But have things really changed? There is still today a big difference between Christianity admired and Christianity practiced.

When we think of communicating our faith, we usually think about the words we can use, or what we can do and say in worship, but it's helpful to remember that Luke's version of Jesus often focuses on *meals* rather than on worship. For someone who talked about the primacy of love for neighbours, the Greek word for hospitality *philoxenia*, seems particularly apposite. *Philoxenia* literally means "love of the stranger" and from Jesus' other parables it is clear he usually saw the stranger as the one who was typically shunned and avoided. The doorman in the Francis anecdote, in directing Francis to the kitchen was clearly not offering *Philoxenia*, (any more than perhaps we are inclined to do in our age).

It seems appropriate that the current Pope chose the name Francis. . But even with his huge popularity it remains to seen whether those impressed by Pope Francis' down to earth humility and compassion are themselves intending to follow his lead.

Two weeks ago I conducted worship at the URC in Great Totham. The tradition there is to have a very short service ofworship, and then a gathering over coffe and biscuits which lasted twice as long. For, to the folks there, community and hospitality are as important as worship. We do enjoy meeting with fellow disciples in the family of Christ. Yet our feelings of hospitality sometimes weaken a little when we do not feel those who share our hospitality are fellow

admirers of Christ. Yet believing we have achieved hospitality without real contact with genuine strangers, may be only to hear one part of Christ's message and even to miss why Jesus was crucified in the first place.

Several years ago I conducted worships in a town-centre Presbyterian church where, after the service each week, there was a bring and share lunch in the church hall, and I was surprised to see the hall doors being opened and a group of about a dozen homeless people waiting outside, who were invited in to share lunch with the congregation.

We remember that the word hospitality comes from the same root as hospice and hospital. The strangers to be welcomed may need more than the briefest of polite contact.

Some commentators suggest that Luke writing to second generation Christians was anxious for them to come to terms with the reality that Jews and Non Jews were going to have to find better ways of bringing their separate communities together. Our communities too have sectors of society deeply divided from the rest and while it is great to gather in community to share a meal together, we remember that our hospitality - the hospitality of Christ - extends beyond our own family

Our ears are attuned to the part where Jesus says all those who humble themselves will be exalted but we perhaps don't hear quite so clearly the part where he says *all those who exalt themselves shall be humbled*.

One scholar (Dr Reza Aslan) writes: "*Remember, the (Be)attitudes aren't just about the meek becoming strong and the hungry being fed, they're also about the fed becoming hungry and the strong becoming powerless.*"

The anecdote about Francis of Assisi and Jesus' parable where the wedding guests were assuming positions to which they were not entitled are essentially saying the same thing. In both cases they are about the value of humility, yet to leave the stories at that point is to miss their challenge. We should not ignore the criticism of those who cheerfully accept offered privilege. The challenge for us comes when we realise that the same degree of humility will be expected of us if we want to claim Jesus as our inspiration and guide.

We certainly can't separate this parable of the wedding banquet from the rest of Jesus teaching. Remember this is the same Jesus who told his followers: *The first will be last, and the last will be first, and The one who saves their life will lose it and the one who loses their life will save it*.

But the parable is a concrete example of how this works in practice, and it is not comfortable for us. Not all strangers are angels to be welcomed so that they may be recognised as angels.

Strangers have stolen coats and handbags. Strangers have messed up the toilet facilities, or taken more than their fair share of food, but hospitality does at least give us freedom to think of the newcomer as a person rather than as the 'other'. It was Archbishop William Temple who said "*Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about your-self at all*". Mind you this does not necessarily help us to see when we have achieved this state of freedom. Another scholar (Frederick Buechner) has a similar thought. "*It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do*".

This way of identifying with others may not represent a common view of humility yet when we see others being genuinely sad for others who are sad, and exulting with the happy, it does seem to work. *For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*'

Hymn 261:

At the Name of Jesus
every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him
King of glory now.
'Tis the Father's pleasure
we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning
was the mighty Word.

Humbled for a season,
to receive a Name
from the lips of sinners
unto whom he came,
he became a witness,
faithful to the last,
and returned victorious
when from death he passed.

In your hearts enthrone him;
there let him make new
all that is not holy,
all that is not true.
He is God the Saviour,
he is Christ the Lord,
ever to be worshipped,
trusted and adored.

When this same Lord Jesus
shall appear again
in his Father's glory,
there with him to reign,
then may we adore him,
all before him bow,
as our hearts confess him
King of glory now.

Prayer:

God of grace,
together we turn to you in prayer,
for it is you who unite us:
you are the one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit -
in whom we believe,
you alone empower us for good,

you send us out across the earth
in mission and service in the name of Christ.

We confess before you and all people:
We have been unworthy servants.
We have misused and abused the creation.
We have wounded one another by divisions everywhere.
We have often failed to take decisive action
against environmental destruction, poverty, racism,
caste-ism, war and genocide.
We are not only victims but also perpetrators of violence.

In all this, we have fallen short as disciples of Jesus Christ
who in his incarnation came to save us and teach us how to love.
Forgive us, God, and teach us to forgive one another.
God, in your grace, transform the world.

God, hear the cries of all creation,
the cries of the waters, the air, the land and all living things;
the cries of all who are exploited, marginalized, abused and victimized,
all who are dispossessed and silenced, their humanity ignored,
all who suffer from any form of disease, from war
and from the crimes of the arrogant
who hide from the truth, distort memory
and deny the possibility of reconciliation.
God, guide all in seats of authority
towards decisions of moral integrity.
God, in your grace, transform the world.

We give thanks for your blessings and signs of hope
that are already present in the world,
in people of all ages and in those who have gone before us in faith;
in movements to overcome violence in all its forms,
not just for a decade but for always;
in the deep and open dialogues that have begun
both within our own churches and with those of other faiths
in the search for mutual understanding and respect;
in all those working together for justice and peace -
both in exceptional circumstances and every day.
We thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ,
and the assurance of resurrection.
God, in your grace, transform the world.

By the power and guidance of your Holy Spirit, O God,
may our prayers never be empty words
but an urgent response to your living Word -
in non-violent direct action for positive change,
in bold, clear, specific acts of solidarity,
liberation, healing and compassion,

readily sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Open our hearts to love
and to see that all people are made in your image,
to care for creation and affirm life in all its wondrous diversity.

Transform us in the offering of ourselves
so that we may be your partners in transformation
to strive for the full, visible unity
of the one Church of Jesus Christ,
to become neighbours to all,
as we await with eager longing
the full revelation of your rule
in the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

**God, in your grace, transform the world.
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

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 574:

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!
God's saving news to all the nations take:
proclaim Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord and King,
that all the world his glorious praise may sing.

Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all;
he will in grace respond to all who call:
how shall they call if they have never heard
the gracious invitation of his word?

Go forth and tell! The doors are open wide:
share God's good gifts-let no one be denied;
live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,
your ransomed powers for his sole glory use.

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, arise!
Go in the strength which Christ your Lord supplies;
go till all nations his great name adore and serve him,
Lord and King for evermore.

Benediction:

Let us go out into the noise and activity of the world.
Let us listen for the questions and the voices that we would rather not hear.
Let us respond to them with the energy of the Holy Spirit,
the power of the One who gives us life, and the boundless love of Christ.

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