



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 7th August 2022

Our worship today includes the sacrament of Holy Communion. You are warmly invited to participate, and I'd invite you to provide yourself with a little bread and wine, or a cracker and some fruit juice, or any thing that can symbolise for you the body and blood of Jesus.

Call to Worship:

We gather in the name of the Creator God.
Giving thanks that there is a small spark of God within us.
May that spark grow into a flame of love and service.

We gather in the name of the Sustaining God.
We celebrate the loving presence of God in our life.
May God's loving presence be a strong influence in our life.

We gather in the name of the Nurturing God.
We rejoice that God teaches us about love and forgiveness.
As we grow in faith, trust and love for God, may our worship, witness and service bring honour to
God's Holy Name.

We worship the God of many names,
Lover of all peoples,
we pray for peace,
in our hearts, in our homes,
in our nations, in our world,
the peace of our need,
the peace of God's Kingdom.

Prayer/Meditation:

Whispering God,
the noise of the world is loud.
Open our ears to your still, small, voice.
God of revelation,
the darkness of the world threatens.
Open our eyes to the light of your presence.
God of abundance,
we cling tightly to so many things.
Open our hands in generosity and joy.
God of all people,
we feel the fear of those who are "other."
Open our arms to the stranger and the enemy.
God of mystery,

we want so desperately to understand you.
Open our minds to the depths of your truth.
Creating God,
we long to know your presence.
Open our hearts to receive your love.
Still Speaking God,
throughout history and the wide world
you have gathered people around your Word
to instruct and inspire.
We give thanks for all
who have received your vision
and shaped diverse and faithful communities
to follow in your Way.

Continue to open that vision to us,
that we may become transformed
by the renewing of your Word in our hearts.
Enable us to grow in love and understanding for each other .
Create in us, O God, clean hearts and minds;
Let us join with you in your suffering and your triumph.
We desire to be your children and
we claim these blessings in your name.

God who is One, You call us to be one,
May we be one with all who are made in Your image.
God who is Three, You call us to be community,
May we find community with all who are called by Your name.
God who calls us all by Your name,
May we find our place in Your eternal family.

God Almighty,
today by the power of Your spirit we unite in prayer,
We unite with all our sisters and brothers in Christ.
We unite with sisters and brothers
from all Christian churches and denominations,
We unite with all who are joined by the holy spirit of God.
We unite with followers from every church and congregation,
We unite with God's sons and daughters
from every creed and culture.

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 16:2-4, 9-15

Hymn 405:

Angel voices ever singing
round thy throne of light,
angel harps for ever ringing
rest not day nor night;
thousands only live to bless thee,
and confess thee, Lord of might.

Lord, we know that thou rejoicest
o'er each work of thine;
thou didst ears and hands and voices
for thy praise design;
craftsman's art and music's measure
for thy pleasure all combine.

In thy house, great God, we offer
of thine own to thee,
and for thine acceptance proffer,
all unworthily,
hearts and minds and hands and voices,
in our choicest psalmody.

Honour, glory, might and merit
thine shall ever be,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
blessed Trinity;
of the best that thou hast given
earth and heaven render thee.

Reading: John 6: 22 -35

Reflection:

The story we've just heard is typical John. The scene finds Jesus followed by a crowd who can't seem to get enough of him. The crowd may or may not have witnessed the feeding of the five thousand but according to John apparently have heard about it and we might guess have probably at least also heard the rumours of Jesus performing other great wonders. Their questions suggest they are quite baffled by his actions and words.

"Rabbi, when did you come here?" they ask, and:

"Can you show signs like our ancestors received? Like for instance Moses giving them manna in the desert."

"That wasn't Moses" says Jesus, "that was God acting. Anyway, the true bread from heaven is the bread that gives life."

"And how do we get that?" comes the inevitable question.

Then comes Jesus' extraordinary and memorable answer. "I am the bread of life", says Jesus "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry".

The questions asked by the crowd then are the very questions we might ask of Jesus today.

Questions like “Who is this man really?” and “Can we have a share in his same gifts?” are questions that still puzzle many people. The standard answers to these questions that we often hear are things like: Jesus is the son of God - and - we will be saved by our faith and/or perhaps - known by our works - we are promised new life in the kingdom of God. Such answers may well have scriptural verses to support them and may indeed sound good in Church but those same answers can become curiously irrelevant when we are at work, or paying our bills or doing the grocery shopping.

“Who is this man really?”

Jesus answers: “I am the bread of life”

Although it may sound as if Jesus is evading the question with an obscure answer, there is another way of thinking of his words. The crowd has after all discerned that Jesus has something in his actions that sets him apart. If he says he does not so much bring bread but rather is the bread what perhaps he is really saying is that he doesn't so much bring the message as he *is* the message.

A televangelist who thunders about sin but has an affair with his secretary or siphons off the donations of the faithful into his own bank account, may in fact be using direct quotations from the Jesus and the writers of the Bible in his public address, yet despite using exactly the same words as Jesus, he is rightly dismissed as a hypocrite because he is not the same as his message. The quiet little old lady who is thoughtful, kind and loving to her neighbours may not have a hope of getting all her Bible quotes word perfect, and may well be unable to use a microphone at all, let alone address a TV audience with confidence, yet her witness will be seen as authentic because she *is* her message.

Living in what for much of the rest of the world sees as luxury, we in the West probably don't really grasp what bread meant to those in Jesus' audience. In a typical Western supermarket, the shelves are stacked with a huge variety of food. Yet in many places of the world there is only one staple food. In much of Asia the staple is rice, in much of Africa it is maize. In New Guinea it is often yams, or for the lucky, pork, coconut and fish. But whatever the staple food - it is the food that keeps starvation at bay. In first century Palestine it was mainly unleavened bread.

There is of course one part of Jesus message which can be and often is misinterpreted. When Jesus says don't work for the food which is perishable, in context he is certainly not saying, therefore forget about perishable food. After all a little earlier in John's gospel he is recorded as feeding the five thousand. Fish and bread are indeed perishable food.

What however he seems to be reminding us, is that food - particularly basic food in a physical sense - may be fine in its place but like other things we might seek, when the merely physical becomes our main focus and we see it as the main or even the only purpose of our effort we are in danger of losing our perspective. Whatever takes our main focus and attention becomes our life.

And it would seem that for many the main focus of life is their own pleasure. Not fulfillment or usefulness or the common good, but simply doing and having exactly what we want. A life of greed.

Traditionally politicians who wish to stay in power exploit this greed. Back in the times of the early Christian Church the Roman Emperors distracted the attention of the crowds with bread and circuses. Today the more subtle version is to woo and distract the electorate with visions of improved amenities, offer tax breaks for the rich and set up trade barriers and immigration barriers to prevent poorer countries from sharing our wealth.

Jesus appears to be inviting us to change the direction of our attention, and instead put our main search into everything he stands for as our principal goal and purpose. When Jesus says "I am the bread of life" and tells us that we should work for that bread, it becomes a call to action.

In one sense, attention to the bread of life or for that matter directing our focus to the Kingdom of God should also help attend to some day-to-day realities. Working towards a goal does not in practice mean that we should expect to reach that goal completely. The real world is a little short on those fully deserving the title of saint. Yet short of shutting ourselves away from the world as a hermit saint, in practice it seems that without being fanatical it should be possible at least settle on attempting to live with a positive direction rather than chasing the illusion of rainbows of self gratification.

This is not to say we shouldn't be taking a good hard look at areas of real life where a re-orientation is sorely needed. It is simply a fact that more than enough food is able to be produced to sustain the world's population yet it is also true that many starve.

And why? Maybe it's just that too many of us are focused on our own appetites rather than on the needs of others, or for that matter, seriously working for the other principles that Jesus lived. To partake of what Jesus called heavenly food is to take Jesus and all he stands for into our thinking and living and that includes accepting his attitudes to others. The challenge is to make that thinking our thinking. We have seen that same message in the lives of some others, but the real question for our conscience is what others will see in us. Jesus called himself the bread of life and when we seek communion we seek to partake of that same bread. Jesus is the bread of life, and looking at his example and the example of those who have taken him at his word we can see it is a form of sustenance worth working for. For whatever we are is our message, and whatever we are will speak more convincingly than any words.

Hymn 439:

As we break the bread
and taste the life of wine,
we bring to mind our Lord,
Man of all time.

Grain is sown to die;
it rises from the dead,
becomes through human toil
our common bread.

Pass from hand to hand
the living love of Christ!
Machines and people raise
bread for this feast.

Jesus binds in one
our daily life and work;
he is of humankind
symbol and mark.

Having shared the bread
that died to rise again,
we rise to serve the world,
scattered as grain.

Communion:

As Jesus shared meals with his friends long ago, so today we share this symbolic meal together. Separated by distance but united by faith, we eat and drink in his memory; we remember his life, his words and relationships; and we give thanks to God that his Spirit is with us to the end of the age.

The table of bread and cup is now made ready. It is our table, in our home; it is the table of Jesus and all who love him; it is an ordinary table, made holy by the presence of God's Spirit; it is the table of sharing with the poor of the world, with whom Jesus identified himself; it is the table of communion with the earth, in which Christ became incarnate.

So come to this table, you who have much faith and you who would like to have more; you who have shared this meal often and you who have not done so for a long time; you who have tried to follow Jesus and you who have failed; come. It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.

Let us hear the story of the Last Supper as told by the apostle Paul:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, "this is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way he took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Let us pray.

Loving God, through your goodness we have this bread and wine to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. May we know your presence in the sharing of this bread, so that we may know your touch in all bread, all matter.

We celebrate the life that Jesus has shared among his community through the centuries, and shares with us now. Made one in Christ and one with each other, we offer these gifts of bread and cup and with them ourselves, a single, holy, living sacrifice.

And now we join with all your people in offering our prayer and praise...

Hear us, O Christ, and breathe your Spirit upon us and upon this bread and cup. May they become for us your body, vibrant with your life, healing, renewing and making us whole.

And as the bread and cup which we now eat and drink are changed into us, may we again be changed into you, bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, loving and caring in the world...

The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

This bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ. Take and eat, this is the body of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

This cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ. This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

Prayers for Others:

Jesus said, *'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'* This is the promise of God to whom we now pray.

Loving God: thank you for sending your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, to be the Bread of Life for the world. Forgive us for elevating earthly appetites above devotion to you. Feed us with the knowledge of Christ so that we recognise our sin and gladly repent in his name. Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those whose daily need for healthy food, clean water and proper shelter goes unmet, and for those misusing what they have in the vain pursuit of pleasure. Feed them with all the good things of Christ for life now and in eternity. Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Have mercy on those whose lives have been broken by violence and crime. Feed them with hope and a new life in Christ. And bless our brothers and sisters in prison and those who minister to them. Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Feed those who are sick or sorrowing with healing and consolation through Christ. We pray particularly for those who are closest to us. And meet the needs those we know personally to be in want and whom we name silently in our hearts. Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, you heard the prayers of your people in the wilderness and fed them bread from heaven despite their sin. Graciously hear us today and feed us too with the Bread of Life from heaven, even our Lord Jesus Christ, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

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 345:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty,
hold me with thy powerful hand:
bread of heaven,
feed me now and evermore.

Open thou the crystal fountain
whence the healing stream doth flow;

let the fiery, cloudy pillar lead me
all my journey through:
strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee.

Benediction

Let us go now in peace,
for Christ has called us to live in peace
among our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let us go now in courage,
for Christ has called us from the places of our life
to be agents of compassion and partners in healing.

Let us go now in joy and thanksgiving,
for Christ is our light!

Let us go now as one body,
to love and serve God as we love and serve the 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