



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 11th September 2022

Call to Worship:

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.

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.

Prayer/Meditation:

We worship today in different places, we come from different backgrounds, we live in different circumstances. We worship today with our own different expectations, perhaps to be reassured, perhaps to be comforted, perhaps to learn something, perhaps to be challenged, perhaps to have our faith strengthened and affirmed.

We worship today with our own different worries and concerns, our own fears. For some of us there may be pressures at work or within our families; we may be seeking relief from the stress of daily life; we may be concerned about an uncertain future; we may be worried about a loved one or a friend.

We worship in the hope that our time here will offer inspiration or hope, or the solution to some question or problem that has been troubling us.

We worship to affirm our commitment to the gospel of Christ, and to explore ways of putting our faith into action, so that our faith is never just something we think about or a set of beliefs we hold on to, but a real part of our lives that influences our decisions and directs our actions and colours our relationships.

We worship to learn about Jesus; to affirm our faith in him and to remind ourselves that in Jesus we see the way to respond to God and to the world; in Jesus we see the way to treat other people; and in Jesus we discover what is important and what is not, we discover where the priorities of faith lie.

And we worship today to pray together. In our prayers, spoken or unspoken, we give thanks for all that is good in our lives and in the world; we confess our own shortcomings and weaknesses; we try to express our intentions for our own life of Christian service; and we bring to mind the needs of others, known and unknown to us, who suffer because of disease, disaster, or the selfishness of others.

So in our worship today may we each find what we seek, and at its end may we be changed, however slightly, having taken another step in the pilgrimage of faith, and ready once again in our own place and our own circumstances to engage in the ministry of the Kingdom of God.

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: II Corinthians 5:16-21

Hymn 289:

To God be the glory, great things he has done!
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,
who yielded his life in atonement for sin,
and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

Chorus

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;
and give him the glory-great things he has done!

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
to every believer the promise of God!
And every offender who truly believes,
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives:

Chorus

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;
and give him the glory-great things he has done!

Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;
but purer and higher and greater will be
the wonder, the beauty, when Jesus we see:

Chorus

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;
and give him the glory-great things he has done!

Reading: Luke 15:1-10

Reflection:

Traditional Christian belief regards Jesus as being both divine and human. There are these two sides to Jesus, two angles or aspects that have to be kept in mind every time we study a passage of the New Testament. There is firstly our understanding of *who Jesus was*. By that I mean most of what we find about Jesus in the writings of the apostle Paul and in much of the gospel according to John, and in many non-scriptural writings of the early Christian Church.

Jesus the Word of God, Jesus the sacrificial lamb, Jesus the risen and living Christ, Jesus the judge, Jesus the second person of the Trinity, Jesus the Saviour, God incarnate. All these names and titles, and many more besides, describe Jesus in cosmic terms and emphasise the place of Jesus as the agent of a divine plan to reconcile the world to God.

But there is also the other side of the Jesus story. Jesus the man from Nazareth, Jesus the travelling preacher, teacher and healer. The Jesus described by Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Jesus who was a friend of Peter and Andrew and James and John and Mary and Martha and all those who followed him for three years or so before he was arrested and executed. All these people seemed to have little clue as to who Jesus actually was. Yes, some of them recognised him as the Messiah, but when you read the Old Testament passages that look forward to the coming of a Messiah to bring justice and freedom and peace to the people of Israel, you will not find anything specific about this person's being any kind of incarnation or avatar of God. The Messiah they expected was a very human leader.

It's a wonderful and miraculous thing that Peter and Andrew, for example, could simply leave their livelihoods and their families and go off with this teacher who, at the beginning, must have been almost unknown to them, and just as remarkable that they stayed with him on the strength, not of his status as the incarnation of God (because they didn't know about that) but simply because the strength of his personality and the truth of his teaching and the power of his message were enough to capture their imaginations and their hearts and keep them faithful to him right up to his death and beyond.

For us today, I think it's important to grasp the truth not only about *who Jesus was* as God incarnate, but also about *what Jesus taught* and the ways in which he taught it - because those were the things that captured and converted and transformed the lives of those who first knew him.

The two little parables we read this morning show an image of Jesus the man, the teacher. They are kind of thing that moved people to follow him. On the face of it, consideration of these two parables could produce the shortest sermon in the world, because they appear to be quite simple. Jesus tells them in response to some grumbling religious people who criticise him for consorting with undesirables, *'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'* Jesus then tells these two little stories and adds after each one, *'There will be joy over one sinner who repents.'* The meanings seems quite clear-cut. Repent and be saved and there will be joy in heaven. End of sermon.

Except, sadly, it's not the end of the sermon. If that had been the end of the sermon, then it's hard to see what was so compelling about Jesus teaching, and why so many people made such sacrifices to be with him. Because the thing about Jesus' teaching was that it was different and surprising and even shocking. If Jesus then, or if a preacher today, simply told these stories and said, repent and be saved and there will be rejoicing in heaven, well, that would be nothing new, nothing radical. It was standard religious teaching even in Jesus' time.

No. Jesus was continually telling stories that turned people's beliefs and expectations upside down; characters beyond the fringes of respectable society were called neighbours; wealth and security were dismissed as unimportant; a tiny insignificant seed was used as an image of faith; blessings were showered upon the poor in spirit, the worried, the anxious, the persecuted; people were told 'love those who hate you'. In every aspect of Jesus' teaching the norms of society were reversed, and it would be odd if in these two parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin the same reversal was not to be found. And of course it's there too.

Have you ever thought it strange that Jesus should have drawn pictures of a sheep and a coin when he's talking about repentance? It seems a rather bizarre image to use, because neither a sheep nor a coin are capable of repentance. We can't with any seriousness imagine the shepherd having trailed all over the wilderness, up mountains and down valleys, finally

finding his lost sheep and saying to it, 'Are you sorry you ran away?', and the sheep saying, rather sheepishly, 'Yes, I'm sorry, please forgive me.' Or even more strangely, the woman interrogating her lost coin before welcoming it back to her money-jar with its friends. Isn't it odd that, in parables about repentance, Jesus should use images of an animal and an inanimate object?

Yes it is odd. It is Jesus' great reversal of our expectations. His critics believed and taught - as we in the church still sometimes believe and teach today - that *if we repent, then we will be found, saved and welcomed by God.* Jesus' use of the sheep and the coin, then, makes perfect sense, and is indeed the whole point of the teaching. It's not about repentance as a *condition* of being saved; it's about repentance as a *result* of being saved. And he makes this point strongly by using subjects for his story that are incapable of repentance.

Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son? When the boy was done with his adventures, and is returning home, Luke tells us in chapter 15, verse 20 '*While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion: he ran and put his arms round him and kissed him.*' Again Jesus makes the same point. Yes, the son had repented, but the father did not *know* that he had repented, but he welcomed him and loved him anyway.

The two parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin come with something of a health warning for Christians. If I, as a modern Christian, look at this passage of scripture, and try to identify as closely as I can with any of the characters, what happens? I am neither the woman nor the lost coin nor the shepherd nor the lost sheep. I am certainly not Jesus, but neither am I an outcast like a tax collector. No. I am, whether I like it or not, closest to the Pharisees and the scribes, the respectable upstanding religious person who disapproves of the company Jesus is keeping. In the parable that translates into being one of the ninety-nine sheep left while the shepherd goes off to look for the lost one.

A health warning. Jesus is saying, *Don't dare criticise God for loving the lost, and don't dare put conditions on God's love.* Because in God's Kingdom there is a welcome for all God's children and in this world there is love for all God's children, and if all God's children are loved enough and welcomed enough, they will repent, and there will be great rejoicing.

And that impacts to on our own ministry as disciples of Christ, for if we love enough those who are the outcast, the marginalised, even the dishonest and undesirable, even those we don't really like - if we love enough and welcome enough there will be repentance and there will be great rejoicing.

Hymn 566:

The Church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ her Lord;
she is his new creation
by water and the word:
from heaven he came and sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her,
and for her life he died.

Elect from every nation,
yet one o'er all the earth,
her charter of salvation
one Lord, one faith, one birth:
one holy name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,

and to one hope she presses
with every grace endued.

'Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation
of peace for evermore;
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great Church victorious
shall be the Church at rest.

Yet she on earth hath union
with God the Three in One,
and mystic sweet communion
with those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we,
like them, the meek and lowly,
on high may dwell with thee.

Prayer:

In a world where many would seek to damage your creation, bring hatred to your people, show violence to your children ... help us always to be grateful for the gifts of love and life, for the glimpses of transforming beauty and unending wonder. Take us now, and use us well to combat evil and destruction wherever we find it.

In world driven by greed and a lust for power; where the material threatens to overwhelm the spiritual; where goodness seems too frail in the face of badness ... help us not to give up on righteousness and truth; to believe that you can use well the gifts we offer; that you will call forth the gifts of your people again and again.

In a world where people are broken at the hands of humanity and by the vagaries of nature ... help us to trust the healing of your blessing and love, placed even now in the hands of those who seek to face down injustice and champion human rights; who stand in the dark places with your light held high; who give of themselves for the sake of others.

In a world where we struggle to understand pain and suffering, and, most especially, in the lives of those we love ... we bring before you those for whom we weep; those we embrace in our hearts; those to whom we reach out in the yearnings of our prayers ..

Silence ...

In a world where we can feel so insignificant and helpless ... help us to know you have a place for us; lift our spirits when we don't feel good enough; fit us into your plan in amazing ways.

In a world where so much is focused on the here and now ... help us to remain bound with those who have gone before us; to rejoice in our fellowship in the one kingdom of your love; and encourage us to plant seeds of hope and love for the future, that we may sleep and rise in the

confident hope that the weak may be made strong, and the world transformed through the power of your love.

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 prayers. loving God, which we offer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn 567:

Thy hand, O God, has guided
thy flock, from age to age;
the wondrous tale is written,
full clear, on every page;
thy people owned thy goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both of this bear witness:
one Church, one Faith, one Lord.

Thy heralds brought glad tidings
to greatest, as to least;
they summoned all to hasten
and share the great King's feast;
their gospel of redemption,
sin pardoned, earth restored,
was all in this enfolded:
one Church, one Faith, one Lord.

Thy mercy will not fail us,
nor leave thy work undone;
with thy right hand to help us,
the victory shall be won;
and then, by all creation,
thy name shall be adored,
and this shall be our anthem:
one Church, one Faith, one Lord.

Benediction

Let us go from here with confidence and hope.
To strengthen those who are tired and exhausted;
to comfort those who are anxious and fearful.
to say to them all:
"Be strong, and do not fear!
For God's kingdom is coming—
Indeed, God's kingdom is already here!

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us, and with all those we love, today and always, Amen.

