



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

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

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2023

Call to Worship:

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed  
a stronghold in times of trouble.  
And those who know your name put their trust in you  
for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.

Jesus came to bring peace-  
not peace as an absence of conflict, but peace as the coming of God's kingdom.  
We enter God's kingdom  
when we listen and understand, when we forgive and care.  
We enter God's kingdom  
when we remember those who die for peace and those who work for peace today.  
As we worship God  
let us commit ourselves to Jesus' peace. May we bring his peace to people everywhere

Prayer/Meditation:

We approach our worship today giving thanks that worship is part of our lives, and in worshipping together we can feel confident and secure whatever our mood or circumstances.

When we are sure in our faith and confident in ourselves and in our God, in worship we can affirm the truth of what we believe and what we are; when we are troubled by doubts and uncertain of the value of faith, in worship we can be reassured and strengthened; when we are happy with our lives and content in our circumstances, in worship we can give thanks for the blessings we enjoy; when we are unsettled and wishing for more from life; in worship we can be challenged and inspired; when we are gladdened by the beauty and the wonder of the natural world, in worship we can come to give thanks; when we are depressed and shocked by the conflict, cruelty and hatred we see every day, in worship we can find the strength of love.

We believe that we are called to love our neighbours as we love ourselves; to testify to the reality of our faith through the love we show to others. It sounds like a wonderful idea, but so often when we come down to putting it into practice we find that we are not up to it.

We acknowledge our failure to live up to that calling, the lost opportunities and wasted moments, the angry words and unkind comments, the thoughtless deeds and careless actions - all the ways we have denied God through what we have done.

We acknowledge those times when we have ignored those in need - too preoccupied with our own affairs, too concerned with our own comforts, too protective of our own interests - all the ways we have denied God through what we have failed to do.

We acknowledge the times when we have brought sorrow rather than joy, hurt rather than healing, despair rather than hope, worry rather than faith.

We seek forgiveness for the love we have failed to show, the care we have failed to express, the support we have failed to give, the pardon we have failed to offer.

May we take the opportunity in worship for cleansing and renewal; may we attempt to put failure and wrongdoing behind us; may love be recreated and restored within us, so that we may learn to love others with the forgiving love without conditions that we see in Jesus, and may our eyes be opened to the presence of the spirit of God around us and within us that we may see the truth and value of love, and may we go out in the name of Christ to live and work as he has taught, and to love as he has shown.

May our worship today meet our needs, may it be an inspiration, a comfort and a challenge; may it be an offering of all that is good in us and a cleansing of all that is wrong with us; may our singing, our speaking, our praying and our listening be an expression of the people we are and an affirmation of the faith we profess, and may the Spirit of Christ be known to us in our worship, making us more acutely aware of the mystery that is God and more conscious of the love that surrounds us, that, our offering of worship done, we may go renewed, refreshed and ready to serve God in every part of our lives.

***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 6:12-16

HYMN 32: God is in his temple

Reading: Matthew 16:1-12

Reflection:

Over the last few weeks we've been looking at discipleship, and what it means to be called by Jesus to 'follow'. Last week we considered the rather nebulous idea that as disciples we are 'the salt of the earth'. Today we ask the question: How are Christians supposed to live and work and worship according to their faith in a society that is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to religion?

We need look no further than the gospel to see examples of how that question has been tackled in the past, and we will look this morning at how it was tackled by some of the religious groups and institutions that existed in what is now Israel in the time when Jesus was active - and we will look at how Jesus dealt with the same issue.

The circumstances were a bit different of course. The homeland of Judaism was under occupation by a hostile Gentile state, and the Jewish people were faced not with indifference or hostility but oppression. Nonetheless their situation, and the question they had to address, was similar to those of the Christian Church today - how to live a faithful life in a culture and society that was in many ways contrary to their faith and beliefs.

Around the time the gospels were written, there were four main groups within Judaism, each tackling the issue in their own way.

The group known as the Zealots consisted of those who used violence to fight their oppressors, who believed that the only way to rid their society of Roman oppression was to take up the sword. Throughout history this course has been taken by groups who have believed that there is no other way to gain freedom than to fight, and even kill, for it. They are romanticised as freedom fighters by those who agree with them and denounced as thugs and terrorists by those who do not.

A Zealot is named among Jesus followers, and it's possible that, despite Jesus' teaching about non-violence, the Zealots may nonetheless found enough in Jesus' words to justify their approach. When Jesus said to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's, his words could be taken by a Zealot to mean 'give Caesar the sharp end of a sword and your tithes to God'.

The group which took an opposite approach to that of the Zealots was the Sadducees. Enemies of the Zealots in the Jewish community, their approach was to collaborate with the Romans. However reluctant their co-operation may have been, they realised that the Romans were far too powerful to fight. Rather than fight for your freedom, they argued, and run the risk of losing everything, you should work with the occupiers to preserve what little freedom you already have.

From a faith perspective, it is significant that the Sadducees, so we are told in the gospels, did not believe in resurrection or an after-life. This might explain why their emphasis was on creating as tolerable a life possible in the here and now. Unlike the Pharisees, to whom we shall come in a minute, they could not promise better things to come or any kind of heavenly reward. Their priority was to enjoy God's good gifts in this life and to seek ways of living with the Romans that provided as good a life as possible for the people under their rule.

The Pharisees thought that both the Zealots and the Sadducees were mistaken. Zealot policy was literally suicidal; the Romans could and would crush them like insects; Sadducee policy was a slow death in which the faith would be gradually diluted until it became meaningless.

The Pharisee approach was to become so faithful, so religious, so obedient to every detail of the Laws of scripture, that no other force however powerful, could corrupt them. They established a community within a community, a society within a society, a culture within a culture, and tried to preserve a pure and unique version of the Jewish faith that was so steeped in the history and tradition and law of the people that it could survive intact through occupation and oppression.

Spiritually, the Pharisees believed in the reward and punishment of an after-life, so it was easier for them to tolerate a life under the oppressors because they knew that if they lived well according to the law, their faithfulness would be rewarded in time to come.

Finally, there is the option of simply withdrawing from all of it. There were some parties within the Jewish faith which simply didn't want to be involved in politics or the relationship between civil and religious society, so they withdrew into the hills or deserts to live as religious communities where they could live lives of prayer and religious observance and wait for God to intervene in the world.

Before we ask what is an appropriate response of Christians today to an increasingly secular society, we might note that of these four approaches to a similar question, the Zealots, the Sadducees, the Pharisees and those who withdrew from society altogether, only the

Pharisees survived to promote and sustain the Jewish faith through the centuries to come. Both collaborators and rebels become redundant when the occupying power weakens and falls away. Isolationism from society has never found wide appeal. Only the approach of maintaining a unique faith community within society seems to have been sustainable.

And where did Jesus stand in this matrix of Jewish response to the Romans? Well, he was certainly against the Sadducees, the quisling government that collaborated with the Romans and finally tried and condemned him. He never showed any sign of wanting to encourage his followers to disengage from society and become some desert-dwelling sect. The presence of Simon the Zealot among his followers may suggest that he had some sympathy with that aims of the Zealots, but he abhorred the violence through which they tried to achieve those aims.

And although he had some very harsh words to say about the abuses and exaggerations of the faith that some of the Pharisees engaged in, he seemed to be in agreement with their ultimate goal - to be a unique religious community that proclaimed the rule of God above the rule of any political or military power. It may be then that Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees was more about their methods than their beliefs.

Paul of course was a Pharisee, and it was from the background of his Pharisaism that he was able to be converted to a universal proclamation of God's love not only for his people but for all people.

So where do we stand in relation to our new secular multicultural society where prayer is banned from civic life? With the Zealots, who fight for their own and show no respect for those whom they oppose? With the Sadducees, who collaborate and compromise for a quiet life? With the sects, who withdraw to the symbolic wilderness in order not to be tainted by the world around them? With the Pharisees, who try to maintain a unique faith community within wider society?

It is, as we have seen, a complicated question, and not one that we can answer in a word or a phrase or even a sermon. Our guide, as always, is Jesus, who saw good where there was good to be seen, who was able to distinguish between the things of God and things of the world, and between the things that were trivial and the things that mattered. So, in a sense, we have to each address the question for ourselves. Is our modern religious controversies like the wearing of religious symbols at work, or refusing to undertake work that would offend our Christian sensibilities, or even the Church of England's current debate about equal marriage, which continues to divide Anglicanism and damage the reputation of the whole of the Christian church - are such questions a matter of the life or death of Christianity? Or, in the wider scheme of things, is there more to be concerned about?

HYMN 90: O Lord, all the world belongs to you

Prayer :

In Jesus we see what God is like - that's why we call him Lord. We see him giving of himself without counting the cost, offering his own life for others.

So now we pray for all those who seek to offer love, however hesitant, partial or imperfect their love may be. May they be inspired by the love of God.

We pray for those new in their faith, still learning about Jesus, still uncertain of their commitment, still discovering what love is. May their love always grow.

We pray for those established in their faith, facing the daily risk of growing complacent, stale, settled into a comfortable routine. May their love be ever fresh.

We pray for those whose faith has crumbled, no longer holding the trust they once held, no longer able to feel God present in their world, no longer seeking to serve and follow Jesus. May their love be renewed.

We pray for those who have never had faith, those consistently unmoved by the message of the gospel, those who resist its challenge and who wilfully turn away from anything that smacks of religion. May love be born in their hearts.

We pray for those whose faith is costly, those who sacrifice money, time, energy, security, health and even life itself in the service of others. May their love shine out to others.

And we pray for those who need something to put their faith in - the poor, the hungry, and the homeless, the sick, the suffering and the bereaved, all those broken by the tragedies and crises of human life. May they experience the love of God in the love of others.

The love of Jesus was for all people, whoever they may have been - that's why we call him Lord. May love reach out into every heart in every place, and may we be part of that, learning to love as he did, learning to love as we are loved, learning to recognise and respond to the love of God, the love we see in Jesus, who we call 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.

Loving God, hear our prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

HYMN 200: The Kingdom of God is justice and joy

Benediction

God's blessing be upon us  
as we go into the world in Jesus' name.  
May we strengthen and encourage one another  
in our shared vision.

And may the blessing of our adventurous Creator God go with us.

And may the blessing of the Son,  
who showed us how to live,  
re-shape us.

And may the blessing of the dancing Spirit  
joyfully enable us in our renewed living.

So 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

