



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 19th February 2023

Call to Worship:

Come, let's worship God.
God who is mystery,
God who is not contained by any one religious system,
God who is certainly not contained by our minds and hearts.
Come, let's worship God.
God who wills dignity for every family, every person.
God who lies at the heart of each life and speaks to the
depth of each heart.
God who is constant adventure,
Constant movement,
Come, let's worship God!

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we pray for the peace of the world;
may the nations find ways of living together with harmony and respect.
Lord Jesus Christ, we pray for the peace of the Church;
may Christians be united in proclaiming the gospel of love and the kingdom of God.
Spirit of God, we pray for peace in our hearts;
may our life and work and worship reflect the life of your Kingdom.

We worship today perhaps weary from a week of work, perhaps refreshed after a week's holiday; we worship perhaps eagerly, anticipating an encounter with God; perhaps reluctantly because we feel we should be here but would really rather be doing something else; we worship perhaps ready to share our faith gladly, to join wholeheartedly in praising God, perhaps uncertain of what we truly believe and seeking reassurance; we come perhaps at home and relaxed with the words of prayer and scripture, perhaps uneasy because the word and worship of the church seems hardly relevant to our own culture.

But however we feel about it, we worship, called together as the people of God to share this hour of our time together in prayer, in song, in study of scripture and in seeking God. May those who are tired find refreshment in worship today, may those who are rested find new challenges; may those who are reluctant be glad they joined in and those who joined gladly be reluctant to part; may those who are firm in their faith be an example and encouragement to those who are not, and may all of us find what we are seeking from this service of worship.

We acknowledge that we worship sometimes for our own benefit, and that part of our worship involves seeking a fresh start to each week. It depresses us to think of the ways in which we have betrayed our faith through acts of thoughtlessness and selfishness; to think that each week we come seeking assurance of forgiveness and resolving to change, yet again and again we come to prayer burdened by the thought of how we have failed to live up to our own expectations. So once again we join with our brothers and sisters in Christ to admit our failings

and to seek a fresh start. May we end our worship with our failures forgotten and resolved to seek more diligently the way of Christ, that our daily living may reflect something of our worship, that the care and concern we express here for one another and for the world may be expressed equally in every word and action every day, and that our worship may consist not just of this time of sharing, but of our commitment to the gospel of Christ in all our relationships.

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 1-22:2:10

HYMN 319: Thanks to God whose Word was spoken

Reading: Matthew 2:13-23

Reflection:

We read this morning from the Old Testament and from the New Testament. From time to time I've met Christians who question our use of the Old Testament. It is, after all, the Hebrew Bible, the cripture of Judaism. But we are Christian, so are the Hebrew scriptures still relevant? As early as the second century a Christian called Marcion found it impossible to accept the Old Testament because in the Old Testament he found a God who stood for legalism and strict justice, whereas in the Christian writings he found a God of love and compassion. For him, the two could not be reconciled and so he concluded that there must be two Gods - a lower God who created the world and chose the people of Israel as his own, and the supreme God of love made known for the first time by Christ. Marcion therefore drafted a list of scripture that he regarded as suitable for teaching in the Christian Church. Out went the whole of the Old Testament; out went any part of the New Testament that he regarded as being infected with a Jewish outlook. So his Bible consisted of an edited version of Luke's gospel and ten of Paul's letters.

But the fact is that the New Testament - particularly the gospels, and especially the gospel according to Matthew - are so reliant on the Old Testament for their images and sometimes even their words, that to forget the Old Testament would be to deny ourselves of any insight into what the evangelists were talking about.

Matthew's gospel is peppered throughout with the phrase: 'this was to fulfil the words of the prophets' or something similar. Such words appear three times even in the very short passage we read from Matthew this morning. It is very clear from these many references to the prophets that Matthew was keen to preserve continuity between the history of the people of Israel and the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For Matthew, Jesus was the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures, and he emphasises again and again that the prophecies of the Old Testament can be seen to be coming true in the events of Jesus' life.

But there is much more in Matthew's gospels than just 'this was to fulfil the words of the prophet', and in order to discover it we need knowledge of the broad sweep of Old Testament history.

It's a similar thing to the horror/comedy film called *Scary Movie*. It is a parody of a number of horror films that had been released in the two or three years before it was made. Its

plot is based on a film called *I know what you did last summer*, and it contained references to films like *Scream*, *The Exorcist*, *Sixth Sense* and others. In order to fully appreciate the humour of *Scary Movie*, you really have to be familiar with the originals, otherwise a lot of it will simply go over your head. It is possible to be entertained by it on one level, but in order to fully appreciate it you have to be aware of the other film references being made throughout.

Similarly, but to a far greater degree, you have to be aware of the Old Testament coming through many of Jesus' words and actions, or you will miss their relevance and end up with a distorted view of what he was saying and doing. We have to remember that Jesus was working among people whose knowledge of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, would have been intimate. It was a Jewish society in which, then as now, children were brought up with the stories of the scriptures, and for them - just as today when you see a reference to a movie within another movie and the whole story and context comes to mind - a few words of quotation from the scriptures or an action that mirrored something done by one of the prophets, leaders or kings, would bring to their minds a whole background, a whole context that would be lost on anyone who didn't know their scriptures.

Our two readings this morning contain uncannily similar stories. First was the story of the birth of Moses. The Israelites were in slavery in Egypt, and the Pharaoh was getting worried that the Israelite population was getting to large. Soon, he thought, the Israelites would be numerous and strong enough to rebel against him. So the step he took was to order the killing of all male children of the Israelites. In this way he hoped to keep their numbers down and maintain his security. In the midst of all this murder of children, the baby Moses was rescued by being floated down the river in a wicker basket.

Second was the story of the birth of Jesus. Herod, who had been told that a new king of Israel would be born in Bethlehem, was worried about his security, and so he ordered that all male children under two years old should be put to death. Jesus and his family, Matthew tells us, managed to escape this slaughter by running away to Egypt.

Now, Matthew says nothing to draw our attention to the similarity of these two stories, and if they were the only similar stories we might think it was just coincidence, but if we look at the life of Jesus as Matthew outlines it in his first six chapters, then we will learn even more.

When Moses grew up and became the leader of the Israelites, he led them in a daring escape from Egypt which involved crossing the Red Sea out of captivity and into a new life as a free nation of God's people. When Jesus grew up, Matthew's first story about him is about his going through the waters of the river Jordan in his baptism and emerging to be blessed by the Spirit to begin his ministry as the Son of God.

After the Red Sea, the Israelites under Moses wander for forty years in the wilderness where they are faced with hunger, thirst and the temptation to idolatry. After his baptism, Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness where he is faced with hunger, thirst and the temptation to idolatry.

When Moses is finding the responsibility of leadership too heavy for him, he seeks the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, who suggests that he should appoint a number of trustworthy men to help him - and that is what he did.

Jesus' first act, according to Matthew, when he returned from the wilderness, was to appoint a number of trustworthy men to help him.

Then Moses went up mount Sinai and came down with the Law, a series of commandments, which he related to the people on the lower slopes of the mountain.

Jesus first act of public ministry was to speak to a crowd of people on the slopes of a mountain, where he related to them first the beatitudes, a series of blessings, a new kind of law.

So what we have here is not one story common to both Moses and Jesus, but five. Matthew includes these similar stories in his gospel but does not comment on them, nor draw the parallels between the two leaders. That's not because he didn't intend them or because they're just coincidence. He doesn't mention the similarities because he doesn't have to. Matthew's readership would have consisted of people steeped in Jewish tradition whose knowledge of the Old Testament would have been extremely detailed - certainly much better than ours. To them it would be obvious what Matthew was implying throughout his gospel; that in Jesus of Nazareth the New Moses has come, with the same charisma, the same leadership qualities, the same close relationship with God - even more so.

Only by preserving and studying the Old Testament could we know all this. Only by understanding the Old Testament as Matthew understood it can we discover, as Matthew discovered, that Jesus of Nazareth was the one come to bring the people - all people - out of their present situation and into the Kingdom of God. Like Moses - only greater.

HYMN 38: Thou whose almighty word

Prayer :

Loving God, we give thanks for the great gift of love -

The love we are able to share with those around us, which gives us a sense of self-worth and belonging, which enriches our lives in so many ways.

We give thanks for the love of God for us -

Mysterious, even baffling, but constant and never-ending.

We give thanks that we are loved, even when we fail to love; that in spite of selfishness, anger, the judging of others, the confusion and uncertainty of our faith, love remains stronger than all things.

May our love for God and for one another be deepened; may we be faithful and true in all our relationships; and may our love be expressed not only in our worship and prayer, but in our lives every day.

Loving God, there are times when we look at people's lives and find it hard to believe that things can ever change for the better - we see them racked by illness, weighed down by anxiety, tormented by depression, crippled by debt, broken by alcohol, destroyed by drugs, scarred by bereavement, shattered by unemployment, and we wonder what their prospects really are, what hope we can realistically offer them, what help we can possibly give...

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

We pray for such people known to us now - family, friends, members of our church, colleagues at work, neighbours, acquaintances, as well as the countless people unknown to us, each struggling under their own burdens.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

We pray for our world - for those many people who face suffering, injustice, hardship, and death.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

Reach out to all who are in despair, all who long for change but see only hopelessness stretching before them. Touch their lives and bring help, hope, healing and wholeness.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

Loving God, it is sometimes hard to believe that those around us - still less the world we live in - can ever change for the better. We see countries broken by war, people consumed by hatred, thousands living in fear, nations turned against nation, hundreds of thousands made homeless by disaster, continents facing famine, and again we wonder what the prospects really are, what hope anyone can offer, what help can possibly be given.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

Help us to see beneath the surface, recognising the power of faith, hope and love, and that things can change. Help us to see beyond appearances and recognise that even the most hopeless of situations can be transformed.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

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 543: Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us

Benediction

Let us go in peace; loving and caring for one another in Christ's name, and may we be blessed with every gift needful for God's work, may the Spirit grant us the willingness to risk ourselves completely for the sake of the gospel, and may the love and the compassion and the hope and the faith of Jesus dwell richly within us till the time of the coming of his kingdom.

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, now and for evermore. Amen

