



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 26th February 2023

Call to Worship:

As darkness gives way to light
and winter sleep to fresh beginnings,
We come today to be reminded of God's love for us.
Like the green shoots of renewed life,
stirring beneath the soil,
We welcome an awakening of God's word in our lives.
In this time of reflection and repentance,
We affirm our identity as children of God.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving Lord,
at the beginning of this Lenten season,
we are met with the challenge of handing over
every bit of our lives that do not come from You.
To rid ourselves of what clutters our lives,
and all that distracts us from the simple truth
of Your love for us.

Your prophets have called us to change the way we worship—
to make internal sacrifices instead of external ones.

To seek justice, and love kindness,
and walk humbly with You
each and every one of our days.

If we don't give anything up for Lent,
then let us at least give up this:
that we might live cease living in ways that disconnect us from You,
for every one of our steps is like a circle around Your temple.

Perhaps this Lent,
we can give up our way
and give ourselves to Your way for us.

O God, help us to use this season of Lent
to examine our attachments,
and to sense where You invite us
to live more simply and deeply.

Shine the light of Your love
into the private corners of our lives
where we have acquired so much clutter

that it has begun to restrict our freedom.

Grant us the strength to free ourselves
from appetites and needs that drive us
into taking, having and wanting
more than we need or have time for.

Teach us that in letting go
we become free, rather than deprived,
generous rather than covetous,
and spacious rather than restricted.

We offer You our Lenten observance,
and today we place our feet
on the road to Easter, and walk
the Way that You have walked before us

So, lead and guide us on this Lenten way.
May we walk with Jesus toward the hill just outside of Jerusalem.
May we like Him take up our cross and follow,
spending each moment of our lives living responsively to You,
just as Christ Himself did.
For that is the faithful way.

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: Genesis 3:1-7

HYMN 76:

The Lord is King! lift up your voice
O earth, and all the heavens rejoice!
From world to world the joy shall ring,
'The Lord omnipotent is King!'

The Lord is King! who then shall dare
resist his will, distrust his care,
or murmur at his wise decrees,
or doubt his royal promises?

The Lord is King! child of the dust,
the judge of all the earth is just;
holy and true are all his ways;
let every creature speak his praise.

He reigns! O saints, exalt your strains;
your God is King, your Father reigns;
and he is at the Father's side,

the Man of love, the Crucified.

Come, make your wants, your burdens known;
Christ will present them at the throne;
this world of ours and worlds unseen:
how thin the boundary between!

One Lord, one empire, all secures;
he reigns, and life and death are yours;
through earth and heaven one song shall ring,
'The Lord omnipotent is King!'

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Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

Reflection:

A traditional part of Christian doctrine is the call to resist temptation. It no doubt arises from the idea that humans are naturally sinful - the doctrine of original sin which suggests that we are all fundamentally bad, and that it is only through the grace of God that we can be saved to righteousness. Human existence is sometimes portrayed as a constant war against the dark powers of temptation which threaten to overwhelm us. Each temptation is a battle and each victory strengthens us to face the next onslaught. As the old hymn suggests, dark passions, evil companions, bad language - all these are evil powers to be overcome in the war against temptation.

But actually of course, they are a very exaggerated picture of what temptation is all about.

Nineteenth century hymn-writers and modern day advertising agencies have taken the concept of temptation and confused it with choice. A temptation in the sense we're thinking about today is only a temptation if what one is contemplating is somehow wrong, inappropriate, or damaging.

We think of Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness:

(1) to use his powers to relieve his hunger, and turn stones into bread, when he was fasting; (2) to put God to the test, by throwing himself off a tall building in order to be rescued by angels; and (3) to be offered all the world if he would worship evil rather than God. The Bible teaches that temptation in itself is not wrong, but it is giving in to temptation that is dangerous because it leads to sin, or breaking God's rules of the best way to live.

We learn from the story that physical satisfaction, no matter what the cost, the longing to be popular and the desire to be powerful, are all big temptations that may face us today. Christians believe that Jesus experienced the same trials and temptations that are common to us all.

But we note that these are real temptations with real consequences; and that what we often think of these days as temptation is really nothing more than choice.

You may be familiar with the film Monty Python's *Meaning of Life*, in which a character called Mr Creosote is tempted by a waiter to complete his meal of 'everything on the menu served mixed up in a bucket with a fried egg on top', with an after dinner mint. 'No,' says Mr Creosote, 'I'm stuffed.' But the waiter played by John Cleese with a persuasive French accent tempts him like a devil saying how small it is. 'It is,' he says, in a line that has become part of British culture and language, 'only waffer thin.' Mr Creosote gives in to the temptation and it has to be said that the results are quite catastrophic - he explodes.

But the fact is that, in real life, the decision whether to have an After Eight or not is not really temptation, certainly not on the same scale as the temptation we are considering when we read the gospel according to Matthew.

Whether we choose to abandon our diet for an evening or not doesn't really come in to the business of temptation. Temptation is not just about making a choice, it is about choosing a path that is hurtful, damaging or just plain wrong.

To say, 'I know I shouldn't, before having a second slice of cake, or spending some money on a unnecessary gift for yourself is a far cry from saying, 'I know I shouldn't,' and stealing someone's property or assaulting someone with a weapon, or hurting someone in any way at all. Temptation is only temptation when we want to do something bad or something wrong.

The problem, of course, is this: who decides what is wrong? Who makes the rules?

Every society, every culture, even every Christian denomination, reads the Bible in its own way and uses the Bible to support its own beliefs and prejudices. The fact that there is still within some parts of the church today powerful opposition to the ordination of women illustrates this.

We have to be very careful indeed about simply accepting the moral codes handed down to us by our forebears in the church, for as often as not these codes will be tainted with the prejudices of a previous age. What was an evil temptation to our Victorian ancestors, may be a simple lifestyle choice to us today. In the first half of the twentieth century, even, it would not have been unknown for a minister to extinguish his cigarette in the vestry before taking to the pulpit to preach against the evils of alcohol. Nowadays I'd suspect it's more likely that a minister might preach against the evils of tobacco before enjoying a glass of wine with lunch.

So if we can't trust our own culture, who does make the rules?

For Christians, of course, Jesus makes the rules. To find out how to relate to other people, to find out the difference between temptation and simple choice, we look at him. To learn what is acceptable behaviour and what is to be avoided, we look to him. And, perhaps surprisingly, we find a rather simple answer. Both his temptations in the wilderness and his teaching throughout his ministry point to one simple thing. If any action is purely selfish, and is harmful to another, it is wrong. All the advice Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount sends the same message. Look after other people, don't act purely in your own interests, be prepared to sacrifice your comfort, your possessions, your time - anything you can offer - for the wellbeing of others.

To live in such a way is a very tall order, we might even think it's impossible to live without a thought for ourselves and every concern for others. But that seems to be what Jesus demands of us. And if we think we're not up to it, if we think it's too difficult for us, if we think we've already gone horribly wrong and need a fresh start - well we're probably right. And that's what Lent provides for us, an opportunity to look at the way we serve the Kingdom, the way we respond to temptation - real temptation, and the chance, through meditation prayer and worship, to start afresh in our discipleship and obedience to the teaching of Jesus, that we might find the strength to follow him wherever he may lead, however long and difficult the journey may be. We follow rejoicing, resisting temptation when we can, failing often, but knowing that we are forgiven as often as we fail, and that we are coming with Jesus to the Kingdom of God.

HYMN 509:

O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end;
be thou for ever near me, my Master and my Friend;
I shall not fear the battle if thou art by my side,
nor wander from the pathway if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me feel thee near me; the world is ever near,
I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me, around me and within;
but, Jesus, draw thou nearer, and shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear thee speaking in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will.
O speak to reassure me, to hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen, thou guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, thou hast promised, to all who follow thee,
that where thou art in glory there shall thy servant be;
O guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end;
O give me grace to follow, my Saviour and my Friend.
O give me grace to follow, my Saviour and my Friend.

Prayer :

Almighty God,
Be with us as we contend with our lives and all our challenges.
Thank you for listening as we bring before you the troubles that undermine us.
We affirm, it is written,
“One does not live by bread alone.”
Strengthen and sustain our families and our communities.
Nurture the bonds between us and inspire us to live with empathy and forgiveness.
Help those struggling with work or facing uncertainty in their futures, that they may find peace
in your abundant love.
Jesus, our Redeemer, rescue us when we stumble.
We proclaim, it is written,
“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”
Enable us to admit the temptations of the world,
and support us to resist turning away from your teaching.
Awaken us to recognize the gifts you have given each one of us,
and to see the role we can play in healing your creation.

Be with our leaders and those around the world,
that they may act with compassion and generosity.
Guide them to humbly serve their own countries
and to foster peace across our borders.

God, our Creator, inspire us with renewed hope.

We acknowledge, it is written,
“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Deepen our faith to hear your word and follow your way.
Encourage us to bring all our hopes and desires to you in prayer,
that in lifting up our souls to you,
we may be shaped by your love.

Help us to hear the dialogue of prayer,
and to listen in prayer as much as we speak.

We pray today for all who are walking a hard journey:

for those whose daily paths encounter barbed wire and guns;
for those who did not want to leave home but were forced to;
for those who set out today in search of food and water;
for those whose journey is shattered by economic hardship;
for those whose journey is marred by pain or despair,
and for those who faithfully journey alongside them;
for those who are making a move and beginning again;
for those who are clinging on to something that has ended;
for those who are being bullied, and for those who are bullying;
for those who have just taken their first breath, and
for those who today will take their last.

May this Lenten journey, with its stories
about the hard places of Jesus' experience,
give strength and courage to all
whose journey is far from easy.
And may it inspire us to risk Christ's Way of love
as we share the journey with other travellers.

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 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.

Benediction

Whatever wilderness the Spirit has brought us to:
let us walk in boldness, as beloved children of God
walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High
walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with us.

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