



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

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2023

Call to Worship:

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth.  
They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,  
for great is the glory of the Lord.  
For the Lord is high, but regards the lowly;  
and from afar God humbles the proud.

The loving God's commitment to us is clear:  
We see it in the life of Jesus.  
God's commitment to us is complete:  
We see it in the crucifixion of Jesus.  
May we, in this time of Lent,  
Walk with Jesus on his Calvary journey,  
That our commitment may be clear  
And our love complete.

Prayer/Meditation:

Gracious God,  
as a mother loves her child, so you love us.  
For that great truth  
we praise and thank you.

We owe our very lives to you.  
You have watched over us from our birth,  
tenderly nurturing us,  
showering us with love.  
When we have needed you, you have been there.  
For that great truth  
we praise and thank you.

You have given us strength in times of need,  
comfort in times of distress,  
encouragement in times of despair,  
guidance in times of uncertainty.  
Whatever we have faced, you have been with us.  
For that great truth  
we praise and thank you.

Gracious God,  
we have not always appreciated your love,  
all too often ignoring what you would teach us,  
disobeying your instructions,  
taking you for granted and wandering far from your side.  
Yet through it all your love has remained constant.  
For that great truth  
we praise and thank you.

Gracious God,  
caring for us more than you care for yourself,  
sacrificing your all for our sakes,  
loving us with an unquenchable love,  
you have called us to be your children.  
For that great truth  
we praise and thank you,  
in the name of Christ.  
God of all Living and Loving:  
How pleasant it is when women, men, and children  
live together in unity!  
How noble is your creation and the world that you have made!  
How blessed we are to receive the gifts of life and love!

We are thankful for families,  
where scattered piles of belongings testify that we live fully in the moment;  
where the noise of laughter and the silence of sadness are freely shared;

We are thankful for families,  
where we find sanctuary from danger and judgment;  
where words of love and openness are the rule of life.

We are thankful for families,  
where our differences are the spices of life;  
where our unity is something that we can always take for granted.

We grieve for families,  
where violence and rejection are living realities;  
where hearts are broken, and dreams are shattered.

We grieve for families,  
where walls of protection become fortresses of isolation,  
where language is a weapon of destruction and hate.

Help us to understand,  
those families whose identities are different from ours;  
the ways of loving, parenting, partnering  
and working together for peace.

Help us to dare,

to stand strongly against hate and divisiveness;  
to encounter our differences with love and respect.

This we believe:  
that love is stronger than hate;  
that hope is stronger than despair,  
and that good is stronger than evil.  
In the name of the One who is Loving and Living,

***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 2:1-10

HYMN 72:

Now thank we all our God,  
With hearts and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done,  
in whom his world rejoices;  
who from our mothers' arms  
has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love,  
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God  
Through all our life be near us,  
With ever joyful hearts  
And blessed peace to cheer us;  
And keep us in his grace,  
And guide us when perplexed,  
And free us from all ills,  
In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God  
The Father now be given,  
The Son, and him who reigns  
With them in highest heaven;  
The one eternal God,  
Whom heaven and earth adore,  
For thus it was, is now,  
And shall be evermore.

Reading: Luke 2:25-35

Reflection:

The Old Testament reading today isn't just about Moses' mother. And from the story of Moses we can see that he wasn't given just one mother but blessed with the love of three motherly

women: his birth mother, his brave and resourceful sister and the warm-hearted Egyptian princess. These three women saved his life and put him on the path to becoming the saviour of his people. Moses's birth mother showed courage and wisdom in allowing her son to be given away and put into danger in the shallows of the Nile. Moses's sister, Miriam, was passionately concerned for her little brother's survival. The princess felt compassion for the crying baby in the bulrushes and gave him a home and an education.

The story of Moses and his three mothers reminds us on Mothering Sunday that the day is not just a celebration of mums (although we all had one)! The day is a chance to reflect on maternal feelings and how, at their very best, they can tell us about how God loves us.

Isaiah the prophet wrote

"As a mother comforts a child so will I comfort you, says the Lord." (Isaiah 66.13)

This view of God as being tenderly aware of our needs is a good counter-balance to the portrait of God as angry and stern, as, in some places, described by the prophets.

In the New Testament reading we are reminded that motherhood was not easy for Mary. She was young, inexperienced and unmarried. Her pregnancy was viewed with suspicion. Her baby was born far from home in difficult and dangerous surroundings. When she took her son to the temple, only days old, Simeon's prophecy for his future was both ominous and exciting. Jesus' childhood gave her cause for concern and in adulthood, it was clear that his life would become increasingly dangerous. Mary suffered the worst thing that can happen to a mother, she had to watch her son die a tortured death.

## **Meditation**

Parents of course always think of their children as being special. We speak of our God as "loving Father" and address God every week as "our Father". Yet we often believe that God looks at us only to shake his head and criticize us? What if God looks at us with the same delight and joy that we look at our own beloved ones? What if, when God contemplates our lives, he doesn't feel angry or depressed? What if God thinks we are wonderful? What if God loves us with the perfect tolerance and forgiveness that we would wish to show as parents? If we don't believe in a God who is far better and more loving than the best human being, then our estimation of God's grace and love is limited indeed.

Being a mother is not easy. Mothers usually want the very best for their children and they will sacrifice even their own self and their own life to protect and to nurture their children and provide a better future for them than they themselves have experienced. Surely, that is also what we should be doing for the Christian Church today, sacrificing many of the words that remains precious to us to protect and to nurture the future of the Church in an increasingly secular world?

It has been said that the fastest growing branch of the Christian church is made up of those who used to attend but have left it. There are two main answers given when people ask why they have left. One is that the words that they are expected to say and with which they should agree week by week have long ago lost any relevance and meaning. These are people who want to continue following and living the social justice agenda of Jesus but who have found that the Church has become a stumbling block on their spiritual journey. The other answer is that no one from their church has ever bothered to find out why they have left. Unless we, the remnant,

have the courage to ask such a searching question then we will continue to misunderstand and therefore continue to make the same mistake of words rather than of actions.

The challenge is not the words that we are asked to confirm to be members of the Church. The challenge for the Church today is to support, encourage and enable followers of the Way of Jesus to actively promote and to live his mission. And that requires a re-think about the relationship between actions and words of faith.

For the Christian Church to have a future in our increasingly sceptical world we will need to go back to the drawing board and do theology all over again. We will need to set aside much of what has been and what remains precious for many of us. We will need to do less talking about faith, and place much less importance to creedal words and doctrinal statements. Instead, we will need to emphasise much more living the Way of Jesus so that the world can be radically changed for the better for all.

Being a mother and acting like a mother is not easy. But we need to bring the courage of motherhood into the Church and ask searching and soulful questions to guide our future. It is time for the Christian Church in a hostile world to develop a new action-based social justice Reformation fit for the world in which we live. But we can take heart because, as a local church, we are involved, along with politicians, protesters and people of other faiths in the major social justice work of fighting corruption, violence, poverty and fear. This is the work of God's kingdom, a great calling, and the news of what you the church is doing needs to be spread through the community beyond the church walls.

And all of us, mothers, fathers, young people, married or unmarried, might remember, when we're tempted to believe that the glory days of the Christian church are behind us and that there is nothing to look forward to but decline and decay, the words of Dr Seuss, the children's author of 'The Cat in the Hat' who once wrote, "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." Can you rise to the challenge? And if we can, let us smile as we walk together into the desperately needed Reformation of the Christian Church that will offer new hope and new actions to this beautiful but still broken world.

HYMN 107:

The love of God comes close  
where stands an open door  
to let the stranger in,  
to mingle rich and poor.  
The love of God is here to stay;  
embracing those who walk his way,  
the love of God is here to stay.

The peace of God comes close  
to those caught in the storm,  
forgoing lives of ease  
to ease the lives forlorn.  
The peace of God is here to stay;  
embracing those who walk his way,  
the peace of God is here to stay.

The joy of God comes close  
where faith encounters fears,

where heights and depths of life  
are found through smiles and tears.  
The joy of God is here to stay;  
embracing those who walk his way,  
the joy of God is here to stay.

The grace of God comes close  
to those whose grace is spent,  
when hearts are tired or sore  
and hope is bruised and bent.  
The grace of God is here to stay;  
embracing those who walk his way,  
the grace of God is here to stay.

The Son of God comes close  
where people praise his name,  
where bread and wine are blest  
and shared as when he came.  
The Son of God is here to stay;  
embracing those who walk his way,  
the Son of God is here to stay.

Prayer :

We thank God for giving us others to share in our lives:  
For parents, and the love which brought us to birth:  
We praise you, O Lord;  
and bring you thanks today.

For mothers who have cherished and nurtured us:  
We praise you, O Lord;  
and bring you thanks today.

For fathers who have loved and supported us,  
We praise you, O Lord;  
and bring you thanks today.

For brothers and sisters with whom we have shared our home:  
We praise you, O Lord;  
and bring you thanks today.

For children and their parents:  
We praise you, O Lord;  
and bring you thanks today.

For other relatives and friends, who have been with us  
in our hopes and joys and times of sadness:  
We praise you, O Lord;  
and bring you thanks today.

For all who first spoke to us of Jesus, and have drawn us  
into the family of our Father in heaven:  
We praise you, O Lord;  
and bring you thanks today.  
Help us to live  
as those who belong to one another,  
and to you, our Father, now and always

We offer now our prayers and thoughts for the needs of the world and ourselves.

Jesus said that those who remain faithful to him will bear much fruit. We pray for communities of Christians gathered throughout the world today, for church leaders and for those of us who follow, for all women, men and children who seek to know God's will and to do it. Let us make your churches safe and nurturing places where everyone can find their true home, where the lonely, the marginalized and the rejected may be welcomed and where everyone can experience your unconditional love.

Loving God, as we see the brokenness of the world we pray for healing among the nations, for food where there is hunger, for freedom where there is oppression; for joy where there is pain, for peace among all your children. Just as a mother watches her children, you see the damage we do in your world and you forgive our selfishness, greed and stupidity. May your love strengthen us so we can work to change ourselves and the world.

This morning we pray especially for mothers and for stepmothers, grandmothers, godmothers, and all those women who have loved and laughed, wept and worked to care for others. Let us be a source of encouragement, support and friendship for them as they courageously accept this inspiring responsibility. Bless all parents and all carers and strengthen those families living under stress. We know that Mother's day is not a celebration but a time of heartache for many - may they have the comfort of knowing that your love for them is constant, your understanding is perfect, your compassion is never-ending.

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 580:

Lord, you give the great commission:  
'Heal the sick and preach the word'.  
Lest the Church neglect its mission  
and the gospel go unheard,  
help us witness to your purpose  
with renewed integrity;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you call us to your service:  
'In my name baptize and teach'.  
That the world may trust your promise,  
life abundant meant for each,  
give us all new fervour, draw us  
closer in community;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you make the common holy:  
'This my body, this my blood'.  
Let us all, for earth's true glory  
daily lift life heavenward,  
asking that the world around us  
share your children's liberty;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you show us love's true measure:  
'Father, what they do, forgive'.  
Yet we hoard as private treasure  
all that you so freely give.  
May your care and mercy lead us  
to a just society;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you bless with words assuring:  
'I am with you to the end'.  
Faith and hope and love restoring,  
may we serve as you intend,  
and, amid the cares that claim us,  
hold in mind eternity;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Benediction

Let us go now in the comfort and peace  
of the One who gave birth to us.  
Let us go in the assurance  
that the Comforter is with us always.  
Let us go to give comfort and peace to others.  
Divine Wisdom guide us as we go forth  
on Her paths of peace.  
May She give us blessings more precious  
than silver or gold.  
May we find joy in sharing these blessings with others.  
May Wisdom empower us to change our world!



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