



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

Sunday 5th March 2023

Call to Worship:

Let us share with God our hopes for the world:
a world in which all people are treated with tolerance and respect;
a world whose resources we gladly share with each other and with the generations to come;
a world in which it is possible to live together in
peace and love;
a world of freedom, justice and harmony;
a world of hope, love and peace.

The Lord's Prayer:

God of the ordinary,
we praise you.
You take the drabness of our thoughts,
and brighten them into vivid imagination.
You take our everyday lives,
and transform them into holy, precious moments.
You take our meagre offerings
and multiply them into an abundance of delight.
Extraordinary God,
you light up our thoughts, our lives, our selves
with the wonder of your call.

From familiar and comfortable spaces,
You call us: Go.
In the dead of night when questions burn,
You invite us: Come.
Where there is flesh and fellowship,
You beckon us: Draw near.

Coming and going.
Gathering and parting.
Growing and grieving.
We are so keenly aware, O God,
that life does not stand still.
Life moves us.
Life changes us.
And so do you.
You coax and command,
you question and reckon,

you do not leave us unchanged.
We hold in our hearts and before you
all those who are experiencing
the stresses and heartaches of life's changes:
those in mourning,
those without hope,
those who are alone.
those who are bone-weary.

We share the joy and offer thanksgiving
alongside those who are braving new adventures,
those who are welcoming new life,
those who are affirming love,
those who are striding with others toward justice.

In all of life,
in all of our travels,
in all of our doubts,
and in all of our endeavours;
as you call us and send us,
welcome us and keep us;
above all else, you do not leave us.
No matter the changes, you remain.
We praise you, Gracious God. Amen

We praise you loving and eternal God
for your love of all people
expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
We praise you for his commitment to justice,
his zeal for true worship of you
and his willingness to replace all other sacrifices
with the sacrifice of his own life.
In his name we offer you our worship

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 12:1-4a

Hymn 726 (Ps 121):

I to the hills will lift mine eyes:
from whence doth come mine aid?
My safety cometh from the Lord,
who heaven and earth hath made.

Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will
he slumber that thee keeps.

Behold, he that keeps Israel,
he slumbers not, nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps; the Lord thy shade
on thy right hand doth stay;
the moon by night thee shall not smite
nor yet the sun by day.

The Lord shall keep thy soul; he shall
preserve thee from all ill;
henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will.

Reading: John 3:1-17

Reflection:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Martin Luther called John 3:16 “the Gospel in a nutshell.”

It may be the most famous verse in the New Testament, but the popularity of John 3:16 has, in a sense, robbed it of its power. Far from the “heart of the Gospel,” it now seems like nothing more than Christianity’s catchphrase—the logo of the Christian brand.

But there’s another, more dangerous side to John 3:16 as well.

Regardless of what we make of this text’s familiarity, the truth of the matter is that John 3:16 has been used time and time again in Christian history to hurt, divide, and demean people. For some, the requirement that we “be born again” is code for “you have to look, sound, and act like us.”

The Gospel becomes a proof-text by which we determine if other people’s salvation is as certain as ours is. From this vantage point, the text loses its transformative power altogether and becomes a weapon to re-enforce a particular system of belief.

As is the case with the whole of Scripture, when we read John 3:16 apart from its larger context, we run the risk of missing the point. John 3:16 isn’t a theological catchphrase; rather, it is part of a much richer conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, says John’s Gospel, was a leader among the Jews. In public, Nicodemus’s loyalties were clearly devoted to the Jewish establishment. But in private, Nicodemus had his doubts. And so, he visits Jesus under the cover of nightfall.

“Rabbi,” Nicodemus says, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

To put it another way, Nicodemus saw that Jesus was clearly mediating the presence of God, and Nicodemus wanted that kind of experience, too.

Then, as Jesus so often does, he says something that utterly astounds everyone: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

In other words, glimpsing the Kingdom of God isn't a matter of praying a certain way or believing a certain way or following a certain set of liturgical customs; it's about a complete rebirth of our entire existence!

On hearing this, Nicodemus asks an honest albeit naïve question that sounds funny to our 21st century ears: "How can an old man like me go back into my mother's womb and be born again?"

Nicodemus makes what is perhaps the most common mistake when it comes to reading and interpreting Scripture: confusing something meant as metaphor with something meant to be literally true.

More than saying the right prayers or professing the right statement of faith, being born from above is about a way of life. It's about living so that those around you will see you and know about Jesus.

For Nicodemus, being born from above happened slowly. The Gospel of John tells us that he came to Jesus under the cover of nightfall. He wasn't quite sure he believed just yet. He didn't want anyone to recognize him.

Then, after he leaves Jesus, he returns to his position among the Jewish establishment. His conversion doesn't happen with a bolt of lightning or sudden blindness; it doesn't draw the same kind of attention that the Apostle Paul's conversion does; and there's no incredible dream that converts or upends Nicodemus's life like the dreams of Saint Peter or Saint John the Divine.

But deep down, and ever so slightly, something begins to change.

And with the exception of one brief mention in John chapter 7, we never hear from Nicodemus again—that is, until the end of John's Gospel. And it is here that Nicodemus's birth from above is revealed.

As Jesus hangs crucified, after all of the other disciples had fled for fear of persecution, there stands Nicodemus at the foot of the cross, armed with myrrh and aloes and the other provisions for Jewish burial.

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

We can't know what Nicodemus was thinking as he departed Jesus' company after hearing these words. But we can be sure that something within him began to turn. And then, little by little, his heart was broken open and he was born anew, finding his way through darkness and doubt, to the cross.

In his poem, "From the Place Where We Are Right," the German-born Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai put it this way:

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

And one final thought. God loves the world. So often in Christianity we judge and condemn the world. there are Christian websites by the hundred whose only purpose seems to be to tell us what's wrong with the world. We ourselves find it easier to be critical of the secular society than to love it. We sometimes lay the blame for all the church's woes at the feet of the world. Why are there fewer people in church on Sundays? Because many are enticed by the world to go shopping or engage in leisure activities? Why are there so few children interested in the Christian faith? Because the world of social media has kidnapped them and carried them away to an interesting, entertaining, and rather sinister dangerous place? But how often do we look to ourselves? Why have people abandoned the church in droves? Because Christians can't welcome people as they are, but tries to mould them in their own image?

In the midst of our Lenten journey, may we allow our doubts and questions to dig into our certainty. May we know the change of re-birth until, at last, we come to the foot of the cross.

Hymn 473:

God is love,
and where true love is,
God himself is there.

Here in Christ we gather, love of Christ our calling.
Christ, our love, is with us, gladness be his greeting.
Let us love and serve him, God of all the ages.
Let us love sincerely, seeing Christ in others.
Chorus

When we Christians gather, members of his Body,
Christ, our Head, is with us, loving and beloved.
Here is sent the Spirit, one with Son and Father,
fire of love's indwelling, bond of peace among us.
Chorus

Grant us love's fulfilment, joy with all the blessed,
when we see your glory, risen Lord and Saviour.
Bathe us in your splendour, Light of all creation,
be our bliss for ever as we sing your praises.
Chorus

Communion:

This is the joyful feast of unity.
Christ has gathered his people around the earth

to commune at this table.

Across political lines and economic lines,
in places of powerfully protected affluence,
and among the poorest of the poor,
we share a meal,
remembering and celebrating the One who proved shalom possible.

And so, we come:
from the East and from the West,
from the North and from the South.

We come.
We come with our doubts,
We come with our hopes,
We come with our inadequacies
and with our strengths.
Come everyone, for this is a table where all are invited
and all are welcome.

Remembrance:

We remember the stories that Jesus' friends tell,
stories of bread broken and shared, feeding a multitude,
stories of being gathered together, enemy and friend, around tables,
stories of unlikely guests revealing the face of the sacred.

They say that that
it was on a night of both celebration and betrayal
that he took the bread leftover on the table,
blessed it and broke it;
reminding them that it is
in the breaking that we become whole,
in losing our lives that we find them,
in serving that we are served.
As the grain scattered becomes one in the loaf,
when we eat this bread, we become one with one another.

They say that he took the cup also leftover on the table,
poured out and sharing,
remembering with them, the life-giving breath
even now pounding a rhythm through our veins,
the breath of life from whence we come
the breath that precedes and follows all that we can see
As the grapes find life in the vine,
when we drink this cup,
we become at one with the source of life itself.

Blessing:

And so we pray:
Come, holy Spirit, come.
Bless this bread and
bless this fruit of the vine.
Bless all of us in our eating and drinking that our eyes might be open,
that we might recognize the risen Christ in our midst,
indeed in one another.
Come, holy Spirit, come.

The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

This bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ. Take and eat, this is the body of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

This cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ. This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

Loving God, you have called us, fed us and nurtured us; now hear us as we bring before you the needs of the world:

Prayer:

God of the whole human family, we pray for drug addicts, dealers, alcoholics, gamblers, those who cheat and rob their own families, and those who mug vulnerable passers-by.

We pray for violent teenage gangs, for rebellious children who run away from good homes, those who abuse the social benefits system, and respectable business men who cheat the elderly out of their savings.

We pray for sex workers and their customers, those who exploit and abuse young people, and those who employ illegal immigrants in sweat shops.

We pray for terrorists in many lands, for underworld bosses, minders and hit men; for stalkers, seducers, and those who commit domestic violence.

We pray for bank robbers and tax evaders, shop lifters and vandals, scammers, pickpockets, computer criminals, and burglars who assault the elderly in their homes.

We pray for people who gravely abuse their positions of trust or power; corrupt lawyers, doctors, politicians, teachers, police officers, prison officers and ministers of religion.

Most loving God, please do not allow us to become defeatist and bitter. Make us more eager for redemption rather than retribution, and encourage us to employ the tough love of Christ in the affairs of our neighbourhood and nation.

Our God, you have given us in your word
the stories of persons who needed to leave their homelands—
Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, Moses.

Help us to remember
that when we speak of immigrants and refugees,
we speak of Christ.

In the One who had no place to lay his head,
and in the least of his brothers and sisters,
you come to us again, a stranger seeking refuge.

We confess that we often turn away.

You have chosen that the life of Jesus be filled
with events of unplanned travel and flight from enemies.

You have shown us through the example of Jesus
how we are called to relate to persons from different nations and cultures.
You have called us to be teachers of your word.

We ask you, our God, to open our minds and hearts
to the challenge and invitation
to model your perfect example of love.
Amen

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

Hymn 613:

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
in living echoes of thy tone;
as thou hast sought, so let me seek
thy straying children, lost and lone.

O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
the wandering and the wavering feet;
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
thy hungering ones with manna sweet.

O strengthen me, that while I stand
firm on the rock and strong in thee
I may stretch out a loving hand
to wrestlers with the troubled sea.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
the precious things thou dost impart;
and wing my words that they may reach
the hidden depths of many a heart.

O use me, Lord, use even me,
just as thou wilt, and when, and where,
until thy blessed face I see,
thy rest, thy joy, thy glory share.

Benediction:

Let us rejoice: God so loves the world!
May God our Maker
send us back into the world with creative energies refreshed.
May Christ the Light
illuminate our darkest moments.
And may the Holy Spirit of steadfast love
guide us until we worship together again.

And may the grace, mercy and peace of God, father, son and Spirit, be with each one of us and
with all those we love. today and for ever more. Amen