



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 2nd April 2023

Call to Worship:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, as we remember this day how Jesus entered Jerusalem to cries of celebration, help us to welcome him again into our hearts and our lives.

Lord Jesus Christ, we welcome and praise you this day. We lift up our voices in glad hosannas. We joyfully acknowledge you as king of kings and lord of lords. Yet we know in our own hearts, even as we greet you, sincere though we may be, that our worship and commitment is sometimes as weak and shallow as that which greeted you in Jerusalem long ago.

Forgive us that we go on making the same mistakes made on that first Palm Sunday. We profess to follow you but in our hearts follow our own desires. We are self-centred in our discipleship, looking as much for what we can receive as we can give. We are ready to serve when life is good, but reluctant when it involves the way of sacrifice.

Lord Jesus Christ you know, as you entered Jerusalem that the welcome of the crowd would turn to rejection, yet still you came. We praise you for that truth, and give thanks that you still come to us, inviting us to respond and share in your kingdom. Come again now into our hearts, cleansing us of all that is wrong, all that is impure and unworthy, all that keeps us from you. Come to your Church, filling it with love, harmony, humility, and faith. Come to your world, blessing it with peace, justice, freedom and hope.

Gracious and loving God,
In the journey of life, you are our guide and our companion.
From our beginning to our end, you are there.

You run this race alongside us,
at times encouraging us,
at times comforting us,
at times tending to our wounds,
at time carrying us when we don't think we can take another step.

For six weeks we have been on a Lenten journey,
and you have been right here with us—
with us in our discipline and devotion,
with us in our weakness and failure,
with us in our fear,
with us in our hope.

As we spend this final week with Jesus in Jerusalem,
we are amazed once again by his gentle spirit and fierce determination.
As he confronts those who challenge him,
he confronts our own stubbornness and defiant wills.
As he cares even for those who hate him,
we are challenged to love as he loves.
As he bears witness to the emergence of your kingdom,
our eyes are opened to your presence all around us.
As he moves with resolve toward his dark destiny,
we find ourselves struggling to understand why it has to be this way.

God, the journey is not just about the destination;
it is about each step along the way.
The journey itself is a blessing,
with all of its joys and sorrows.
As we run this race you are shaping us into new people.
As we move with you, we are continually born anew.
Help us to be attentive to each step,
in the darkness and in the light.
Help us to fully experience all that we encounter,
the good and the bad,
for in it all we discover you.

Though the race of life goes on,
our Lenten journey is nearing its conclusion.
Bind us ever closer to Christ,
so that we may turn our hearts and minds
to all that he experienced in the crucible of this holy week,
a week both terrible and wonderful.

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: Zechariah 9:9-10

HYMN 208: All glory, laud and honour

Reading: Luke 19:29-40

Reflection:

Much of Jesus' work had been done in Galilee, by the lakeside, on the mountainside, in the homes of his friends. Some of the time he had spent in contact with large groups of people and had helped those who were sick; some of his time he spent with the smaller and more intimate group of his disciples, when he had taught them something of his mission.

In his preaching and his teaching he had always been discreet; there are several stories that tell of him instructing people to keep quiet about what he had done for them. And even when he was addressing the multitudes, he never proclaimed himself, in some dramatic gesture, to be any kind of leader, Messiah or king. He had preferred to let people see him at work and hear the stories he had to tell, and make up their own minds about him, than to proclaim himself to be the Messiah. But now, as the time of Passover approached, it seems that the time had come for him to declare himself; to reveal to the people who he really was.

He arranged with a friend who lived in the village of Bethphage that, when he needed it, he should have the use of a young, untrained donkey. The time had now come so, as per the arrangement, Jesus sent two of his disciples to get it. They were told that they would find it tethered in a certain place in the village. And if anyone questioned their right to take it, they were to answer, 'The Lord has need of it' - this was the password.

And Jesus rode towards Jerusalem. And as he had planned, people recognised the statement he was making. It could be that people were gathering especially to see him, for he was something of a celebrity, and there would be many who had heard of him and his miracles and wanted to see him for themselves.

Jesus knew that the people of Jerusalem would be familiar with the scriptures, and he knew that the sight of this man with a reputation as a teacher and healer now coming into the city on the back of a donkey would be clear signal to the people of Jerusalem that the words of the prophet Zechariah were being acted out: 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' By choosing this particular form of transport, Jesus was giving the clearest possible signal that he saw himself as the fulfillment of the prophecy and that he was the messiah for whom they had been waiting.

It all seems something of a change of mind on Jesus part. He had previously given a telling off to a group of people who wanted to make him their king. He had carefully avoided making any claim to be the Messiah, but now he was saying - not in words but even more powerfully by his actions - that he was indeed the one they were waiting for. Why had he changed his mind?

Well, of course it can be nothing but speculation.

It might be that he saw his mission as involving a journey to Jerusalem and that, even though he knew well that he wasn't the kind of Messiah that most people wanted, he had to fulfil his mission no matter how it turned out.

It might be that this trip to Jerusalem was one last all or nothing effort to get the people to understand him. He had tried teaching them, he had tried showing them, now it was time for one last appeal, a specific statement that he was indeed the Son of the Most High God. If they accepted him then they would change the way they lived and worshipped and a new age would come in; though it seems clear that he knew all along that this visit to Jerusalem would have a different ending.

It might be that, in entering Jerusalem in this very public and provocative way, Jesus was deliberately antagonising the authorities with the idea of bringing them to a final confrontation where he would lay God's claims before them and see how they responded. Again, it is clear that he had a good idea of what the outcome would be.

Whatever his reasons might have been, Jesus knew that by proclaiming in such a public way that he was the Messiah he had passed the point of no return, and that whatever happened from then on his faith and that of his disciples would be tested to the breaking-point. For us today, Palm Sunday is little more than the beginning of the Easter story, so familiar that it becomes difficult to get up much enthusiasm for it. But for Jesus and his friends it was perhaps the most important day of their lives, for it was the day when Jesus stopped being an object of interest and curiosity to the people and an irritant to the authorities and became a serious threat to the stability both of the Jewish religious culture and to the civil Roman government.

But as we embark upon Holy Week, how are we to respond to the story of Palm Sunday, when Jesus finally showed his hand and set the train of events in motion that would lead to Easter?

Well, we like to think of ourselves as disciples of Jesus in this modern world, so it might be appropriate to look at how Jesus' friends reacted. Again it's speculation, but we can assume that they were happy that the man they had been following through thick and thin for three years was finally getting the recognition he deserved. They finally saw that everyone seemed to be receiving him with praise. For the disciples, this arrival into Jerusalem must have been one of the best days they had had with Jesus.

And in some way, we can share that feeling of celebration with them, but only in some way, because we know what happened next; we know that soon the celebration turned to fear and then loss; and again to wonder and praise.

But it's what happened in between that can teach us something. The fortunes of the disciples went, in a fairly short space of time, from high to low to high again, and their reaction was that, while things were going all right, they stayed with Jesus, but when he was arrested and put to trial, they ran away.

Peter denied that he had ever known Jesus, the rest of them fled. The lesson, then, is surely about loyalty and strength of faith.

Jesus proclaimed himself to be the Messiah, and the disciples were happy to be associated with him when all the people were welcoming him. We believe Jesus to be the Messiah, and we too are happy to call ourselves Christian when everything is easy and when our beliefs and our worship are acceptable and indeed encouraged by the authorities we live under.

But when the people turned against Jesus, the disciples abandoned him. We might say that there is little or no chance of that happening to us, yet we can see that even today the church is given very little respect by society; Christianity is no longer the religion of the majority; Christian faith rarely gets a mention in the media unless it is to criticise or ridicule. Already it is becoming harder to be Christian.

And in some ways that's a good thing. Our faith is more and more being tested like that of the disciples. More and more the church, those who serve it, and even Jesus himself are becoming figures of fun and the object of jokes.

As we move through Holy Week, we might think about our own faith and our own commitment, and about how we would react in the place of the disciples. As things become more difficult will we run away; or will we remain faithful and loyal to the Christ who has called us.

HYMN 209: Ride on! ride on in majesty!

Prayer :

God of transformation,
we are reminded this day

that Jesus' ride into Jerusalem
was more than a show,
more than a simple provocation,
more than the beginning of a cute celebration.
It was a signal that things are changing,
an unmistakably potent message
to the powers that be
that the world as we know it
is becoming the world as it should be.
It was a radical act of defiance
directed against those in his day
who wielded power
through violence, oppression, and tyranny.

It is no less radical, and no less tame,
for those who do the same today.

This simple ride reminds us—
and tells the whole world—
that you are indeed coming to make all things new.
You are coming to turn weapons of war
into instruments of peace.

You are coming to release those
who find themselves in all manners of bondage:
chains of injustice;
chains of addiction;
chains of conformity and apathy.

You are coming to provide for the poor:
food for the hungry
and shelter for the homeless.

You are coming to assure the dignity and equality
of all who are marginalized or oppressed.

You are coming to end violence and divisions,
to provide safe communities
and opportunities for education.

You are coming to offer healing and wholeness,
comfort, consolation, and hope.

You are coming to transform all that we know.
You are coming to save us.

But like humble Jesus riding into town on a lowly colt,
you aren't coming in grandeur,
you aren't coming with thunder and lightning,

you aren't making an epic entrance.

You're coming through the mystery of love incarnate,
through your church empowered by your Spirit,
through lives transformed and inspired,
through ordinary people like us,
blessed by you to do extraordinary things.

Come, gracious God
into a world that longs for change,
a world that needs your love,
a world full of your own children,
a world ripe with hope and potential.

We pray to you, Lord of palm-branches and the cross,
for you understand us and in love you have promised
not to push away any who come to you.

So we pray for people who feel pushed away:
pushed away from a living faith in Jesus by pressure from friends and family;
those who feel pushed away by other people in churches
if they do not share the same kinds of ideas, or ways, or clothes;
for people who are pushed out by those who want power,
whose main love to be noticed, to have control.

We pray for your church that all those who trust in Jesus
will be made able by your Spirit to follow his humility,
to see and imitate his servant life, to welcome and not to condemn.

Help your church to be like Jesus.

We pray to you, Lord of palm-branches and the cross,
for you know the warm glow of being praised and the loneliness of being hated.

We pray for world leaders,
quick to stand in the limelight taking decisions which affect everyone in the world
but slow at times to do the steady, less glamorous work to which they are called.

We pray for world leaders to understand their role to serve the peoples of the world,
that posturing will be replaced by practical action to make a difference,
and jockeying for position be replaced by genuine efforts
to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and care for those who are weak.

In days when food banks are required in our land
to feed families who struggle to provide the basics for life,
we ask that you will re-arrange our priorities and help us to live more like Jesus.

We pray to you, Lord of palm-branches and the cross,
because you know how quickly life changes to death.

We pray for those who have recently lost those whom they have loved.

In the shock, confusion, pain and sorrow especially of unexpected loss,
we pray for hearts to be open to the comfort of your Spirit,
shown through friendship and community and as deep calls to deep.

We remember those we know who mourn in these days,
who need to be sure of that you invite those in sorrow to turn to you;
and we name them before you now...

Blessed are those who come in your name, O God.
We have come.
We will go.

And now we pray—we pray for your coming kingdom
emerging all around us,

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 602: Forth in the peace of Christ we go

Benediction

We have gathered with the crowds crying Hosanna!
We have shared the hope for a world about to be changed.
We have walked with another crowd, one that called words of scorn and condemnation.
And now we follow the crowd as it leads out to the cross,
and yet even as the world grows dark, we cannot lose hope.
And so we watch the crowd and we follow, praying that the grace of God, the love of Jesus and
the compassion of the Holy Spirit may be with each one of us and with all those we love, today
and for ever more. Amen

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.

