



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 30th April 2023

Call to Worship:

I will sing of the Lord's great love for ever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.

I will declare that your love stands firm for ever;
that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

May the peace of the Creator God be upon this world
binding all people together in unity and love.
May the peace of the forgiving Christ be upon this world
cleansing and restoring human relationships.
May the peace of the guiding Spirit be upon this world
replacing hatred with friendship and conflict with love.

Prayer:

Seeking to explore the mystery of God, we gather in worship, full of wonder at the majesty of the universe and the complexity of life; seeking to understand the power of Jesus to change the lives of those who know him, we gather in worship, full of wonder at the effects his words and actions had on those around him; seeking to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, we gather in worship, full of wonder and thanksgiving that we are called to live as a community of the Spirit, influenced, moved and guided by our common faith. As we explore, understand and experience, may we come closer to God and to one another.

Loving God, we are thankful that we are able to be here this morning, that we are able to be part of this community of worshippers, and that we are welcome here even with our doubts and uncertainties. We are thankful that here we can ponder our deepest thoughts and feelings, that we can lay ourselves open with all our weaknesses and fears, in the certainty that we will not be judged but loved, supported and encouraged.

And so we come as we are, bringing the bad as well as the good, the doubt as well as the faith, the sorrow as well as the joy, the despair as well as the hope. We bring the anger as well as the peace, the hatred as well as the love, the confusion as well as the certainty, the fear as well as the trust.

We bring our these not with pride or arrogance, but honestly, confident that we are accepted as we are. May we in our worship be truthful to ourselves and truthful to God, and so may we discover the renewing love of God that frees us to live as people of God.

And as we grasp that freedom, we give thanks for all that is good in the world: for love, caring, guidance, protection, forgiveness, laughter. We give thanks that we are able to enjoy all these things as gifts of God, and we seek forgiveness and renewal as we acknowledge our habit of giving thanks for what we have while failing to care much about others. The Kingdom of God is not for us alone alone but for all people - may we be forgiven for turning the Christian faith

into something we receive rather than something we share. May our faith move us to live more truly as God's people, with an understanding of our responsibility towards others - the poor, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, the oppressed, the lonely, the weak, the sorrowful. And may our worship and our whole lives reflect our faith in the truth of the gospel of Christ and the reality of the Kingdom of God.

The Lord's Prayer:

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: John 10:1-10

Hymn 679:

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want:
he makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again,
and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness,
e'en for his own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale,
yet will I fear no ill;
for thou art with me, and thy rod
and staff me comfort still.

My table thou hast furnishèd
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint,
and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me;
and in God's house for evermore
my dwelling-place shall be.

Reading: John 10:22-30

Reflection:

In both our readings today from John's gospel, we find Jesus talking about shepherds and sheep using a metaphor drawn from the famous words of the twenty-third Psalm - the Lord is my shepherd.

Many of us recall Sunday-school posters of this favorite psalm superimposed on beautiful painted pictures of Jesus on a grassy hillside, with a lamb over his shoulders, rescuing it from danger.

Perhaps as children we found comfort in the image of the kind and gentle Jesus who cares for all God's creatures. This is the Jesus who will stay with a child through a dark night filled with terrors: tigers under the bed and monsters in the wardrobe. This is the Jesus who stays with adults too, through nights of weeping, and loneliness, and worry, and despair.

And in those times of danger and grief, many people turn to the Twenty-Third Psalm for comfort. At the bedside of people facing surgery or serious illness, reciting the psalm brings peace and hopefulness. At memorial services, it evokes the kind and loving presence of the God who promises an eternal dwelling place in the house of the Lord.

But then, there are the times when events in our lives or in our world throw our peace, our hopefulness, our comfort into doubt - times when the Jesus we remember from our childhood, smiling on that grassy hillside, seems almost irrelevant to the darkness of the world.

Perhaps the people crowding around Jesus in the Portico of Solomon wanted answers: "Are you the Messiah?" Would Jesus be the new hero who would drive out the Roman invader? Would the nation be free and independent once more?

The people crowding around Jesus want clarity and certainty. Instead, he is cryptic and evasive. The people want him to speak with authority about weapons and strategies; instead, he talks about sheep. He claims a kind of leadership that they find very offensive: he claims to be one with God the Father.

How do we reconcile the gentle, kind shepherd Jesus, the one who would go anywhere and risk anything to save even the smallest lamb, with the Jesus who provoked his enemies to violence? And how does this Jesus have anything at all to do with the worries and dangers of our lives? What can the gentle shepherd do to help?

The great thing about Psalm 23 is just how realistic it is about the darkness of life. Perhaps the picture we get of the Good Shepherd from art and music and childhood memories is an image of pure light and pure sweetness. But the psalm itself knows darkness and fear. Like the writer of the psalm, many Christians have traveled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. They too have known the threat of the unknown. And yet many have also known the comfort of God's presence, walking alongside them through that dark valley. Many people have felt the warmth of Jesus' love surrounding and enfolding them in the most difficult moments of their lives. Many have experienced transcendent holiness and light in the darkest of times.

People who spend much time with those who are ill or bereaved begin to know what kind of help brings true comfort. Comfort does not come from assurances that everything will be all right or from platitudes that try to explain why everything that happens is God's will. Comfort comes from the simple presence of companions who are willing to sit alongside us in our darkest hours, to walk through the darkness with us, to help us make the darkness holy, and to rejoice with us when small glimmers of light finally begin to shine.

That is what our Christian faith tells us.. It tells us that Jesus is not the God of light alone. Jesus knows darkness too, because he too has been enfolded by darkness. Like us, he has grieved over the senseless waste and tragedy of life. Like us, he has agonized over those who suffer. He has entered into the darkness of death. And he promises to walk that road with us so that we do not have to walk it alone. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

The ultimate truth of our Christian faith, the truth we remember this Easter season and every Sunday as we celebrate the Lord's Resurrection, is that our Shepherd leads us out of death into life. The Lord who was crucified and who rose again is the same Lord who promises to redeem the world, to relieve its suffering, to restore it to wholeness, to inaugurate a new creation. The risen Lord is the sign of the life that God promises to all of us: life transformed, life redeemed, life restored, life abundant, life joyous and eternal and blessed. God prepares a table for all of us: a table brimful with overflowing cups and overabundant blessings. And Jesus, our Great Shepherd, invites us to come and share with him at the table of blessing.

Hymn 262:

Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne;
hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy chosen King
through all eternity.

Crown him the Son of God,
before the worlds began:
and ye, who tread where he hath trod,
crown him the Son of Man;
who every grief hath known
that wrings the human breast,
and takes and bears them for his own,
that all in him may rest.

Crown him the Lord of life,
who triumphed o'er the grave,
and rose victorious in the strife
for those he came to save:
his glories now we sing
who died, and rose on high;
who died eternal life to bring,
and lives that death may die.

Crown him, the Lord of Love!
Behold his hands and side,
rich wounds, yet visible above
in beauty glorified.
All hail, Redeemer, hail!
for thou hast died for me:
thy praise shall never, never fail
throughout eternity.

Prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for all we have - our homes, our food, our clothing, our modern appliances, our public amenities, our opportunities for education, our access to healthcare, the

confidence and security to travel where we like in safety. And we acknowledge our feelings of discomfort and guilt when when we realise how many people in the world are denied these benefits that we take for granted.

We pray for those who have no homes, living as refuges, or living rough on our streets. We pray for those who live in inadequate housing, the shacks and huts of shanty towns or in bed and breakfast accommodation because there is nowhere else for them to go. We pray for those who have no food, their crops have failed, their economies burdened by debt, their labours not fairly rewarded. We pray for those who have no fresh water, daily facing the threat of disease and the nightmare of drought, and for those who have no resources, condemned to a life of poverty with no relief, no opportunity to help themselves. We pray for those who have no access to education, to a health service or a welfare system, no-one to turn to for help or support.

And we pray for those for whom this last week has brought tragedy and disaster, those whose lives have been thrown into turmoil, and those whose lives have been ended by the actions of others. We remember especially the people of Ukraine, the families of those who have lost their lives, those who live in constant fear, and those who will face the rest of their days coming to terms with physical scars or mental and spiritual wounds.

We believe that God is in the midst of suffering and devastation as much as in praise and rejoicing; may the faith and hope of those who suffer carry them through this tragedy; and may the prayers of ourselves and others be a comfort to them and an inspiration to us to continue our struggle for peace and healing. In a moment of silence now we remember those who are on our minds at this time ...

Our prayers we offer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. 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 650:

God with humanity made one
is seen in Christ, God's only Son:
in you, Lord Christ, the Son of Man,
we see God's reconciling plan.

To save a broken world you came,
and from chaotic depths reclaim
your whole creation, so we share
your reconciling work and care.

In you all humankind can see
the people God would have us be.
In you we find how God forgives,
through you, the Spirit in us lives.

Through us God calls the world again;
and constantly his love remains

with arms outstretched, to heal and bless
the refugees of emptiness.

Where race or creed or hate divide,
the Church, like God, must stand beside
and stretch out reconciling hands
to join, through suffering, every land.

Then give us strength, great Lord of life,
to work until all human strife
is reconciled, and all shall praise
your endless love, your glorious ways.

Benediction:

May the joy of life fill our minds,
the love of life fill our hearts
and the energy of life fill our whole being
this day and for the rest of our days.

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