



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

Sunday 21st May 2023

Call to Worship:

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever  
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.  
I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;  
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

May we dream of a world made new,  
Where together we shout for justice,  
And as one we fight against oppression.  
May we dream of a world made new,  
Where together we seek God's righteousness  
And as one we sing God's praise.  
May we dream of a world made new,  
Where together we climb God's mountain,  
And as one we enter the promised land.  
May we dream of a world made new,  
Where together we proclaim the good news of God's kingdom,  
And as one we enjoy its peace, and abundance and love.

Prayer:

We have come today to offer worship.; to seek God apart in our homes yet together in spirit; to focus our minds at this time of worship on the things of God; to play our part in the witness of the Christian community; and to share our faith with one another and with Christians throughout the world.

Our worship today, as every week, is part of our response to our experience of God in our lives and in the world around us. We approach worship with a mixture of feelings: feelings of wonder at the complexity of the world with its natural beauty, its amazing variety, its constant surprises, and its opportunities for relationships of love and caring which sustain us; feelings of thankfulness that we live in the time and place we do, that our material needs are met so abundantly, and that we are surrounded by family, friends, and brothers and sisters in Christ who nurture and sustain us through times of joy and times of tragedy; feelings of passion for the gospel of Christ because we believe that it is in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth that we come closest to seeing the nature of God, and that it is in his words and his actions and his promise that his spirit lives with us and among us that our spiritual needs are met and our lives enriched and fulfilled; feelings of doubt and confusion because we seem unable to comprehend the ultimate truths of the world, because we feel that we are floundering in a spiritual sea of uncertainty, because we sometimes think that as Christians and church members it is required of us to know all the answers, because we so often doubt our own faith and our own commitment to the kingdom of God; feelings of comfort and security because worship is familiar to us as we

hear well-known words of comfort, sing favourite songs and tell familiar stories; feelings of determination to continue changing and growing in faith as we are challenged again with the call to serve God and contribute to the mission of the church, and feelings of inadequacy as we realise how great the task and how small our resources.

Whatever our own particular feelings at this time, may we find meaning in this time of worship, that we may rise from here changed and more committed than ever to serve the kingdom of God.

Loving God, we praise you for your love shown to us in Jesus - love that goes on seeking us out; caring, guiding, protecting, forgiving, despite our lack of love and our failure to live as Jesus' disciples.

Loving God, forgive our feeble faith. Forgive us for caring so little about what the gospel means for us, so little about others, and so much for ourselves. Forgive us for turning the Christian faith into something we receive rather than something we share.

Loving God, may we live more truly as people of God. May we have a due sense of responsibility towards others - the poor, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, the oppressed, the lonely, the weak, the sorrowful.

May we recognise our responsibility towards God and the whole created world that we have been given, so that in everything we think and say and do, we may live for the Kingdom. And may we respond to God's love by loving God and by loving others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

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: Leviticus 19:1-18

Hymn 289: To God be the glory

Reading: John 13:31-35

Reflection:

[Y]ou shall love your neighbour as yourself... Leviticus 19:18

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. John 13:34

It's interesting to look at these two commandments. We tend to think of the Old Testament in terms of a harsh Law and a vengeful God, and of the New Testament as telling the story of a loving God.

We have been taught to think of the Old and New Testaments in this way largely thanks to Paul and his distinction between the old life of "the Law" and the new "life in Christ"—and it's even clear in how we refer to them: "Old" and "New." Much more helpful to call them by the names scholars now prefer - the Hebrew Bible (or Hebrew Scriptures), and the Christian Bible (or Christian Scriptures). Then we won't be tempted to feel that "new" is somehow better than

“old.” After all, both sources contain the story of the people of God and their efforts to understand their relationship with the Divine, and we find connection and meaning in both.

Yes, the Hebrew Bible *does* contain many hard stories of conflict and conquest, of violence, and of harsh judgment. We struggle to recognise the God who would not only allow, but encourage, the violent takeover of peoples and nations; or the God who punished seemingly minor infractions with death.

But the Hebrew Bible also contains evidence of a loving God in many stories of God creating, rescuing, and providing for God’s people—and in calling them back again and again through the words of the prophets. Even the details of the Law are about how to live in community and how to treat one another. Leviticus is not just about rules, it’s about right behaviour: it’s about leaving the gleanings of the field and the fallen grapes of the vineyard for the poor and for the stranger. It’s about taking care of the stranger, the orphan, the widow—the marginalised members of the community. Leviticus is about fairness and truth telling, about justice and ethical behaviour— and it is also about love.

And it is this that Jesus is reminding his disciples—how else is it that again and again in the Gospels we hear Jesus talking about these same issues? About justice and fairness and ethical behaviour and helping the poor and marginalised—about how these are the behaviours of the Kingdom of God? And is it not Jesus who, when questioned on the Law, says that the greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbour, and that “on these hang all the Law and the prophets”? Jesus is passing on the most basic and ancient truths of his Jewish tradition, and he says it over and over again in many different ways, because it is also the basis of the Kingdom that *he* was encouraging his followers to make real—the Kingdom that we as Christians are to make real in this world, in the here and now.

We all know that we should love others, but the command says to “love your neighbour *as yourself*.”

We are not always encouraged, by the church or by the world, to love ourselves. Too often we are encouraged to feel guilty about our weaknesses and mistakes and wrongdoing, yet both Hebrew and Christian scriptures speak to us of our value, of our worth, of God’s love for us. In the beginning, God looked upon the creation—which included human beings—and said, “It is very good.” Jesus said, “Blessed are you...” Yes, there are stories of violence and betrayal in the Bible and in our lives; yes, we make mistakes and act out of fear and hatred; yes, we too often damage or destroy ourselves and each other and the rest of creation—but ultimately, our story is one of love and justice.

In both testaments, God calls us back again and again. Even when we don’t know it or hear it, God calls us “Beloved.” God does not ask us to ignore, dismiss or reject that, but to deeply accept it, to open ourselves to it—and to care for ourselves and honour ourselves as worthwhile; to nurture ourselves and our gifts, and to work to bring forth the Kingdom.

Jesus cared for himself often by going off alone to pray and refresh himself, away from the crowds and the demands—this is a consistent image of him from every Gospel. Only then did he have anything to give to those who came to hear him speak, or who came to him for help. And, following his example, caring and nurturing and loving ourselves — out of *that* love will true love of neighbour come. Only by learning to love ourselves can we *really* learn to love each other.

Hymn107: The love of God comes close

Prayer: We give thanks for the constant presence of God in our lives - whether we see and acknowledge it or not; for the encouragement, strength, challenge and renewal that come to us day by day.

We give thanks for the experiences of priests and prophets, judges and patriarchs, disciples and apostles, all those of whom we read in Scripture whose lives were changed by a new-found faith.

We give thanks for the Church all we share within it - through music and prayer, preaching and worship, mission and service.

We give thanks for the natural created world - the people we meet, the sights we see, the sounds we hear and the experiences we go through.

We give thanks for the image of God in Jesus. We see it in his life and work, hear it in his preaching and teaching, experience it in his death and resurrection, and feel it in his living presence.

We give thanks for the Spirit of God within us, inspiring, comforting, teaching.

And as we give thanks for God's gifts, so we pray also for those for whom God seems far away, silent and powerless.

We think of those known to us who are facing difficult times - battling with illness, wrestling with depression, anxious about the future, grieving for loved ones - those for whom life is a puzzle, even a burden, and who long to find hope and some way of making sense of their confusion.

We think of those who feel far from God - burdened by doubt, overwhelmed by temptation, crushed by failure - those who want to know God, but who find it hard to see or hear God in the cruelty and conflict of the world; those who seek to serve but are weighed down by a sense of their own weakness, their lack of faith and their repeated mistakes.

We think of those who seek guidance - who feel unsure of the way ahead, uncertain of their ability to face the future, unclear about what they should be doing or what their choices might be; all who are asking God to lead them forward, yet who still have no clear sense of their own calling.

We think of the poor and the weak, the vulnerable and disadvantaged in society - those denied their rights, their dignity, their freedom, their livelihoods - all who long for a time when peace will be established, but who have given up believing it ever will be.

We know that there are many in the world crying out for help from God who seem to receive no response - some because they do not expect to receive any, some because they are not ready or willing to listen, some because they do not understand or recognise the voice of God when they hear it, but many genuinely and urgently longing for an answer. May they find what they seek, receive what they need, and may we be moved to speak the right words, do the right things, offer the right responses; listen, act, pray, speak and give at the appropriate times, that we may fulfil our small part in God's mission of bringing comfort and peace, hope and love. In Jesus' name. 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 533: Lord of good life

Benediction:

God of grace and mercy,  
be with us as we face an unknown future  
and as we walk paths untrodden.  
In the ever-changing and uncertain world where we find ourselves,  
help us to know and be assured that you are present.  
Calm our hearts and minds and give us hope in you.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with each of us and with all those we love, today and for ever more.

