



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 30th July 2023

Call to Worship (Ps 29):

Give glory to God, you powers of heaven!
Give Glory! Honour God's might!
Honour the glorious name of God;
worship in splendour and holiness.
Enthroned above the flood waters,
God reigns over all and for ever.
Give strength to your people, Almighty God,
and give them the blessing of your peace.

Prayer/Meditation:

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 today, that though we are apart, we are still a 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 to worship 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: Matthew 13:31-33

Hymn 100: O love of God, how strong and true

Reading: Matthew 13: 44-49a

Reflection:

Last week in our worship we looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's one of Jesus' longer stories, but many of the parables are only a couple of sentences and, in Matthew's gospel, are often preceded with the words 'The Kingdom of God is like this. . .'. Today we read a collection of those mini-parables, and we'll take a closer look at some of them: the mustard seed, the leaven in the loaf, the treasure in a field, the pearl of great price.

The first is the parable of the mustard-seed, in which Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed planted in a field which grows into a great tree in whose branches birds will build their nests.

We could sum it up by saying 'tall oaks from little acorns grow'.

For Jesus' listeners, however, there was something pretty strange about this parable. Jesus was, as he often does, turning the people's expectations upside down and taking sides with the weak, the small and the powerless.

First of all, they would have known perfectly well that the mustard plant is *not* a mighty tree but a straggling bush barely four feet high. Secondly, they would have known that the mustard bush was an unwelcome addition to anyone's garden or farm. It was a weed which grew quickly and strangled other plants. Think bindweed. The Kingdom of God is like bindweed: often unwelcome and virtually uncontrollable. It seems to appear overnight and is notoriously difficult to get rid of. It seems to be able to grow in impossible conditions - through concrete for example. It runs wild. When it is cut down it springs up again. That's bindweed. That's the Kingdom of God.

For Jesus then to say that birds will build their nests in its branches must have sounded most unlikely, if not downright nonsense, but of course it was *meant* to sound nonsensical. The tree with birds nesting in its branches is a reference - an obvious reference to those who knew their scriptures - to the mighty cedar of Lebanon, a symbol of the might of the kingdom of Israel under Saul, David and Solomon, and a reference to the hope that the kingdom would be restored, as in Ezekiel chapter 17: '*On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.*'

Now of course the purpose of parable is not to give people the answers but to make them think, and here is Jesus saying, 'You might want to believe that the Kingdom of God is strong, tall and safe like a mighty cedar tree, but I'm suggesting to you that the kingdom is like a weed. Uncontainable, uncontrollable.' It's a provocative suggestion that might have upset his listeners - and might upset us as well - but a far more effective one than saying that the kingdom is mighty like a cedar. *That's* what they would have expected him to say.

The same is true of the second parable, the parable of the leaven. For us today, who have been brought up with this parable, there is nothing very striking about it. The image is obvious. The leaven is an organic substance which works invisibly in the dough, permeating through it and changing its properties: the Kingdom is the influence of the Spirit working through the people of God, invisibly and almost imperceptibly changing the people and the properties of human society.

But for those listening to Jesus this would all have come as something of a surprise, because in Jesus' society leaven was a symbol of corruption.

Jesus himself used leaven in this context. In Matthew's gospel he tell the disciples to 'beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees' and Matthew says, 'they understood that he had not told them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees'.

That's the kind of image that people would have had in mind when Jesus told them that the Kingdom of God is like leaven. They must have been shocked, but we are not shocked because we expect by now that when Jesus speaks he is very likely to reverse our expectations and turn our thinking on its head.

And the kingdom of God, for all its wild uncontrollability and all its insidious influence on society, is a thing of ultimate value. So says Jesus in the parables of the treasure in the pearl. It is worth sacrificing everything for, because it is worth more than any valuable possession or human achievement.

These parables do have lessons for us, particularly perhaps the parable of the mustard seed. If we have anything in common with Jesus' listeners, it is that we want to welcome the Kingdom of God *on our own terms*. We want the kingdom to be something we can control, and so Christian Churches of all denominations have formulated rules and practices about how things should be done, how local congregations should operate, how worship should be structured, how mission should be carried out, what is appropriate and what is wrong. Churches meet in synods and presbyteries and assemblies and convocations and all kinds of formal structured groups and meetings in order to give order to the work of the kingdom. And while it is probably true that we need to order ourselves in our service of the Kingdom, we cannot control the Kingdom. It is a weed that grows throughout the church and the world and can appear at unexpected times in all sorts of unlikely places.

At the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church earlier this month, two new congregations were welcomed into the denomination. That in itself is nothing unusual; a number of new churches have joined the URC over the years. One of those welcomed this year was the Bristol Korean Church, and the other caused a bit of debate, because it is an *online* church called yoURChurch. It has no place of worship, but is a dispersed community, and there was some unease in Assembly about whether it could really be defined as a local church of the URC. It was, however, welcomed joyfully, because Assembly saw the recognition of an online

church as a sign of the Kingdom, A church that exists outside the box, and functions in a new and unfamiliar way, contrary to many of our church's structures and expectations.

It is perhaps the natural instinct of our church tradition to try to contain and formalise new ways of expressing the faith, to fit everything into our familiar structures and practices. But Jesus warns us against striving for a kingdom that is solid, predictable and comfortable like a great tree and suggests that, instead, the kingdom, like a weed, may spring up anywhere, even in the unlikeliest of places, and cannot be controlled, will not conform - and will not go away. Praise be to God that it is so!

HYMN 489: Be thou my vision

Prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for the great gift of love -

The love we are able to share with those around us, which gives us a sense of self-worth and belonging, which enriches our lives in so many ways.

We give thanks for the love of God for us -

Mysterious, even baffling, but constant and never-ending.

We give thanks that we are loved, even when we fail to love; that in spite of selfishness, anger, the judging of others, the confusion and uncertainty of our faith, love remains stronger than all things.

May our love for God and for one another be deepened; may we be faithful and true in all our relationships; and may our love be expressed not only in our worship and prayer, but in our lives every day.

Loving God, there are times when we look at people's lives and find it hard to believe that things can ever change for the better - we see them racked by illness, weighed down by anxiety, tormented by depression, crippled by debt, broken by alcohol, destroyed by drugs, scarred by bereavement, shattered by unemployment, and we wonder what their prospects really are, what hope we can realistically offer them, what help we can possibly give...

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

We pray for such people known to us now - family, friends, members of our church, colleagues at work, neighbours, acquaintances, as well as the countless people unknown to us, each struggling under their own burdens.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

We pray for our world - for those many people who face suffering, injustice, hardship, and death.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

Reach out to all who are in despair, all who long for change but see only hopelessness stretching before them. Touch their lives and bring help, hope, healing and wholeness.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

Loving God, it is sometimes hard to believe that those around us - still less the world we live in - can ever change for the better. We see countries broken by war, people consumed by hatred, thousands living in fear, nations turned against nation, hundreds of thousands made homeless by disaster, continents facing famine, and again we wonder what the prospects really are, what hope anyone can offer, what help can possibly be given.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

Help us to see beneath the surface, recognising the power of faith, hope and love, and that things can change. Help us to see beyond appearances and recognise that even the most hopeless of situations can be transformed.

Transforming God - may your light shine where there is darkness.

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

Hymn 200: The Kingdom of God

Benediction

Whatever fears and anxieties we must face:
let us walk in boldness, as beloved children of God,
walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High
walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with us.

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