



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

Sunday 13th August 2023

Call to Worship:

Our prayer is for peace in the world  
that all people may live in harmony.  
Our prayer is for peace in our nation  
that this may be a land where all are loved and respected.  
Our prayer is for peace in our homes  
that family and friends may be a strength and support.  
Our prayer is for peace in our hearts  
that our lives may reflect the life of Jesus.

Prayer/Meditation:

God, before time began,  
God, after all time ends,  
God, of the present moment,  
we worship you.

Before our earliest memories  
you knew us;  
after all memories shall cease  
you will know us still.

Out of reach  
of the highest endeavours of science;  
undefined  
by the deepest workings of our brains,  
yet to the humble heart,  
the questing spirit,  
the anguished soul,  
the quiet mind,  
you choose, in love and mercy,  
to make yourself known.

Before such love,  
such divinity,  
what can we do  
but wait in silence,  
trusting in you  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God our lover,  
look in mercy on our anxious lives.

Day by day  
we struggle to achieve,  
rarely stopping to ask  
if our achievements match your will.

Day by day  
we battle to communicate,  
rarely remembering to check  
if our communication is a channel  
for your good news.

Day by day  
we endeavour to control,  
rarely pausing to ensure  
that first we are controlled  
by your Spirit.

Forgive the frantic fury  
of our anxious lives;  
speak to us  
in the midst of the struggles  
of daily living;  
catch us now, we pray,  
in a moment of silence,  
as we wait, together, on you.

Gracious God,  
your love brings  
life to dead souls,  
light to dark minds,  
strength to weak wills.

Show us how to search for you  
in the midst of life;  
help us to believe and trust  
that no wrong we have done,  
and no good we have failed to do,  
is too great for you to pardon.

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.

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: Genesis 37:1-11

Hymn 484:

We come unto our faithful God,  
the Rock of our Salvation;  
the eternal arms, that sure abode,  
we make our habitation;  
we seek thee as thy saints have sought;  
we bring thee, Lord, the praise they brought,  
in every generation.

The fire divine their steps that led  
still goeth bright before us;  
the heavenly shield around them spread  
is still uplifted o'er us;  
the grace those sinners that subdued,  
the strength those weaklings that renewed,  
doth vanquish, doth restore us.

Their joy unto their Lord we bring;  
their song to us descendeth;  
the Spirit who in them did sing  
to us his music lendeth;  
his song in them, in us, is one;  
we raise it high, we send it on,  
the song that never endeth.

Ye saints to come, take up the strain,  
the same sweet theme endeavour;  
unbroken be the golden chain;  
keep on the song for ever;  
safe in the same dear dwelling-place,  
rich with the same eternal grace,  
bless the same boundless Giver.

Reading: Genesis 37:12-28

Reflection:

There is an American situation comedy called *The Middle* (which is currently being broadcast on the Comedy Central channel) about a working class family and its struggles with everyday life.

From the younger son's obsession with books and his lack of social skills, through the daughter's indomitable optimism despite her inability to succeed at anything at all, to the elder son's incorrigible arrogance that masks deep insecurity, all the trials of everyday family life are illustrated with humour and often poignancy.

And despite being a product of the twenty-first century, *The Middle* addresses some themes that are as old as the story we read this morning from the Old Testament; for it too is a story about family relationships and it too reveals the strengths and the weaknesses of its characters and shows how a family bond can ultimately overcome the weakness and selfishness of its individual members.

There's an episode of *The Middle*, for example, that tells the story of the hurt and resentment that is caused when the father accidentally reveals that, of his three children, he has a favourite.

And that's exactly what starts the story of Joseph.

Joseph at the beginning of the story is portrayed as something of an arrogant teenage brat (though we might note that no word of criticism is ever levelled at him in the story). He is perhaps aware that his father loves him more than his brothers, and uses that knowledge to get under their skin with his dreams of power and superiority. Then Jacob, their father, makes the mistake that sets the whole story going - he gives to Joseph the famous coat of many colours which is not only an expensive gift but, because of its decoration and design - colourful, ankle-length and with long sleeves - is symbolic of authority and power. Jacob, like the father Mike in *The Middle*, opens a horrible can of worms by declaring his love for Joseph over his brothers.

Here is a family, then, which in our world would be described as extremely dysfunctional. The dysfunction is driven by an out-of-control teenager who apparently has his father wrapped around his little finger and who can therefore do and say what he likes, however hurtful that may be to his brothers, who are all older, wiser and more mature than he is. And the father, Jacob, who must be torn between love for his youngest son, and dismay at the disruption the boy is causing in the family. There is selfishness in the story, there is the weakness of the father, and there is the jealousy of the brothers which grows to become hatred. There is no indication that Joseph is even aware of how much he is hurting his brothers; he is confident in his father's protection and, as it turns out, he is a bit too confident.

For Joseph is obviously unaware of the depth of his brothers' hatred, or if he suspects it, he doesn't care. But we see when the brothers debate about what to do with Joseph that there is deep down and almost completely hidden, a family loyalty - perhaps even a love for their young brother that only gradually reveals itself.

The brothers' first intention is to kill Joseph, to get rid of him permanently and completely. But one of them, Reuben, suggests that they shouldn't actively put the boy to death, but rather give him a fighting chance by throwing him into a deep pit and leaving him there. The implication seems to be that he will die there anyway, but the brothers won't have actually and directly killed him, and there would always be a chance that he would be rescued. But in fact Reuben has a secret plan to return later and rescue his little brother.

Initially, the brothers agree to this, and they do indeed throw Joseph into a pit. But then their plan is moderated even further at the suggestion of Judah who, for the first time shows brotherly compassion of a sort by suggesting that there would be no particular advantage to the brothers in killing Joseph - after all, he says almost as an afterthought - he is our brother.

And so the first chapter of the story ends with Joseph being sold into slavery to a caravan of passing traders. They have got rid of Joseph, and believe they will be unlikely ever to see him

again; but they don't have the boy's death on their conscience. However they know they need a cover story, so they smear Joseph's coat with goat's blood and take it back to their father, claiming to have found it but that there was no sign of Joseph.

So, like a modern situation comedy, or perhaps a soap opera, the story is driven by the feelings and emotions of the characters. Joseph's arrogance; Jacob's weakness; the jealousy and deception of the brothers; Reuben's conscience and Judah's duplicity and greed. All the elements are there of a very modern story, and if we were to read the other ten and a half chapters of Genesis that tell Joseph's story - something that we don't have time for now - you will find that it's all driven by its characters. The Pharaoh; Potiphar and his wife; Joseph himself of course, who begins to show other sides to his character; the servants and other members of the royal household; Jacob and the brothers when they reappear; everyone Joseph meets, in fact, has their own agenda, their own hopes and fears, their own individual personality that makes its contribution to the flow of the story.

Is there anything we can take from the story of Joseph?

It is first and foremost part of the great body of mythology that charts the pre-history and development of the nation of Israel; it is part of the story of the creation of the twelve tribes of Israel and as such is of interest to us as the history of the people which produced Jesus of Nazareth.

Christian scholars of the past, when it used to be believed that everything in the Old Testament pointed to Jesus, suggested that Joseph could be seen as a kind of primitive proto-Messiah who saved his people from the ravages of drought and famine, and triumphed against those who conspired to discredit or even kill him.

There is another way of understanding the story, one which doesn't rely on imparting a meaning to it that isn't really obviously there. It's a way of looking at the story which explains why it is one of the best-known stories in the Old Testament, and why it still holds our attention in our very different world. And that is that it's based upon something that seems unchanging in all periods of history and therefore in any good story from whatever source - and that is human nature and relationships. It speaks to us because it is real and true and indeed it speaks to our own experience of life.

We have all been victims of greed and jealousy - our own or someone else's. We have all met deviousness and deception - our own or someone else's. We have all known forgiveness and reconciliation - our own or someone else's.

A good story is a good story, whether it comes from a modern scriptwriter or an ancient religious text, and a good story is always grounded in the truth of human societies, relationships and emotions.

And to those who claim that the Bible - and especially the Old Testament - has no relevance to life in the twenty-first century, we can say that the story of Joseph is a good - and modern - story - good, and true.

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.  
(Amen)

Prayer:

God, you have called us to be a people of prayer—  
to continue the ministry of intercession handed on to us  
by Jesus Christ Himself.

And so we come before you with confidence,  
bringing our prayers for the world you love.  
In your mercy, hear and answer.

We pray for those who, like Jesus' disciples,  
find themselves surrounded by high winds and stormy seas;  
those who feel overwhelmed by events and circumstances—  
the loss of a job,  
the death of a loved one,  
serious accident or illness,  
chronic pain,  
depression,  
or divorce—  
and who don't know where to turn.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like Joseph,  
find themselves deeply wounded by people they love—  
people they thought they knew and trusted—  
and who are struggling to know how to respond.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like Peter,  
are experiencing a crisis of faith;  
who long to whole-heartedly trust in God  
but are held back by questions and doubts.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like the prophet Elijah,  
have fallen into despair;  
who have begun to doubt God's presence and power;  
or question God's call in their lives.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like Joseph,  
have had their hopes and dreams crushed;  
those whose lives have suddenly taken a different turn,  
and who now wonder what lies ahead for them.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, it is not your will that any should suffer.  
We offer our prayers for all those who hunger and thirst,  
those who live in the midst of violence or poverty,  
and those who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Through the life-giving power of your Holy Spirit,  
make your sustaining presence known to all who are in pain or need,  
so that they, too, may know your love and live.

In the name Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen

Hymn 509:

O Jesus, I have promised  
to serve thee to the end;  
be thou for ever near me,  
my Master and my Friend;  
I shall not fear the battle  
if thou art by my side,  
nor wander from the pathway  
if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me feel thee near me;  
the world is ever near,  
I see the sights that dazzle,

the tempting sounds I hear;  
my foes are ever near me,  
around me and within;  
but, Jesus, draw thou nearer,  
and shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear thee speaking  
in accents clear and still,  
above the storms of passion,  
the murmurs of self-will.  
O speak to reassure me,  
to hasten or control;  
O speak, and make me listen,  
thou guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, thou hast promised,  
to all who follow thee,  
that where thou art in glory  
there shall thy servant be;  
O guide me, call me, draw me,  
uphold me to the end;  
O give me grace to follow,  
my Saviour and my Friend.

Benediction:

Eternal light shine in our hearts.  
Eternal goodness deliver us from evil.  
Eternal power be our support.  
Eternal wisdom scatter the darkness of our ignorance.  
Eternal pity have mercy on us  
that with all our heart and mind  
and soul and strength we may seek your face  
and be brought by your infinite mercy into your holy presence.

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