



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 27th August 2023

Call to Worship:

In the beginning before time, before people, before the world began,
God was
Here and now among us, beside us, enlisting the people of earth for the purposes of the
Kingdom,
God is.
In the future when we have turned to dust and all we know has found its fulfilment,
God will be.
Not denying the world but delighting in it, not condemning the world, but saving it, through
Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
God was, God is, God will be.

Prayer/Meditation:

We come to worship,
We come to celebrate God's world-wide family.
We come from our places of work,
leaving behind deadlines and pressures
the tedium or creativity of daily tasks.
We come to celebrate God's world-wide work.
We come to join the community of faith,
At this time of prayer and praise,
struggling to witness and serve,

O Lord our God, we worship with songs of praise in our hearts,
because of your unfailing love and faithfulness.
Even though we struggle with life's issues, your mercy blesses us.

Listening God, we worship with prayers of thanks in our hearts,
because you hear and answer our prayers.
Even though life is sometimes difficult, your strength blesses us.

Welcoming God, we worship in reverence and faith,
because your faithful love endures forever.
Even though we are fragile people
who sometimes feel lost and abandoned,
God's love blesses us and never changes.

God you have given each of us many gifts,
but sometimes we cannot recognize
what gift we have to share,

so we hide it away and keep it to ourselves.

God you remind us that all gifts are needed,
but sometimes we let ourselves be convinced
that some gifts are more special than others.

God you call us to work, to live, to love together as parts of one body,
but sometimes we decide that membership in the body
is limited by our understandings.

God, for the times we have ignored or mislabeled Your gifts,
for those times we have cut another off from the body,
We offer words of repentance,
we ask for forgiveness and grace.

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 16:13-20

HYMN 60:

God who spoke in the beginning
forming rock and shaping spar,
set all life and growth in motion,
earthly world and distant star;
he who calls the earth to order
is the ground of what we are.

God who spoke through people, nations,
and events long past and gone,
showing still today his purpose,
speaks supremely through his Son;
he who calls the earth to order
gives his word and it is done.

God whose speech becomes incarnate
Christ is servant, Christ is Lord!
calls us to a life of service,
heart and will to action stirred;
he who uses our obedience
has the first and final word.

Reading: Matthew 16:21-28

Reflection:

"Who do people say that I am?... But who do you say that I am?"

Jesus asks - *Who do people say that I am?* and his disciples tell him that people are saying he is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the other prophets. So, the teaching and healing Jesus has been involved in reminds people of the great figures of their faith from the past. They compare Jesus to the great heroes of their faith.

But Jesus moves on from this speculation of the people about his identity and asks those who have lived closely with him, day in and day out - *But who do you say that I am?* And Peter, in his role as spokesperson for the others, finds words for what they have been thinking about him - and says, *"You are the Messiah."*

The the word has been spoken - 'Messiah'. Their friend and teacher may be someone long-awaited in their faith tradition - the one come to save Israel. This Jesus could be the Messiah! And once the word falls from Peter's lips and is out there among the disciples - they move from being a band of friends and followers into the true life of discipleship.

"Who do people say that I am?... But who do you say that I am?" As members of his community of disciples, they are questions for us too. Through this Gospel Jesus calls us to first to be aware of what people of our day and age say about his identity. There are plenty of definitions of Jesus around. Some say Jesus is God in a human body; others say he was a great prophet, teacher and healer, but not divine; some say he is a fictional character; others believe he is irrelevant in this modern age; some say Jesus is the one who will make you fabulously wealthy; still others think he is their property alone, and on their side over against others who do not fit neatly into their narrowly defined in-group of believers. As we go through our daily life, who do we hear people saying Jesus is?

And where do we find ourselves in this field of answers?

Marcus Borg, a well-known Biblical Scholar of the last 20 years, writes compellingly about this second question from Jesus, *Who do you say that I am?* Borg wrote this:

"For those of us who grew up in the church, believing in Jesus was important. For me, what that phrase used to mean, in my childhood and into my early adulthood, was 'believing things about Jesus.' To believe in Jesus meant to believe what the gospels said about Jesus. That was easy when I was a child, and became more and more difficult as I grew older.

But I now see that believing in Jesus can (and does) mean something very different from that. The change is pointed to by the root meaning of the word believe. Believe did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean 'to give one's heart to.' The 'heart' is the self at its deepest level. Believing, therefore, does not consist of giving one's mental assent to something, but involves a much deeper level of one's self. Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means to give one's heart, one's self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit.

Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one's heart to Jesus is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ. For ultimately Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but a figure of the present. Meeting that Jesus, the living Jesus, who comes

to us even now - will be like meeting Jesus again for the first time.” (From Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p.136-137)

It is said that *“actions speak louder than words?”* In the life of faith, our actions are often our first witness to what we hold to be true and real in our hearts. How we live and move in this world is the sermon that we each preach every day. So who do we say that Jesus is through our lives? What if we are the only Jesus that someone else ever sees? What words of hope, healing and resurrection assurance is our life preaching and giving witness to?

Words are important of course, but as St. Francis of Assisi is remembered to have said to the friars under his supervision - *“Go out into the world and preach the Gospel, and use words when necessary.”*

Who do you say that I am, Jesus asks. Who do you say that I am, not just intellectually, not just when you worship on Sunday, not just when you are enjoying quiet moments of prayer, not just when you are sharing with your fellow Christians. All these things are good. But there is more to being a follower of Jesus. Who do we say that Jesus is, in those places where our lives are lived? Who do we say that he is, when we are in the presence of those who don't know Jesus, those who aren't interested or even, whether we know it or not, those who might be just a little curious about Jesus? What does the way we live our lives say about who Jesus is? Is the joy, the love, the peace that we see in Jesus reflected in the way we live our lives?

See these Christians, how they love one another, it was said of the followers of Jesus in the Early Church. Could we today live so that it would also be said of us? Only in and through us will Jesus make himself known to those who do not know his love.

We worship today and every week in the name of Jesus. Not to celebrate a belated memorial service for a good man who died a long time ago. We worship to celebrate the Messiah in our midst.

If we have met Jesus again for the first time, we are drawn to worship each week to connect with others who have also found abundant new life through relationship with him. We worship to deepen our relationship with Christ and the other members of his body. That is the Gospel we proclaim and are ready to share, so that others might meet him again for the first time too. And we share this Gospel not by attacking anyone with words, but rather in his Spirit, we seek to live and serve in ways that will make others want to come and see what the divine source is from which we are drawing such life-giving water.

HYMN 269:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does his successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall wax and wane no more.

For him shall endless prayer be made,
and praises throng to crown his head;

his name like sweet perfume shall rise
with every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue
dwell on his love with sweetest song;
and infant voices shall proclaim
their early blessings on his name.

Blessings abound where'er he reigns;
the prisoners leap to lose their chains,
the weary find eternal rest,
and all who suffer want are blest.

Let every creature rise and bring
peculiar honours to our King;
angels descend with songs again,
and earth repeat the loud Amen.

Prayer:

Gracious God,
In love you created us,
and in love you sustain us, day after day.
So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to you,
knowing that you hear us, and will respond.

We offer our prayers for the world around us.
We pray for those who find themselves in bondage:
those forced into slavery or prostitution,
those oppressed by governments or economic systems,
those enslaved by personal addictions.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, respond.

We pray for those who struggle to raise their children
in the midst of violence or poverty;
those who can only stand by and watch as their sons or daughters die
of starvation or malnutrition,
of preventable disease,
or from gang violence.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, respond.

We pray for those who refuse to participate in violence or injustice,
who courageously stand up for what they know is right,
regardless of the personal consequences.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,

and in Your love, respond.

We also pray for those who oppress others,
who are unable to break free from cycles of violence and anger,
who are no longer able to empathize with their victims.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, respond.

We pray for all who suffer this day,
whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually.
May Your presence surround and sustain each one,
so that they may know your love and live.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, respond.

Finally, God, we pray for ourselves—members of your body here on earth.
Break down the barriers that divide us from one another.
Unite us in our common allegiance to you as Lord and Saviour.
Grant us compassion and humility in our relationships.
Release the gifts you have given to each one,
so that in us and through us,
your kingdom might come and your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

I invite you now to spend a few moments in your own prayer, in words or in silence, or simply in reflecting on the words we have read and the stories 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 625:

God of freedom, God of justice,
God whose love is strong as death,
God who saw the dark of prison,
God who knew the price of faith:
touch our world of sad oppression
with your Spirit's healing breath.

Rid the earth of torture's terror,
God whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest,
God who shed the tears and blood;
move in us the power of pity,
restless for the common good.

Make in us a captive conscience
quick to hear, to act, to plead;
make us truly sisters, brothers,

of whatever race or creed:
teach us to be fully human,
open to each other's need.

Benediction:

We go with confidence into the days ahead,
trusting in God's unfailing love and faithfulness.
God's love will not abandon us,
for we are created of love, called to live in love
and love endures forever.
So let us go in joy to love and serve the Lord!

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. Amen.