



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 6th August 2023

Hello again. Welcome to worship for Sunday 6th August 2023. Our worship today includes the sacrament of Holy Communion, and you are as usual warmly invited to participate. Please provide yourself with a small piece of bread and a little wine, or some fruit juice and a cracker, or anything that can symbolise for you the body and blood of Jesus.

Call to Worship (*Psalm 144*):

All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.

They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom
**and tell of your power to make known to
all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious
splendour of your kingdom.**

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we bring with us to our worship today our sense of wonder. Wonder at the vastness and the strangeness of this universe which we can barely comprehend; wonder at the processes and systems of nature which sustain human life on the planet; wonder at the beauty and variety of the millions of species of creatures and plants with which we share our living-space; wonder at the complexity and also the savagery of the world of nature; wonder at the seeming insignificance of the human race inhabiting this tiny speck of dust in the infinity of the universe yet apparently unique.

Loving God, we bring with us to our worship today our gratitude for the lives we have been given, for the time we lived and for the time we have remaining; we give thanks for all that makes life varied and interesting, for the challenge of work and the enjoyment of leisure, for the comfort and the frustration of living and working with other people, for the familiarity of the routine and the surprise of the unexpected.

Loving God, we bring with us to our worship today all that irritates and annoys, all our complaints and grievances against the world; we bring our thoughts and feelings about those who have upset or angered us, our righteous or unrighteous indignation, and our desire to make peace.

Loving God, we bring with us to our worship today all our weaknesses and failings; all the challenges we have to face but feel may be too much for us; all the past times when we have failed ourselves or failed others; all the temptations that have been too much for us to resist; all the times when we have thought of ourselves only, and had little concern for the well being of those around us.

Loving God, we bring with us to our worship today our fears for ourselves and for our future. We like certainty, we like to know what is going to happen, yet the nature of human life is that we cannot know, that we are constantly surprised by events and that our pilgrimage often takes unexpected turns. May we learn to welcome the unexpected and to travel with joy along whichever path we may find ourselves on.

Loving God, we bring with us to our worship today our concerns for the world. Sometimes we find it hard to decide whether the world is a basically good place that is being spoiled by the greed and selfishness of the human race, or whether suffering and pain are a necessary part of human life. We know only that it is our calling to love, to care, and to work in Jesus' name for the good of all people.

Loving God, we bring to our worship today ourselves as we are, with all our strengths and weaknesses, all our joys and our fears, all our understanding and our confusion. May our worship today offer us strength and encouragement in our faith and may we know that we are loved and forgiven, so that we may go forward from here refreshed, renewed and enabled by the power of the Spirit to continue our pilgrimage with joy in serving 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: Romans 9:1-5

Hymn 532:

Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working, most wondrous your ways!
Your glory and greatness no mortal can tell,
and yet in the heart of the humble you dwell.

Lord of all power, I give you my will,
in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom, your service is song;
and, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong.

Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to find;
what eye has not seen and what ear has not heard
is taught by your Spirit and shines from your word.

Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart,
your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,
your presence to shield me, whatever betide.

Lord of all being, I give you my all;
if e'er I disown you, I stumble and fall;
but, led in your service your word to obey,
I'll walk in your freedom to the end of the way.

Reading: Matthew 14:13-21

Reflection:

One of my favourite Biblical scholars, John Dominic Crossan, suggests that when we are reading stories about Jesus, we might benefit from treating them like parables. All too often, especially with the miracle stories, we get so bogged down in wondering about how they happened, or whether they really happened at all, that we overlook their actual meaning and message. But treat them as parables - as stories about Jesus - and we are free to look for the teaching behind them. We can treat this story of the feeding of the multitude as a parable, even though it's about Jesus rather than by Jesus.

So here we meet Jesus out for a walk with his disciples - and being followed by crowds of people.

But Jesus doesn't see just a crowd, faceless and nameless. He sees *people*. In this particular story he sees *hungry* people, but it seems to be a characteristic of his to notice not just the presence of people, but who those people are and what they need.

And if you look at Jesus' encounters with different people this is his standard response - the approach that sets him apart. Others see a greedy dishonest tax collector - Jesus looks closer and sees someone worthy of a name, Zaccheus, and that he is an unhappy person. In another place the people see an untouchable leper - yet Jesus sees a person who suffers and wants the touch of human hand to heal. Again the disciples see a prostitute invading Jesus' personal space - Jesus sees her as Mary - again an individual with a name - a woman who can be welcomed.

Remember when the disciples see little children bothering Jesus. Jesus sees these children, who the disciples considered to be children getting in the way, rather as real live people deserving his full attention. In a city we are regularly surrounded by people - go to a football match.... wall to wall people. Go down town - those thronged foot paths. To see them as a crowd that is the easy bit. To notice their eyes, their aches and pains - to see them as persons - now that is more difficult..

It is all too easy to walk unseeing past the homeless person on the street, the Muslim woman shrouded in a veil, the child who is scared of its parents.

And even when we do notice individuals in the street, it is all too easy to form an opinion of them based on our own prejudices - to judge them.

The second lesson of our miracle story is that Jesus doesn't see himself, the one many have called Son of God, as the *only* one to whom the responsibility for the act of kindness should be left. In another gospel version of the same story he calls a boy with his packed lunch to him to start the sharing process.

In this Matthew version, it is the disciples he turns to, and utters one of the most telling phrases in the gospel. 'They do not need to go away. *You* give them something to eat.' It is a sad commentary that these days we not only prefer not to notice too much by way of needs, but that when such situations are forced upon us we don't see ourselves as part of the answer to need.

I am sure that many of us are unconsciously drawn to the easy option of praying for God to fix all. But whereas it is easy to ask a vague conception of God to deal with these issues like famine, war, injustice and loneliness by praying his blessing, if we believe that Jesus would have been concerned with our present context of contemporary need - perhaps he too would still be looking for someone as ordinary as us to join with him in sharing.

In our reading today from the letter to the Romans, Paul is in despair because his own people, the Jews, have been blessed by God throughout their history. Theirs is the

adoption; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Yet now they are refusing to accept the greatest gift of all - Jesus the Messiah. They have been offered everything, yet now they are turning away.

In our world, in our faith, we are offered everything, we are offered the Kingdom of God, but the offer is not for us alone, just as the coming of the Messiah was for the whole world and not just the people of Israel.

We are offered the chance to see people as people, and not as categories defined by their appearance or behaviour, but rather as people with needs. And we are called to act as Jesus' disciples in doing what we can to fulfil those needs, to share, to care, to play our part in a miracle of transformation. To walk in faith out of our churches and away from the safety of our prayers, into the world, to see people as they really are.

As one wise person once said: The test of Sunday is Monday!

HYMN 578:

Lord of light, whose name outshineth
all the stars and suns of space,
deign to make us thy co-workers
in the kingdom of thy grace.
Use us to fulfil thy purpose
in the gift of Christ thy Son:
Father, as in highest heaven,
so on earth thy will be done.

By the toil of patient workers
in some far outlying field;
by the courage where the radiance
of the cross is still revealed;
by the victories of meekness,
through reproach and suffering won:
Father, as in highest heaven,
so on earth thy will be done.

Grant that knowledge, still increasing,
at thy feet may lowly kneel;
with thy grace our triumphs hallow,
with thy charity our zeal.
Lift the nations from the shadows
to the gladness of the sun:
Father, as in highest heaven,
so on earth thy will be done.

By the prayers of faithful watchers,
never silent day or night;
by the cross of Jesus bringing
peace to all, and healing light;
by the love which passeth knowledge,
making all thy children one:
Father, as in highest heaven,

so on earth thy will be done.

Communion:

This is the joyful feast of unity.
Christ has gathered his people around the earth
to commune at this table.

Across political lines and economic lines,
in places of powerfully protected affluence,
and among the poorest of the poor,
we share a meal,
remembering and celebrating the One who proved shalom possible.

And so, we come:
from the East and from the West,
from the North and from the South.

We come.
We come with our doubts,
We come with our hopes,
We come with our inadequacies
and with our strengths.
Come everyone, for this is a table where all are invited
and all are welcome.

Welcome:
And so we gather at the table.
We come from many places,
differing in age, differing in race,
differing in politics, sexual orientation and even religion.
As we come together around the table
we discover that our differences are not something we tolerate
but that our differences are indeed a blessing,
the more difference we bring, the more fully we experience
the presence of the sacred in our midst.
So come, children of God, just as you are.
Wherever you are on this journey of life, you are welcome here,
here in this place, here in this community, here at this table.
Come, children of God, come and remember.

Remembrance:
We remember the stories that Jesus' friends tell,
stories of bread broken and shared, feeding a multitude,
stories of being gathered together, enemy and friend, around tables,
stories of unlikely guests revealing the face of the sacred.
They say that that
it was on a night of both celebration and betrayal
that he took the bread leftover on the table,
blessed it and broke it;

reminding them that it is
in the breaking that we become whole,
in losing our lives that we find them,
in serving that we are served.

As the grain scattered becomes one in the loaf,
when we eat this bread, we become one with one another.
They say that he took the cup also leftover on the table,
poured out and sharing,
remembering with them, the life-giving breath
even now pounding a rhythm through our veins,
the breath of life from whence we come
the breath that precedes and follows all that we can see
As the grapes find life in the vine,
when we drink this cup,
we become at one with the source of life itself.

Blessing:

And so we pray:

Come, holy Spirit, come.

Bless this bread and
bless this fruit of the vine.

Bless all of us in our eating and drinking that our eyes might be open,
that we might recognize the risen Christ in our midst,
indeed in one another.

Come, holy Spirit, come.

The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

This bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ. Take and eat, this is the body of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

This cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ. This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

Prayer:

Loving God, you have called us, fed us and nurtured us; now hear us as we bring before you the needs of the world:

Loving God,
You are our Creator and Sustainer.
When You open Your hand,
You satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing.
And so we look to You whenever we are in need,
trusting in Your love and Your abundant goodness.

As You once fed the hungry crowds with five loaves and two small fish,
we ask that You would again fill those who are empty this day.
Pour out Your Spirit on all who hunger and thirst.

We pray for those who are physically hungry—whose stomachs are empty.
who are facing critical food shortages;
who are suffering the effects of malnutrition and starvation;
and watching helplessly as loved ones die.

**Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand.
Pour out Your Spirit, so that they may be filled.**

We pray for those who are empty emotionally—
who are lonely and long for companionship and love,
who are caught in the grip of depression,
or overwhelmed with grief.

**Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand.
Pour out Your Spirit, so that they may be filled.**

We pray for those who are spiritually empty—
who are troubled, but don't know where to turn;
who long for purpose and meaning, but don't know where to look;
who need You, but do not yet know You.

**Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand.
Pour out Your Spirit, so that they may be filled.**

God, we praise You for Your abundant gifts in our lives.
Pour out Your Spirit on us as well.
Fill us with Your compassion and love,
so that we would willingly share some of our abundance
with those who have need.

**Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand.
Pour out Your Spirit, so that we may be filled.**

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,
who came so that all of humanity might come to know
the abundant life that comes from You

Our Creator,
You sustain all life,
give bread to all who need it,
and hear the calls of the poor.

You alone are powerful
and the rightful ruler of the nations,
and you are the provider of safety and security.

We ask that,
as you have graciously provided for us
and our needs,
may you provide for those
who call to you
in despair and dire need.
Grant them their daily bread these coming days. Amen

Hymn 599:

Christ for the world! we sing,
the world to Christ we bring,
with loving zeal;
the poor, and them that mourn,
the faint and overborne,
sin-sick and sorrow worn,
for Christ to heal.

Christ for the world! we sing,
the world to Christ we bring,
with fervent prayer;
the wayward and the lost,
by restless passions tossed,
redeemed at countless cost
from dark despair.

Christ for the world! we sing,
the world to Christ we bring,
with one accord;
with us the work to share,
with us reproach to dare,
with us the cross to bear
for Christ our Lord.

Christ for the world! we sing,
the world to Christ we bring,
with joyful song;
the new-born souls, whose days,
reclaimed from error's ways,
inspired with hope and praise,
to Christ belong.

Benediction:

May God's abundant love be with us everywhere;
May Christ Jesus feed us with his body and his word;

And may the Holy Spirit confirm the truth in us
.....and fill us with God's presence always.

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