



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

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

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> September 2023

## Call to Worship:

I will sing of the Lord's great love for ever;  
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.

I will declare that your love stands firm for ever;  
that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

May the peace of the Creator God be upon this world  
binding all people together in unity and love.  
May the peace of the forgiving Christ be upon this world  
cleansing and restoring human relationships.  
May the peace of the guiding Spirit be upon this world  
replacing hatred with friendship and conflict with love.

## Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we answer your call to worship by gathering here today. We worship you for your love, more aware than ever today that we live in a world where many seem unloved, neglected and abandoned. We worship you for your care for your people, more aware than ever that there are millions who are uncared for. We worship you for your forgiveness, more aware than ever that there are many for whom life seems little more than a punishment. We worship you for your justice, more aware than ever of the injustice of our world where people are divided by their wealth or their skin colour. We worship you for your power, more aware than ever of the destructive power of nature that can so quickly deprive thousands of their possessions or their lives.

And so we come with a faith that is sometimes confused, sometimes uncertain, but which is grounded in the life, example and death of Jesus of Nazareth who spoke of love, care, forgiveness, justice and power and set them in the context of the Kingdom. Keep us from despair, loving God, when we realise how far from the Kingdom our world remains. Forgive us our neglect, our lack of caring, our unwillingness to forgive, our failure to stand up for justice, our contempt for nature that, even in the face of disaster and suffering, your people may grow in faith, learn from the past, and continue onwards on the pilgrimage.

Encourage us to follow the example of the faithful men and women of the past who have grasped the vision of the Kingdom and who have put aside personal ambition and security to proclaim the Good News in word and deed; fill us with your Spirit that we may more clearly see how we, as individuals Christians and as a family of your people, can more faithfully make a difference to the world around us; convince us of your grace and forgiveness that, as we engage in the ministry of your church we not have to carry with us the guilt of past failure; strengthen us in our calling that we may be equipped and ready to put aside our own wishes and desires and follow Christ.

Loving God, as we gather for worship, we open ourselves to your Spirit, offering ourselves in faith for the service of the Kingdom. May we today hear the word of God, feel the presence of God's Spirit, and remember Jesus, that the word of the Kingdom we share here today may uplift and strengthen us as we journey together.

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: Galatians 5:16-26

HYMN 691:

God is our refuge and our strength,  
in straits a present aid;  
Therefore, although the earth remove,  
we will not be afraid:

Though hills amidst the seas be cast;  
Though waters roaring make,  
And troubled be; yea, though the hills  
by swelling seas do shake.

A river is, whose streams do glad  
the city of our God;  
The holy place, wherein the Lord  
most high hath his abode.

God in the midst of her doth dwell;  
nothing shall her remove:  
The Lord to her an helper will,  
and that right early, prove.

Reading: Luke 5:27-32

Reflection:

There are among churches two different kinds of understanding of what the church is all about, and each has a long word to describe it. The first is counterculturalism. That is simply the belief that the church stands apart from the culture of the society in which it is set; that the church indeed possesses its own culture which is in many ways in conflict with secular society. It's a mark of such churches often to be critical of society; to look at things like the constant liberalisation of sexual ethics; the decline in Christianity and the rise of alternative spiritualities; the consumer society with 24 hour supermarkets and emphasis on possessions as the way to fulfilment - all these kinds of thing - and to deplore them as un- or even anti-Christian. To preach instead that the Christian Church offers an acceptable alternative, a community that is not based on selfishness and greed, but is based upon a certain set of values that are to be found in the Bible. We need only look at our reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians as one example among many from the writings of the apostle. Here he is drawing a stark contrast between the life of the Christian community and the life of the world in which

that community exists. He opposed what he calls the flesh and the spirit. One is all about a long list of unsavoury attitudes and activities, and the other is a slightly shorter list of Godly qualities. Her says 'those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.'

And it is this view that many modern Christian communities share. What goes on in the world around us is an ever-increasing downward spiral into sin. It is the task of the Christian community to show a better way - to show by example and by teaching that the love of God and the teaching of Jesus renders unnecessary all selfishness and renders powerless all evil. And - an important point - Christians should not endanger themselves by becoming too closely involved in the world, by sharing the values of the world or participating in the modern cultural trends of the world.

That's one way of looking at the Church's mission, and it is, as we have seen, perfectly Biblical, valid and meaningful. The only caution about it might be that there is always a danger of creating a divide between the Church and the world that becomes harder and harder to cross until the Church becomes sectarian and exclusive.

Another new word now - 'enculturation'. This describes a different approach to church life which is also commonly found in churches of the United Reformed Church. It is the belief that, in order to be at all effective in bring the gospel to the world, the church has to be closely involved in the world; has to understand the culture of the world around it; even in some ways to be part of the world around it. Only then can the gospel be lived and presented in ways that are relevant and understandable to a generation of people who may not have had any childhood connection with the church and are unfamiliar with all the Christian jargon words. A church which believes in 'enculturation' believes also that the Christian church started as a grass roots movement among a group of ordinary people who found something special in Jesus of Nazareth. They were people who suffered from, and very often succumbed to, all the various kinds of temptations that we have seen described by Paul. Yet Jesus welcomed them, helped them and loved them. His church, therefore, should not be judgemental about peoples attitudes or activities, but should rather attempt to influence them to by including them, welcoming them, loving them as Jesus did.

This view of the church is likely to have a more flexible view of the Christian scriptures, believing that it's important that our use of the scriptures should connect with the society in which we find ourselves. We cannot simply take a set of historical documents and apply them to a world that is changed out of recognition since they were written; the gospel needs to be reconnected to everyday life and we need to seek and discover God not just in the pages of the Bible, not just in the life of the Christian community. We need to realise that God is present in all the world - on both sides of the encounter between church and society. These culture-related churches tend to be inclusive, flexible and - another fancy word - 'contextual'. That is, they try to relate closely to the community in which they are set, not emphasising differences and building barriers, but rather emphasising similarities and discovering common needs and concerns.

It may be that, as you have been listening to these descriptions, you have been mentally placing yourself on one side or the other, saying either, 'yes, the church needs to be deeply involved in the life of the world', or 'no, the church is the community of God's people and stands apart from the world'. My own immediate reaction when I heard them was to quite firmly decide that the Church could only be at all relevant, its mission at all effective, if it was a part of the world it serves, part of its culture and understanding of its needs. I thought of Jesus

associating with criminals and outcasts, offering forgiveness, bringing healing and apparently accepting people as they were. Loving them without precondition.

But - and here's a little exercise you can do at home - if we try to think of as many incidents in Jesus' life as we remember, and of as many of the stories we told as we can remember, and get a piece of paper and draw a vertical line down the middle. On one side of the line we put the words and actions of Jesus that suggest the church should be apart from society and on the other side of the line the incidents and words that suggest the church should be an integral part of society, what do we find?

The Good Samaritan: the rules of society are being broken by the man who gives help; the Prodigal Son: the rules of society are being broken by the father who welcomes his son home; the Woman at the Well: Jesus breaks the rules by even talking to her; the Sabbath Law: Jesus breaks it. Yet on the other hand, he does relate closely to ordinary people; he does conform by worshipping and teaching in the synagogue; he is baptised according to the tradition of his people.

Jesus spoke in our reading from Luke about being a 'sign to the people of this generation'. He is part of the world, and in some ways the same as it, yet he is also different. He points the way to something new and better. It would seem that Jesus had a foot in both camps, and that to adopt one while rejecting the other is a pitfall to be avoided. Neither rejecting society nor totally embracing it is appropriate.

So maybe the divide between the counter-cultural church and the contextual church needs to be fluid; that certain situations will require us to look at society and say, 'no, that is un-Christian and wrong, and we cannot be part of it', while other will cause us to say 'we embrace this with love as part of God's world'. We need to be a pendulum that swings appropriately between alternative understandings of the world and the church. The Bible puts this as being 'in the world but not of the world' and in attempting to live and relate to this world in that way, we would be doing no more than following the example of Jesus, who was able to maintain the purity of faith amid all the sins and weaknesses of the world.

HYMN 497:

Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart  
and a discerning mind:  
give, as I play the Christian's part,  
the strength to finish what I start  
and act on what I find.

When, in the rush of days,  
my will is habit-bound and slow  
help me to keep in vision still  
what love and power and peace can fill  
a life that trusts in you.

By your divine and urgent claim  
and by your human face  
kindle our sinking hearts to flame  
and as you teach the world your name  
let it become your place.

Jesus, with all your Church  
I long to see your kingdom come:  
show me your way of righting wrong  
and turning sorrow into song  
until you bring me home.

Prayer:

For the faith which draws us to worship week by week, joined as a family of God's people, we give thanks.

For the words of God we find in scripture, giving challenge and inspiration, we give thanks.

For the example of Jesus in relationships and responses to others, we give thanks.

For the opportunity to live as disciples, learning, following and proclaiming, we give thanks.

For the love that fills our lives, surrounding us and encouraging us when times are difficult, we give thanks.

For the call to worship and serve, and the responsibility of nurturing and caring for others, we give thanks.

We offer our prayers for those who are new to faith, who are filled with the excitement and enthusiasm of a new way of life, who are inspired and motivated to proclaim the good news of the kingdom; and for those whose faith is long-standing and may have lost the edge of excitement they once had, who are Christians by habit rather than conviction.

We offer our prayers for those whose faith sustains and encourages them, who gain from their faith the strength to cope with the trials and troubles of life; and for those who are filled with doubt and uncertainty, who seek the assurance that they are loved.

We offer our prayers for those who give of their time and skills to help others grow in faith, for those who preach the gospel and those who offer pastoral care and companionship; and for those who would like to share their faith but feel inhibited by their lack of knowledge or worried by the possibility of rejection or ridicule.

We offer our prayers for all people in any kind of need, thinking especially of those known to us who are in any kind of trouble or distress, and in a moment of silence we remember them ...

We offer our prayers for the church throughout the world, for its ministry and mission, for its worship and service to communities.

May our prayers be but a starting-point for our own deeper commitment to the life and work of the church, may the thoughts and feelings we express here be worked out every day in our dealings with other people, in our willingness to help where help is needed, to welcome the rejected and isolated, to care for the young and the immature in faith. And through our prayer, worship and service, may others come to grow in faith and commit themselves to discipleship. In Jesus' name.

Hymn 485:

Almighty Father of all things that be,  
our life, our work,  
we consecrate to thee,  
whose heavens declare thy glory from above,  
whose earth below is witness to thy love.

For well we know this weary,  
fallen earth  
is yet thine own by right of its new birth,  
since that great cross upreared on Calvary  
redeemed it from its fault and shame to thee.

Thine still the changeful beauty of the hills,  
the purple valleys flecked with silver rills,  
the ocean glistening  
'neath the golden rays; they all are thine,  
and voiceless speak thy praise.

Thou dost the strength  
to worker's arm impart;  
from thee the skilled musician's mystic art,  
the grace of poet's pen or painter's hand,  
to teach the loveliness of sea and land.

Then grant us, Lord,  
in all things thee to own,  
to dwell within the shadow of thy throne,  
to speak and work, to think, and live, and move,  
reflecting thine own nature, which is love:

that so, by Christ redeemed from sin and shame,  
and hallowed by thy Spirit's cleansing flame,  
ourselves, our work, and all our powers may be  
a sacrifice acceptable to thee.

Benediction

Let us be ever listening for the voice of the Lord  
and follow wherever it leads.  
Let us offer ourselves as a temple for the Holy Spirit.  
And may God be with us and speak through us;  
May Christ Jesus be one with us and lead us to new life;  
May the Holy Spirit dwell within 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