



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 10th September 2023

Call to Worship:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High:
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

Prayer/Meditation:

Gracious God, giver of life, the source of our faith and hope and love, we come to worship you, to offer our praise and thanksgiving and to confess our failings before you and to one another. We praise you for the gift of faith. We praise you for your call to each of us to 'walk the way, live the life of Jesus today' and we remember with thanksgiving all who have journeyed with us and before us, guiding our feet and encouraging each step of that journey. We thank you for the presence of the Spirit with us to challenge and inspire, dream dreams and share in visions, and prompt us to venture down new paths of discipleship.

We praise you for the gift of hope. We praise you that through your Word we gain an insight into the world as you intend it, where all are valued and included in the circle of community regardless of race, gender, age or ability and where the earth itself is cherished as our common home. We thank you that in Jesus, the Word made flesh, we see the embodiment of hope for humanity and a new way to live.

We praise you for the gift of love. We praise you that in the loving relationships we have in our own lives we experience something of the deep love which you have for us, a love which is individual, unique and constant. We thank you that you draw us into the circle of divine love which binds together Father, Son and Spirit and yet reaches out to include and embrace all who seek to dwell in that love.

Merciful God, by reminding ourselves of how and why we want to give you praise and thanks, we also remind ourselves of our need to confess that we have not always lived the way we would want to live and the way which brings you joy.

We confess that there have been times when our faith has faltered, and we have failed to fully engage with the impact that faith should have on our decisions and relationships with others.

We confess that there have been times when we have given up on hope, and have become overwhelmed by the desire for power and your kingdom values have got lost in our inertia.

We confess that there have been times when we have stopped loving you and our neighbour, when self has dominated all our relationships and our need to receive has dominated our desire to give.

Forgive us, gracious God. Draw us to you once again. May each turning to you be an opportunity for a new start, an opportunity to remember that we are your children, made in your image and

likeness and an opportunity to experience afresh the constant love which you have for each one of us. Help us to hear Jesus word to us, 'Your sins are forgiven. Follow me'.

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: John 6:43-51

Hymn 56:

Creating God,
your fingers trace
the bold designs of farthest space;
let sun and moon
and stars and light
and what lies hidden praise your might.

Sustaining God,
your hands uphold
earth's myst'ries known or yet untold;
let water's fragile blend with air,
enabling life, proclaim your care.

Redeeming God,
your arms embrace
all now despised for creed or race;
let peace, descending like a dove,
make known on earth your healing love.

Indwelling God,
your gospel claims
one family with countless names;
let every life be touched by grace
until we praise you face to face.

Reading: John 6:60-69

Reflection:

I want to tell you today about the atheist and the bishop. No, it's not a joke, it's a debate I once heard on the radio featuring an atheist and a bishop about how we cope with the traumas and difficulties of the human condition. The bishop of course wanted to look at the human condition from a Christian perspective. He noted that religion has for many centuries been the foundation on which people have built their ethical and moral standards, their relationships with the rest of society and indeed their very outlook on life. It has been religion that has very often steered the progress of humanity.

The atheist agreed with all of this and, being a rational person who was prepared to see the good about religion as well as the bad, acknowledged the significant beneficial

contribution that religion has made to human development. Her argument was that it is no longer necessary, and that belief in God is redundant for all practical purposes in today's world.

It was an interesting debate, and all the more interesting because the atheist and the bishop found substantial areas of agreement - mainly that humans need *something* to underpin their lives and serve as a foundation on which their attitudes, relationships and responses can be built. That something, claimed the atheist, could be a religious faith, but *need* not be. She suggested that a passion for the well-being of all humanity - humanism - could be just as strong an influence on people than any belief in God.

This raises a very interesting issue about the ways in which we believe the things we do, and the reasons why we believe the things we do. For many people of faith - Christians and of other faiths - the choice is between what is true and what is false. We take it almost for granted that what we believe is true (we wouldn't want to align ourselves with anything we thought might be *untrue*), and from there it's a short and perfectly logical step the come to the conclusion that someone who believes something different must be wrong. Faith, then, becomes a matter of truth against falsehood. We can see that throughout the history of the Christian Church. Some of the Church's darkest moments have come when it has insisted that its understanding of human life and faith is the only true understanding; and it may be that, even in these more tolerant times, we nonetheless think of ourselves as defenders of truth against the falsehoods of secularism and other faiths.

When we look at our faith and its relationship with other beliefs as conflict between truth and falsehood or right and wrong, then we virtually exclude an element of choice. How could it be right for anyone to choose any expression of faith other than ours when ours is right and others are wrong? And is it not therefore part of our calling as guardians of the truth to encourage or persuade other people to join us in our beliefs? To warn people of the folly of embracing any other faith than ours? Indeed, to believe that only when all people share our beliefs with the world be a completely safe, completely just, completely peaceful place?

Well, that is one way of looking at it, but what if we reconsider the words of the atheist that our basic rule of life might be religious faith but need not be, and then expand that for the context of a faith community like this one, and say that the same truth we are so passionate about might not be found in our own faith alone, but might be shared with others.

Maybe the whole question is much more complex than trying to find what is true and, having found what we believe to be the proper expression of truth, aligning ourselves with that and then believing that we have the truth. Let us suppose that in our own thoughts and experiences of the world, we have realised that the question of peace is of fundamental importance, because only in a peaceful environment can human potential be fully realised; and we can say the same thing for justice, and for love and kindness and consideration and selflessness - all the qualities that make for a good fulfilled life for all people. And then we try to find a way of expressing our hope and our desire and our passion for those qualities.

Some people will be humanists, they will see no need for any kind of religious faith and no need for any kind of organisation like a church. Others will decide that that religion of some kind is the most appropriate expression of their beliefs, and being part of a like-minded community is a helpful way of finding support and encouragement when life becomes difficult; some will prefer a religion that provides guidelines or even rules for living that will

help them to know which attitudes and actions are appropriate and which are not; others will prefer a more free kind of faith community that encourages its members to explore for themselves the big questions of life. The point about all of it is that, having identified what are our basic beliefs about human existence, we then choose a way of expressing those beliefs and sharing them with other people.

This may sound like some kind of heresy, for what it says is that Christianity is a valid, appropriate and truthful way for people to express their beliefs, but it may not be the *only* way.

In our reading from the gospel according to John this morning, we heard of a small incident in which a number of Jesus' disciples made the choice to leave him. In his teaching he had been demanding a total commitment from them, and some, it seems, were not prepared for that. They decided, therefore, to leave him and not to follow him any more. They made their choice, and they went, without apparently, any words of condemnation from Jesus. They were, like everyone Jesus encountered, free to decide for themselves what they thought about him, and to make a commitment to follow or not as they decided.

But those who decided to follow did so because they felt they could do nothing else. When Jesus turned to Peter and asked, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Peter replied, 'To whom could we go? You have words of eternal life.'

Peter, it seems, was so captivated by Jesus and his teaching, so utterly convinced by what Jesus said and did, that he couldn't think of anyone he'd rather be with.

So there is revealed perhaps in this little incident the process of commitment to discipleship. There is first a choice - to follow Jesus or not to follow Jesus - then there is a decision - to make a commitment to him or not to make commitment to him. And that commitment became the life-changing experience for Peter and the other disciples and many who have followed Christ since that time.

So where does all this leave us with our atheist and our bishop? It warns us of the danger of thinking that Christianity is the sole possessor of truth and goodness. We can find truth and goodness aplenty even in the godless world of humanism; we can find truth and goodness in many if not all of the world's faiths. But by our upbringing, our culture or our own exploration into faith, we have chosen the way of Jesus Christ. And having made that choice, we have continued to explore, now in company with other Christian people, the teachings of Jesus about the Kingdom of God, the example of Jesus in relationships with others, the understanding of Jesus of the love of God, and we have seen that, for us, Christianity is a rich and full expression of the view we have of the world, the hopes and dreams we share for the future of the human family, and the truth we perceive of God and the world.

So we have chosen to be Christian, and having done so, we have made the commitment that Peter and all the others made - to not just accept the Christian faith, but to cling to it, to make it the centre of our lives, to do as Paul suggests in his letter to the Ephesians and to clothe ourselves in it. For we believe with a passion that it can be the way to a new and better world.

We share substantial parts of our worldview with our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu brothers and sisters, we share our hopes with them for peace and justice and love - and with our humanist brothers and sisters too. But we have chosen to express those hopes in a

Christian way, because we have seen in Jesus something that resonates with us, something that calls to us, something to which we are willing to make a commitment, because we believe that the Christian way is our way to the world we hope for and desire for all people.

HYMN 489:

Be thou my vision,
O Lord of my heart,
naught be all else to me, save that thou art -
thou my best thought in the day and the night,
waking and sleeping,
thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom,
be thou my true word,
thou ever with me
and I with thee, Lord;
thou my great Father, thy child let me be,
thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my dignity, thou my delight,
thou my soul's shelter,
and thou my strong tower;
raise thou me heav'nward, great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not,
nor earth's empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always;
thou and thou only,
the first in my heart,
High King of heaven,
my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven,
thou heaven's bright sun,
grant me its joys after vict'ry is won;
heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Prayer:

Mysterious God, hidden and revealed,
first and last, beginning and end,
we worship and adore you.

With effortless ease
you name and hold in mind
every life, every life form, and every human being.
You create us and give us breath.

You delight in the work of your hands.

You know us and call us by name,
and nothing can separate us from your love.
And so we have confidence to admit
that we belong to a race, the human race,
that hides from you,
refuses and resists your love,
avoids your gaze,
and seeks satisfaction in lesser gods.

We confess our own part
in denying that we belong to you,
by hiding or running away,
giving ourselves to other powers,
and resisting your love.

We are sorry,
for wrongdoing that ensnares us
and wrongdoing that we have chosen.
Forgive us and set us free.
Turn us back to you.
Turn us toward each other in love.
Loving God, beginning and end,
we thank you and praise you
for ancestors, known and unknown,
held in memory, or hidden in time,
and for the forms of life
from which we have descended
and which have left their mark
in our body and brain.

We praise you
for people with whom we are connected—
in our church family,
at home or work,
through kinship and friendship
and through TV, books, and other media.
Thank you for all who shape us for good
and make us what we are.

We pray for all living things.
for the protection of endangered species.
Preserve the web of life
on which our life depends.
In our care for the earth,
forestall the mistakes
of people and leaders
and deflect our dangerous decisions.

We pray for earth's creatures, now and in the future,
and for the human generations that follow us,
especially for those who descend from us
by kinship or by choice.
Give them a good earth
with ample food, pure air,
and clean water.
Give them peace and hope,
and people to love.

Mysterious God, beginning and end,
first and last,
hidden and revealed,
all glory and honour are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

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

Hymn 605:

Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
Christ our Head, who, throned in glory
for your own will ever plead,
fill us with your love and pity,
heal our wrongs, and help our need.

As you, Lord, have lived for others,
so may we for others live;
freely have your gifts been granted,
freely may your servants give.
Yours the gold and yours the silver,
yours the wealth of sea and land,
we but stewards of your bounty,
held in trust as from your hand.

Come, O Christ, and reign above us,
King of love, and Prince of peace:
hush the storm of strife and passion,
bid its cruel discords cease:
by your patient years of toiling,
by your silent hours of pain,
quench our fevered thirst of pleasure,
shame our selfish greed of gain.

Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
in your love you prayed the Father
that your people should be one;
grant, O Christ, our hope's fruition,
here on earth your will be done.

Benediction

Christ's peace be with us,
Christ's peace within us,
Christ's peace behind us,
Christ's peace before us,
Christ's peace beside us,
Christ's peace to win us,
Christ's peace to comfort and restore 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