



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

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

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2023

Call to Worship (Psalm 51):

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me;  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me;  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Prayer/Meditation:

We praise you, O God,  
with words of thanksgiving in our mouths and in our hearts—  
words which can never really do justice  
to the depth of your care for us.

We rejoice in your blessings,  
yet we so often fail to live up to them.  
Like your people of old,  
we often desire to fashion you in our image  
or in ways that we can control.

Knowing these failings of ours as you do,  
you still invite us to share your life of grace and abundant love  
by being united with Jesus Christ through the power of your Spirit.  
We do not deserve such gifts.

We can only receive them and respond.  
May this time of worship and our daily living  
proclaim our thanksgiving for these undeserved and lavish gifts of grace.

Lord Jesus, you invite all of us.

No special qualifications needed;  
No particular connections or exclusive memberships required;  
No secret passwords or unique attributes expected;  
No campaigning or canvassing,  
no examinations or reference checks;

Just an amazing invitation to a feast;  
to find our place at Your table,  
alongside these other unworthy ones,  
these other beloved ones;

these others humble enough to accept the invitation  
without asking who else will be there.

Well, Jesus, Lord of the Feast,  
with thankful and open hearts,  
we accept Your amazing invitation.

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: Exodus 32:7-14

HYMN 292:

When morning gilds the skies,  
my heart awaking cries  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Alike at work and prayer  
to him I would repair:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

When sleep her balm denies,  
my silent spirit sighs:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
When evil thoughts molest,  
with this I shield my breast:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Does sadness fill my mind?  
A solace here I find:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Or fades my earthly bliss?  
My comfort still is this:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Let earth's wide circle round  
in joyful notes resound:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Let air and sea and sky  
from depth to height reply:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Be this, while life is mine,  
my canticle divine:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Be this the eternal song  
through all the ages long:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Reading: Matthew 22:1-14

Reflection:

The readings this week from Exodus and the Gospel of Matthew are about the unexpected. In the story from Exodus, Moses has been up on the mountain for a long time. The people are getting worried, even scared. They don't really know where Moses has gone, or why—they don't understand. Like so many times during their journey, they are confused and scared, and they lose faith. This is not so surprising—it is a continuing theme. They ask Aaron to make gods for them, so he takes all their jewelry and makes a golden calf.

God, of course, sees what they are doing. God tells Moses to go back down to the people, whom God threatens to destroy. This is not so surprising, either, as the Old Testament contains other stories of God's anger. But Moses begs God to reconsider, and reminds God of the promises made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

And then comes the surprise, the unexpected: God changes his mind; God relents. As the psalmist says,

*So would he have destroyed them,  
had not Moses his chosen stood before him in the breach,  
to turn his wrath away from consuming them.*

Then in Matthew's Gospel, we have the strange story of the king who held a wedding banquet for his son. The invited guests would not come, so the king sent his slaves out to bring people in from the street. Then he seems surprised to find a guest who is not dressed "appropriately," and he orders the slaves to bind the man and toss him "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

We are shocked and surprised by this story, as were those listening to Jesus. As in many cultures, hospitality was very important to these people. It would have been unforgivable for guests or hosts to behave in this manner. Jesus' listeners would have been shocked and offended—and especially so when Jesus compared this story to the kingdom of heaven.

Perhaps that was the point.

First of all, this is one of those parables in which the writer, here it's Matthew, takes a story of Jesus and re-works it for his own purposes. You can see another version of this parable - probably one a lot closer to the one Jesus told - in the fourteenth chapter of Luke. What Matthew does is sort of soup up the story so it isn't exactly a parable anymore. Instead, it becomes an allegory of salvation history - a way of telling what Matthew sees as the central movements of God's actions and plans for all of human history.

In this allegory, the first guests stand for Israel. The first two sets of slaves who issue the invitation represent the prophets of the old covenant, which is why some of them are beaten up and killed, hardly the usual way of declining an invitation. The city that is destroyed represents Jerusalem.

In the second part of the allegory, the slaves who are sent into the main streets to invite

just anybody are the apostles, the followers of Jesus after the resurrection, who brought the church together. And the church, Matthew knew all too well, was filled with both good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, deserving and undeserving. After all, “everyone” means everyone: good, bad, and indifferent. The second crowd is very different from the first group, just as the church was very different from the leaders of Israel.

So, here we are. The wedding hall is filled with all sorts of guests. This precise moment in the story is Matthew’s present, the world, right then, as he knew it. It is also the world as we know it: the present age of the church.

Matthew is expressing the early Christian belief that, in spite of the words of the prophets and of John the Baptist, Israel, especially Israel’s leaders, had repeatedly ignored God’s invitation to his great messianic banquet for his son Jesus. So they are rejected, and the church is formed by the apostles. Remember, the apostles are represented in this allegory by the slaves who are sent to everybody else, to the lower classes, to women, to the gentiles, to the ones who had been ignored. And the apostles are told not to judge, but to invite. That was the way things were when Matthew used this parable of Jesus to tell the story of salvation history

Jesus often made unusual or surprising or uncomfortable comparisons in his parables. Once again, he is challenging the assumptions of his listeners, shocking them with a surprising or unexpected story.

But why would he tell such a story about the kingdom of heaven? It was not only for the shock value. Jesus wanted to expand people’s perceptions. He is saying that the kingdom of heaven is beyond our expectations, beyond our assumptions, beyond what we can analyze and think through and get our heads around. This is not to say that we should not think or try to understand. It is only to say that there is always more than what we can see, that God will always surprise us, will always confront us with the unexpected. The point is for us to always try to be open to more, not just to rest in the comfortable assumption that we know all about God.

These stories make us uncomfortable. We don’t know what to do with them—stories of the Lord talking about destroying his people, or strange, confusing parables told by Jesus. We usually ignore them, or try to find some way to explain them away—“well, this is what this really means.”

We remember this is Matthew’s story; Matthew who was writing on behalf of the Church, Matthew who was using this story to tell the whole historical story. So, unlike Luke, he moves the story on beyond the present into the future and speculates about what will happen to those who enter unworthily- they are bound and cast into the outer darkness. The final judgement. Luke refuses to speculate in this way, and consequently his version of the story is probably closer to the spirit of Jesus. He finishes the parable by saying; ‘none of those who were invited will taste my dinner’.

But there is a way of understanding them, without taking them literally. In the Gospel, for example, Jesus is being deliberately provocative. He challenges our preconceived ideas about what God and God’s kingdom are like. We all have our favorite ideas of what the kingdom of

heaven might be like. Jesus is telling us that it will be like nothing we can imagine. In that over-used phrase, Jesus is inviting us to “think outside the box.”

Because the truth is that we cannot know for certain. In the book of Isaiah, it says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” This does not mean we are stupid, it only means that we are human and our knowledge and our understanding are limited. Even though we contain a spark of the divine, even though we are made in God’s image, we are not God. The most we can hope for in this lifetime are glimpses—through story and scripture, through prayer and meditation, through our experiences. If we are open to the Spirit, if we listen, if we pay attention, we can catch a glimpse here and there of the kingdom.

HYMN 195:

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,  
and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,  
and I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth;  
at Bethlehem I had my birth.

Chorus

'Dance, then wherever you may be,  
I am the Lord of the dance,' said he,  
'and I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,  
and I'll lead you all in the dance', said he.

I danced for the scribe and the pharisee,  
but they would not dance, and they wouldn't follow me.  
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John  
they came with me and the dance went on.

Chorus

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame;  
the holy people said it was a shame.  
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high,  
and they left me there on a cross to die.

Chorus

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black  
it's hard to dance with the devil on your back.  
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone,  
but I am the dance, and I still go on.

Chorus

They cut me down and I leapt up high;  
I am the life that'll never, never die;  
I'll live in you if you'll live in me;  
I am the Lord of the dance, said he.

Chorus

Prayer:

God, we come into Your presence  
with praise and thanksgiving for Your faithful love.  
Your love never fails—not even we turn away from You:  
when we ignore Your invitation,  
or desert You for gods of our own making.  
Even then You do not abandon us,  
but reach out—again and again—  
inviting us back into relationship once more.

As You welcome us, so You welcome our prayers.  
We bring them to You with confidence,  
knowing that You will hear and respond.

We pray for the world You created, and the people who share it with us:  
- for countries caught up in war or violent conflict,  
- for regions of the world recovering from hurricanes and flooding,  
- for the starving people of the world.,  
For these and all the other areas in our world  
where there is need and despair,  
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our country and for its people:  
- for our government leaders, national and local,  
- for our judicial system, police forces and military,  
- for our cities, towns, and rural communities,  
- for employers and employees, for young and old,  
For all who are part of this great country,  
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our local community—the people of this city/town,  
- for those who are unemployed,  
- for those in prison,  
- for those who are hungry,  
- for those who are alone and afraid,  
For all our neighbours, both known and unknown to us,  
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for this congregation—our brothers and sisters in Christ,  
- for those who are ill,  
- for those who are anxious about the future,  
- for those struggling with their faith,  
- for those who minister among us,  
For all Your people in this place,  
Lord, hear our prayer.

Pour out Your Spirit on us!  
Fix our hearts and minds on what is true and honourable and right.

Give us the joy and peace that comes from knowing and doing Your will.  
Keep us faithful to the call we have received in Christ Jesus, our Lord,  
extending Your loving invitation to the world around us.  
In Jesus' name.

I invite you now to spend a few moments in your own prayer, in words or in silence, or simply in reflecting on the stories we have heard and the words we have read in our worship today.

Hear our prayer, Loving God, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Chrst. Amen.

HYMN 580:

Lord, you give the great commission:  
'Heal the sick and preach the word'.  
Lest the Church neglect its mission  
and the gospel go unheard,  
help us witness to your purpose  
with renewed integrity;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you call us to your service:  
'In my name baptize and teach'.  
That the world may trust your promise,  
life abundant meant for each,  
give us all new fervour, draw us  
closer in community;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you make the common holy:  
'This my body, this my blood'.  
Let us all, for earth's true glory  
daily lift life heavenward,  
asking that the world around us  
share your children's liberty;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you show us love's true measure:  
'Father, what they do, forgive'.  
Yet we hoard as private treasure  
all that you so freely give.  
May your care and mercy lead us  
to a just society;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Lord, you bless with words assuring:

'I am with you to the end'.  
Faith and hope and love restoring,  
may we serve as you intend,  
and, amid the cares that claim us,  
hold in mind eternity;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us  
for the work of ministry.

Benediction

Let us now go forth,  
strengthened to do the work of Christ,  
extending his invitation to the eternal banquet,  
rejoicing in God.

May our gentleness be known to everyone  
and our hearts be untroubled.

For the God who created us,  
the Christ who empowers us  
and the Spirit who inspires us  
give us strength and hope.

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