



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

Sunday 29th October 2023

Call to Worship

Glory to God in the highest!
And hope to every discouraged heart.
Glory to God in the highest!
And peace to every conflicted soul.
Glory to God in the highest!
And joy to every downcast spirit.
Glory to God in the highest!
And love to everyone.
Let us sing praises to our God.
Let us seek God's light in the darkness.

Prayer/Meditation:

O Lord our God, we come to 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 come to 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 come with reverent worship filling our minds,
because your faithful love endures forever.
Even though we are fragile people
who sometimes feel lost and abandoned,
your love blesses us and never changes.

Faithful God,
we come into your presence with thanksgiving,
deeply grateful for the unfailing love and faithfulness
you have shown toward us, your people.
When we call out to you, you answer.
When we are exhausted, you give us the strength to go on.
When we find ourselves in trouble,
you are there, standing beside us.

Holy God, Creator of Life,
you call us out of our dark places,
offering us the grace of new life.
When we see nothing but hopelessness,
you surprise us with the breath of your spirit.
Call us out of our complacency and routines,

set us free from our self-imposed bonds,
and fill us with your spirit of life, compassion, and peace,

And so we come before you in gratitude and praise,
offering you the worship of our hearts and lives.

Open our eyes to see and know you here among us;
open our ears to recognize your voice.

And then send us out from here,
to live and work in the world as your faithful disciples.

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: I Corinthians 15:1-11

HYMN 610:

Beloved, let us love: for love is of God;
in God alone has love its true abode.

Beloved, let us love: for they who love
are born of God, his children from above.

Beloved, let us love: for love is rest,
and they who have no love abide unblest.

Beloved, let us love: for love is light,
and those who have no love dwell in the night

Beloved, let us love: for only thus
shall we behold that God who first loved us.

Reading: Matthew 22:34-40

Reflection:

I'd like to address today a question I have mentioned in passing a few times recently: the question of religious belief.

Religion is about what we believe, isn't it?

Well, maybe not, maybe not about what you or I or Baptists or Catholics or Jews or Muslims or Hindus believe.

We are so immersed in a culture that views religion as a simple matter of what people believe that we think this the way it always is - in all faiths and at all times. But it isn't.

No one objects to calling Buddhism a religion. Yet Buddhism has no theology at all in the way we use the word. Buddhists don't believe anything, at least not anything that is a set of propositions. Buddhism doesn't even have a god in the usual sense.

But, of course, Buddhism might strike us as a bit exotic and foreign. So let's take a look at the religious culture out of which we come—the Christian and Jewish traditions.

The Hebrew scriptures show little interest in what people believe. The closest they come to a creed is the shema:

Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One.

They *do* show a lot of interest in what people do. They are supposed to love God and follow the commandments. The great prophets were concerned with justice, compassion and being faithful to the covenant. They had no interest in doctrine.

The early Christian communities started to show more concern with what people believed, as we see from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It begins to be important that people believe - but even then there was a variety of beliefs.

Islam, the next great religious movement, also has little theology. Its statement of faith is that 'there is no God but God and that Mohammed is his prophet'. This is a way of insisting, as did the Jews, that there is only one God. The great emphasis in Islam was with what the faithful are supposed to do, not what they are supposed to think.

It is Christianity that is most concerned with creeds and statements of faith, and to this day congregations regularly recite what they believe in great and often complicated detail.

Yet the idea of belief has become distorted. The word used to be used in a very different way. "Belief" once meant "what I give my heart to" or what I commit myself to. Belief was linked to emotion and action. Belief did not mean agreeing with a set of ideas.

Actually, even in religions that emphasise belief, beliefs change over time. It is no longer a sin to believe that the sun is the centre of the solar system. Today the Roman Catholic Church accepts evolution. So you can be a faithful Catholic today by believing what would have been heresy a few centuries ago. Many Churches churches once taught that slavery was God's plan.

And here's the radical point. The point is that religious belief can actually be an obstacle to God's kingdom. Every major religious tradition seeks to encourage a sense of wonder, mystery, awe, compassion, gratitude, justice and humility. Creeds and statements of faith can be an obstacle to that. Once we think our religion is about believing the right thing, we are in danger of becoming arrogant, belligerent and defensive.

Look at what happens when a belief system takes priority. First, we categorise everyone who does not agree with us as either ignorant or evil. If we have the truth and are certain we have it, then our task in life becomes spreading this truth. Our task also becomes defending the truth from all of those who disagree. Believers have enemies everywhere. The world becomes a battleground. This is the world of Muslim fundamentalists blowing up innocent people and of Christian fundamentalists shunning and trying to criminalise people who are gay.

Once a religion becomes all about belief, hatred will surely follow. Believers can be dangerous.

So, if religion isn't really about what we believe, then what is it about? Can we be religious without a complicated belief system?

Can we just believe anything we want? Actually, no. I would love to believe that I will live to be 200 years old and become a concert pianist. But what is important about a liberal faith is that we don't have to pretend to believe what we can't believe. We don't have to lie. And we don't get caught up in endless debates about whose beliefs are correct. It's not about religion without belief, but rather faith beyond belief.

The problem with asking what someone believes is that it is the wrong question.

True faith is about what we love, not about what we think. True faith is about what we hold sacred. The practice of true religion is faithfulness to what we love.

When we focus on what we truly love, we ask the real questions. We ask questions like, “How shall I live?” When we ask the question together in community, it becomes, “How shall we live together? What shall we do together?” When we focus on what we truly love, we discover something wonderful: we discover that we love the same things.

We realize that we need one another. We want to be compassionate and gentle with one another. We aspire to create a religious community where we can come to know one another more deeply. We want to create a place where we can cry together, laugh together, sing together, learn together, and act together, where we can come together to remind ourselves of what is truly worthwhile. That is what worship is—it is literally an affirmation of worth.

And we want to make a difference in the world. We are not content to be a club. We know there are hundreds, thousands, of neighbours who love what we love. And if they love what we love, they have the same religion we do. We open our hearts and our doors to them.

Religion beyond belief is religion that transcends culture, race and class. It is religion where we can grow spiritually, where we can forge deep and lasting relationships, where we can join hands to help heal a broken world.

We live at a time when religious tribalism kills people every day. Fundamentalists try to force their beliefs on others. Millions upon millions want no part of that kind of religion.

Yet the options offered by secular consumer culture are no better. People know that consumerism is a false god. Modern society has eroded the network of relationships that gave people a deep sense of belonging and produced isolation, loneliness and fear.

The challenge for the Church is to offer a community where people can nurture relationships, deepen spiritually, and serve a mission that is worthy of their highest ideals. Without insisting that we all believe in exactly the same way - our way - and rejecting those who don't.

We must know what we love. And then we must let that love guide us. This is true religion. It is not really religion without belief. It is religion beyond belief. It is a religion to be lived and felt. This is the religion our world so desperately needs, and this is what we are called to be.

And if we feel that we need some statement of faith to unite us, Jesus gives us one:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And Love your neighbour as yourself.’

HYMN 509:

O Jesus, I have promised
to serve thee to the end;
be thou for ever near me,
my Master and my Friend;
I shall not fear the battle
if thou art by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me feel thee near me;
the world is ever near,
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but, Jesus, draw thou nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear thee speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will.
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
thou guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, thou hast promised,
to all who follow thee,
that where thou art in glory
there shall thy servant be;
O guide me, call me, draw me,
uphold me to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
my Saviour and my Friend.

Prayer:

Loving God,
we pray for vulnerable people all over this world,
people without power
who live in places of terror and violence, fear and oppression.

Protect them, God;
we feel so powerless ourselves to help them.
Encourage and empower us to work
for peace and freedom from fear in our own contexts.

God of grace,
we pray for those whose lives have been turned upside down
by various disasters: floods, fire and drought-driven famine.
Bring courage and hope to them;
through their pain, may they remain connected to you in prayer.

Healing God,
we pray for those who are sick and suffering;
for those who are worried about their loved-ones,
and for those whose lives have been touched by mourning and loss.
Bring peace; may they know your love, even in their distress

Caring God, we pray for those who care for the sick and vulnerable
in a million different ways.
Strengthen them in their calling.

God of community,
we pray for communities of faith;
may they be a source of hope for their neighbourhoods and for the world.

Help us to discern needs and work to fulfill them.
Strengthen and unify your people,
and show us how we can be the disciples you call us to be.
Return the sick to health and well-being
and relieve the suffering of those who have lost loved ones,
are unable to find meaningful employment
and fear the challenges of old age.

Guide us, God of love,
into your paths of right relationships.

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 Christ. Amen.

HYMN 86:

God, who stretched the spangled heavens,
infinite in time and place,
flung the suns in burning radiance
through the silent fields of space,
we your children, in your likeness,
share inventive powers with you.
Great Creator, still creating,
show us what we yet may do.

Proudly rise our modern cities,
stately buildings, row on row;
yet their windows, blank, unfeeling,
stare on canyoned streets below,
where the lonely drift unnoticed
in the city's ebb and flow,
lost to purpose and to meaning,
scarcely caring where they go.

We have ventured worlds undreamed of
since the childhood of our race;
known the ecstasy of winging

through untravelled realms of space;
probed the secrets of the atom,
yielding unimagined power,
facing us with life's destruction
or our most triumphant hour.

As each far horizon beckons,
may it challenge us anew,
children of creative purpose,
serving others, honouring you.
May our dreams prove rich with promise,
each endeavour, well begun.
Great Creator, give us guidance
till our goals and yours are one.

Benediction

Whatever fears and anxieties we must face:
let us walk in boldness, as beloved children of God,
walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High
walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with 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