



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

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2023

Call to Worship:

We worship in the name of the One who bids us come.  
We worship to hear the words of the One who is Love.  
We worship to sing praises of the One who teaches peace.  
Come, let us worship!

The heavens are telling the glory of God  
May our worship reflect God's glory.  
The firmament proclaims God's handiwork.  
May we see each other as the handiwork of God.  
Let our prayer and praise, our singing and proclamation project the love of God.  
As we join in worship with Christians around the world, and with Christians throughout  
time.

Prayer/Meditation:

We have heard about you, God of all power.  
You made the world out of kindness,  
creating order out of confusion;  
You made each one of us in your own image;  
Your fingerprint is on every soul.  
So we praise you.  
**We praise and worship you.**

We have heard about you, Jesus Christ:  
the carpenter who left his tools and trade;  
the poor man who made others rich;  
the healer who let himself be wounded;  
the criminal on whom the soldiers spat  
not recognising the face of God;  
the saviour who died to bring new life.  
So we praise you.  
**We praise and worship you.**

We have heard about you, Holy Spirit.  
You broke the bonds of every race and nation,  
to let God speak in every tongue;  
You made disciples drunk with grace;  
You converted souls and emptied pockets;  
You showed how love made all things new  
and opened the doors to change and freedom.

So we praise you.  
**We praise and worship you.**

Holy God, we come to worship,  
a people who would like to think that we love you  
with all our hearts and souls,  
with all our might,

but there are so many other things in our lives  
that clamor for our attention  
that we often relegate you to Sundays,  
and times when we want you to rescue us.

Most of us really do want you to be the one  
in whom we live and move and have our being.

We really do want to hear your voice  
above all of the other voices in our lives.  
But we get bogged down in the daily routine.  
We forget who we are.  
We forget who you are.  
We forget what the church is supposed to be.

So here we are, standing before you today,  
with our human weaknesses  
and our short attention spans,  
asking that you would make yourself known to us,  
that you would help us to recognize  
the presence of the Holy,  
that you would continue to challenge us,  
inspire us,  
and make us into the people we were made to be.

Lord Jesus, you have entrusted to us  
this earth as a beautiful vineyard.  
We have neglected it.  
Lord, have mercy.

Jesus Christ, you have entrusted to us  
people to care for with love.  
We have often remained indifferent to them.  
Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you have entrusted to us  
our faith as a plant to grow.  
We have cared little for it.  
Lord, have mercy.

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: Isaiah 5:1-7

HYMN 79:

This day God gives me  
strength of high heaven,  
sun and moon shining,  
flame in my hearth;  
flashing of lightning,  
wind in its swiftness,  
deeps of the ocean,  
firmness of earth.

This day God sends me  
strength to sustain me,  
might to uphold me,  
wisdom as guide.  
Your eyes are watchful,  
your ears are listening,  
your lips are speaking,  
Friend at my side.

God's way is my way,  
God's shield is round me,  
God's host defends me,  
saving from ill;  
angels of heaven,  
drive from me always  
all that would harm me,  
stand by me still.

Rising, I thank you,  
mighty and strong one,  
King of creation,  
giver of rest,  
firmly confessing  
Threeness of Persons,  
Oneness of Godhead,  
Trinity blest.

Reading: Matthew 21:33-46

Reflection:

From Isaiah 5 :

What more was there to do for  
my vineyard

that I have not done in it?  
When I expected it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?

. . . he expected justice  
but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness,  
but heard a cry!

From Matthew 21:

“Finally he sent his son to them, saying,  
‘They will respect my son.’”

We expect Christianity to be optimistic; we proclaim a message of good things for all people; the word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news’ ; we speak with joyful anticipation of a new order, the Kingdom of God, in which there is enough and more than enough for all people, where there is peace and plenty; we sometimes even compare the Kingdom to a feast or even a party to which all are invited.

But we see from our two scripture readings this morning that the reality of our world is far from that utopian kingdom. It is a world of violence and hurt; of selfishness and indifference to the sufferings of others, a world of cruelty and pain. It is a world where there are stories of hope and promise, but there are also stories of death and despair, and it is one of those dark stories we find in Isaiah and Matthew today.

There are few passages in Scripture more heartbreaking than the ones we heard. Isaiah and Matthew pull back the curtain to reveal God’s heart—and that heart is wounded. As reported by the two writers, these laments of the Creator about God’s created beings are not the words of an almighty God but of a vulnerable Creator. The cry reported by Isaiah and the simple, unemotional parable told by Jesus have a powerful impact on those of us who listen to them—they scare us and may cause us anxiety.

And they raise questions: “But isn’t everything that God created good?” “How is it possible that God expects results that never materialise? How is it that God sounds so regretful and so hurt? And how is it that God did not know ahead of time how we would ignore God’s love?”

The speaker in this “love-song” of Isaiah concerning the vineyard is not identified, and we do not know who “the beloved” is (v 1). Is Isaiah quoting an ancient hymn or is he creating a new poem? Who is the singer? Who is the beloved? The answers can only be guessed at. Scholars tell us that it is Judah that is passing judgment on herself in the Isaiah passage, but the sound of it is recognizable from other references as the cry of God. It is a repetition of other instances where God “repents” of the creatures God created. The question-and-answer format of the poet has the stamp of the creator—the one who owns the vineyard, who builds the watchtower, who digs the wine press, who waits patiently for the yielding of the grapes.

Jesus uses the Isaiah poem in his parable of the wicked tenants; he always told parables that were based on the lives of his listeners. He chose materials that were well known to these

people who worked the land . They knew about vineyards, the severely pruned stalks in off season, the encouraging sight of the ripe fruit at harvest, the joyful pressing of the grapes.

It is not only the description of the vineyard found in Isaiah that is echoed in Jesus' parable; the cry and the pain of the poem are reflected in the story, but this time with no doubt or questions. All through the ages, this same cry has been echoed by people, for example by parents. What have I done? How did the child I loved and nurtured grow into a rebel I don't recognize? How did it happen that my child has turned into an addict, into someone who is unjust and cruel, into someone I never expected when I held an innocent infant in my hands? What more could I have done? What did I fail to do? These are the cries of someone who creates and loves, and who is bitterly hurt.

In the parable of Jesus there is no doubt of who the speaker is and who the tenants are; even those who want to see Jesus arrested and silenced get the message: "they realized that he was speaking about them." And Matthew leaves no doubt in retelling the story: The landowner who planted a vineyard is God; the tenants are the people of Israel; the slaves who are repeatedly sent to the vineyard, only to be put to death, are the prophets; the son is the one speaking to them, the one whose death is approaching because his proclamation of the kingdom of God is being rejected. So the kingdom will be given to those who bear fruit, Jesus tells them, not to those whose indifference kills the prophets.

So let us look at the poem and the story—not from the perspective of the listeners of old but from our own perspective, our own lives.

Listen to the prophet speak to us: "He expected justice but saw bloodshed, righteousness, but heard a cry!" and listen to the reaction of the people who heard the parable of Jesus: "He will put those wretches (the tenants) to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

It is easy to see injustice when others are perpetrating it but we remain blind when we are the perpetrators. We see this clearly wherever there is religious violence and persecution: It is easy for us today to blame other cultures and faiths for their violence and their injustice while failing to see how our own culture and faith can cause a cry from the oppressed and the neglected of this world. It is easy to proclaim condemnation on those on the other side while totally ignoring the condemnation that we may deserve in their eyes. Both they and we continue to wound the heart of God.

Bringing them even closer to our own selves, these passages of scripture cause us to ask: What is the dream of God for me? Have I come close to fulfilling God's dream? The grapes that Isaiah mentions and the fruits of the kingdom that Jesus requires—what are they?

Justice and righteousness, Isaiah replies.

Love and compassion, Jesus proclaims.

In much of our worship over the last year or so, we have reflected on the theme of 'Walking the Way of Jesus,' exploring our own calling to be people of the way - disciples of Jesus. What does that mean for us? What is expected of us? What is it about following Jesus that sets us apart from the world - and sets us apart from the way we used to be, the thoughts we used to think, the priorities we used to have? What is different about us since we became followers of the Way? And importantly, how do our lives reflect the justice and righteousness of God, the love and compassion of Jesus?

We ask ourselves: Do I practise justice every day of my life? Do I recognize the righteousness of God that keeps me from self-righteousness? Do I remember to do mercy? Do I recognize that Jesus is speaking to me also and not to those other tenants, those “wretches” who deserve punishment?

We started this look at two lessons of the lectionary with despair and fear. Let us conclude with a passion for justice and a desire to stop wounding the heart of God. AMEN

HYMN 482:

We are not our own. Earth forms us,  
human leaves on nature's growing vine,  
fruit of many generations,  
seeds of life divine.

We are not alone. Earth names us:  
past and present, peoples near and far,  
family and friends and strangers  
show us who we are.

Through a human life God finds us;  
dying, living, love is fully known,  
and in bread and wine reminds us:  
we are not our own.

Therefore let us make thanksgiving,  
and with justice, willing and aware,  
give to earth and all things living,  
liturgies of care.

And if love's encounters lead us  
on a way uncertain and unknown,  
all the saints with prayer surround us:  
we are not alone.

Let us be a house of welcome,  
living stone upholding living stone,  
gladly showing all our neighbours  
we are not our own!

Prayer:

For those who are suffering.  
For those who are injured.  
For families that are separated.

For firefighters, police officers, emergency medical workers and all public officials.  
For those who answer the call to comfort and give aid.  
For those who provide support thru their prayers.

For those who are dying.  
For those who died while saving the lives of others.

For all who lost their lives.

For those who survived.  
For the children who have been orphaned.  
For the men and women who have lost their spouses.  
For all who mourn and those who comfort them.

For generosity of spirit.  
For hope in times of despair.  
For light in the darkness.

Gracious and Loving God,  
you are our comforter and our hope.  
Hear your people's prayers as they come before you.  
Strengthen us in this time of need.  
Inspire us to acts of charity and generosity  
and give us hope of a brighter future.  
We ask this 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 Christ. Amen.

Hymn 589:

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,  
is laid for your faith in his excellent word;  
what more can he say than to you he has said,  
to all who for refuge to Jesus have fled?.

'Fear not, I am with you, so be not dismayed;  
for I am your God and will still give you aid:  
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,  
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

'When through the deep waters I call you to go,  
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;  
for I will be with you in trouble to bless,  
and sanctify to you your deepest distress.

'When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,  
my grace all-sufficient shall be your supply;  
the flame shall not hurt you, my only design  
your dross to consume and your gold to refine.'

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose  
he will not, he cannot, desert to its foes.  
That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake

he never will leave, he will never forsake.

#### Benediction

As we journey through the ups and the downs of the coming week, let us remember that God, who has invited us into relationship, is always with us.

We go with God, as the people of God.

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