



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 19th November 2023

Call to Worship :

We open our hearts to receive God's welcome
We open our hands to greet one another.
We open our lives to God's invitation
To live in love and freedom.

In a world crying out for peace,
Where conflicts seem hardened into steel
Where war and poverty uproot families and homes,
And those seeking refuge are treated as criminals:
We seek the power of the Spirit of God,
who made the world to be one,
as we struggle for justice,
and work towards a new creation.

Prayer/Meditation:

Gathering Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Great and Glorious God, we gather to worship you.
We lift our eyes to you, in reverent awe before your majesty.
Great is the Lord our God, and greatly to be praised!

Generous and Merciful God, we come to worship you.
We lift our eyes to you, giving thanks for your compassion.
Gracious is the Lord our God, and greatly to be praised!

Welcoming and Empowering God, we worship you.
We lift our eyes to you, and we celebrate your faithfulness.
Holy is the Lord our God, and greatly to be praised!
We lift our eyes, seeking to worship and praise our God.

Lord God - we give you thanks for all your gifts to us - for daily food - for health - for each breath we take - for freedom to choose - and for the gifts of your word, your power, and your love. Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider all that you are and how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust - may we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live.... Lord hear our prayer....

Help us O God, as followers of Jesus, to multiply all that you given us, to risk spreading your word and perhaps see it misunderstood, to gamble by loving those whom others think worthy only of hate, to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us. Help us be faith filled and to desire to

increase your glory and your goodness in this world. Make us ones who share in both word and deed that which you have given to us. Lord hear our prayer....

We pray, O God, for the church here today - that it may encourage all its members to discover, develop, and use all their gifts, those of nature and those of grace... Lord hear our prayer...

We pray for those who are poor in body or in spirit... for those who are oppressed and heavy laden.... for those who are sick or in despair... Minister O God by your Spirit, and by us, to all those for whom we have prayed - and help us walk faithfully in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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: Matthew 25:14-23

HYMN 373:

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us
you are one with us, Mary's Son -
cleansing our souls from all their sin,
pouring your love and goodness in;
Jesus, our love for you we sing, living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, now and every day
teach us how to pray, Son of God.
You have commanded us to do
this, in remembrance, Lord, of you;
into our lives your power breaks through, living Lord

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us,
born as one of us, Mary's Son -
led out to die on Calvary,
risen from death to set us free;
living Lord Jesus, help us see - you are Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, we would come to you,
live our lives for you, Son of God;
all your commands we know are true,
your many gifts will make us new;
into our lives your power breaks through, living Lord.

Reading: Matthew 25:24-30

Reflection:

The story says that the man gave a huge amount of money to his three slaves. Fortunately for the first two slaves, they manage to double the master's investment and the third slave managed to keep the master's initial investment intact but couldn't quite manage to earn any interest at all. And he is punished, while his more financially astute colleagues are rewarded

When we read read Jesus' stories about masters and slaves or kings and subjects, we almost instinctively assume that it is God who is represented by the authority figure, and we who are the slaves or subjects. But that cannot be true here. If this were all about God, then why in the world would anybody love God? Who could love such a cruel master? But more importantly, if this cruel master is God, then Jesus is describing a god that cannot be compared to the God Jesus himself calls 'my father'.

This parable was written in its current form by the author of the Gospel according to Matthew somewhere between 50 and 70 years after the life of Jesus of Nazareth, The writer of the Gospel according to Matthew wrote it for an audience that was trying to figure out how Christians should live while they were waiting for Jesus to return. They wanted to know how they should behave and what they should be doing. So rather than looking at this story as a parallel between the master and God, it would be more appropriate to see this parable as a story about what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus the Christ. This story is meant to teach the struggling Christian community how to live out their discipleship. It's not about developing our talents or making the best of what we have been given! This story is about something much more important to a struggling church. For the struggles of the Christian churches in the first century were far more dangerous than worries about how to be the church in the 21st century. Worries about budgets, or the maintenance of buildings, or declining attendance at worship - all this pales in comparison with the struggles of a Christian community that gathered together at the risk of their very lives.

This parable is about what we are prepared to risk for the sake of the Gospel. This parable is about the perils of living in fear and this parable asks the question, "What will you risk for the sake of the Gospel?"

What are we prepared to risk? The first two slaves took what they received, invested it all, and doubled the amount. They risked it all. The third slave took what he received and buried it in fear. He didn't risk anything..

This parable tells us just how the world works, and it is just as true now as it was then. "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

You don't have to look very far to see the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. It happens here at home in the first world where we have built an entire economic system that guarantees that the rich will continue to get richer just as the poor continue to get poorer and it happens in the developing world where the poor continue to get poor while the rich prosper at the expense of those who are dying of disease, who have nothing to eat, and no hope of escaping the outer darkness of their poverty, despite their weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

We all know full well that millions and millions are suffering and dying and yet to protect ourselves we bury what has been given to us, because we are afraid of being punished by the wicked master who will surely banish us into the darkness if we do not keep safe what we have been given. We dare not risk losing anything at all, lest we end up in the outer darkness weeping and gnashing our teeth.

So, for the most part we play it safe and we don't take any risks. If we were to compare that wicked master with someone or something, we would not say God. We can be sure that the wicked master is *not* God.

In the storyteller Matthew's day, the wicked master could be Satan himself; who else could be so cruel?

But these days there are a plenty of wicked masters. The wicked slave-master that is the god of financial security. We all know the rules: we're supposed to work hard, buy lots of stuff, and somehow manage to save a fortune so that we can retire and live to spend some more. So, we live in fear of not, earning enough, not having enough stuff, not saving enough and ending our days in meagre subsistence.

Or what about that wicked master that afflicts so many by insisting they fit the mould, so they live in fear of not looking attractive, young and slim.

Or what about that wicked master that keeps telling us that unless we are very, very careful everything could easily go wrong for us, so we spend our lives worrying about maintaining the status quo and we never ever take a risk, because we know that the only way to keep things on an even keel is to play it safe.

But in Christ we are free! We're no longer slaves, so we don't have to worry about those wicked task-masters. We can defy them! There's no need to protect what we have been given because it is *ours*, given to us by God's grace.

God is bigger than our fear of loss. The gifts of God are abundant and unlimited, and we need not bury them or hide them away to protect or preserve them.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made; the stuff of the universe, tracing our origin back to the dust of the stars. We need not rely on the gifts of cruel masters; we have the gifts of God, gifts that are ours and don't need to be hoarded or protected, for they are ours for ever; gifts love love, kindness, companionship, justice and truth. Everything else we can risk. We can risk failure, rejection, loss of popularity or possessions - all that the world gives. We can bury our worldly achievement in the sand to protect ourselves, or we can look around us catch the vision of God's Spirit who lives and breathes in, with, through and beyond us - and take the risk of daring to be all that we are created to be.

HYMN 613:

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
in living echoes of thy tone;
as thou hast sought, so let me seek
thy straying children, lost and lone.

O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
the wandering and the wavering feet;
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
thy hungering ones with manna sweet.

O strengthen me, that while I stand
firm on the rock and strong in thee
I may stretch out a loving hand
to wrestlers with the troubled sea.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach

the precious things thou dost impart;
and wing my words that they may reach
the hidden depths of many a heart.

O use me, Lord, use even me,
just as thou wilt, and when, and where,
until thy blessed face I see,
thy rest, thy joy, thy glory share.

Prayer:

God of wonder and mystery,
God of the stars and the universe,
God of winding ways and straight paths,
we gather today with gratitude
for the gift of your constant presence,
your trustworthy guidance,
and your daring risk-taking with us.
You dare to love us despite our inability to respond fully.
You dare to care for us, despite our challenge in caring for others.
You dare to walk with us, despite our fickleness.

On our own journeys
toward the stars and guiding points you put before us,
you continue to lead us forward,
guiding us by the teachings of Jesus
to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in your loving shadow.

As we struggle with the political wrangling of this world,
the wars waged for both justice and greed,
the violence committed daily against the innocent,
let alone the pain of broken relationships and loss,
you remain steadfast in your care and devotion
for your entire creation throughout the universe.
It is almost too much to take in sometimes.
And even in our doubts and disbelief,
our struggle to understand and constant misunderstanding,
and our flat-out ignorance about your ways,
you remain constantly present to us.

We pray for those suffering the effects of natural disaster: earthquake, flood, storm and fire.

We pray for the people of the poorest places:
without food,
without water,
without shelter,
without hope.

We pray for the regions of our world caught up in violence and threats of violence:

for Israel and Palestine,
for Ukraine and the whole of Eastern Europe,
for all the unstable, violent and corrupt places,
and for people who struggle for peace and justice throughout the world

We pray for those who live with serious illness,
those with chronic pain,
those without access to proper medical care,
those for whom treatment is no longer an option

We pray for peace in this world, Lord,
the kind of peace in which we celebrate diversity,
are joyfully challenged by adversity,
and share in the joy that is to be found everywhere.

We pray for those who are lonely,
that you might lead us to reach out and be friends.

We pray for those who are hungry,
that you might lead us to offer sustenance.

We pray for those who are lost,
that you might lead us to give hope and direction.

We pray for all the nations of the world,
that we might find a way to work together to lift one another up.
We pray for our leaders in our nation and around the world,
that your Spirit might guide them
to set an example for our us and all nations
to work together rather than against one another.

And we pray for ourselves,
that we might continue on this journey,
learning the lessons you offer,
seeking the fullness of your perfection,
and live as you would have us live.

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 642:

We utter our cry: that peace may prevail!
that earth will survive and faith must not fail.
We pray with our life for the world in our care,
for people diminished by doubt and despair.

We cry from the fright of our daily scene
for strength to say 'No' to all that is mean:
designs bearing chaos, extinction of life,
all energy wasted on weapons of death.

We lift up our hearts for children unborn:
give wisdom, O God, that we may hand on,
replenished and tended, this good planet earth,
preserving the future and wonder of birth.

Creator of life, come, share out, we pray,
your Spirit on earth, revealing the Way
to leaders conferring round tables for peace;
that they may from bias and guile be released.

Come with us, Lord-Love, in protest and march,
and help us to fire with passion your Church,
to match all our statements and lofty resolve
with fervent commitment in action involved.

Whatever the ill or pressure we face,
Lord, hearten and heal, give insight and grace
to think and make peace with each heartbeat and breath
choose Christ before Caesar and life before death!

Benediction

Let us live in peace; loving and caring for one another in Christ's name, and may we be blessed with every gift needful for God's work, may the Spirit grant us the willingness to risk ourselves completely for the sake of the gospel, and may the love and the compassion and the hope and the faith of Jesus dwell richly within us till the time of the coming of his kingdom.

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