



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

Sunday 5th November 2023

Hello again. Welcome to worship for Sunday 5th November 2023. Our worship today includes the sacrament of Holy Communion, and you are as usual warmly invited to participate. Please provide yourself with a small piece of bread and a little wine, or some fruit juice and a cracker, or anything that can symbolise for you the body and blood of Jesus.

Call to Worship:

Praise be to the Lord,
for God has heard my cry for mercy.
The Lord is my strength and my shield:
my heart trusts in the Lord, and I am helped.
My heart leaps for joy
and I will give thanks to God in song.

Prayer/Meditation:

We come to worship today to praise God for the wonder of all creation. Yet sometimes when we come to understand the mechanics of the universe, when we know about the laws of physics and when we hear the theories of modern cosmology, when we think about Big Bang and Evolution, when we are familiar with the fossil history of the planet and can trace the evolution of the human family... when we know all these things does the wonder go out of it for us? Do we doubt the reality of the divine? Do we wonder if there is any place for God in the real world?

We come to worship today to offer our prayers to God. Yet we can see by the nature of the world around us that our prayer seems to have no influence over events, that the power of coincidence seems as potent as prayer, that God is not manipulating people and events to suit our bidding, that the situations for which we pray often get worse instead of better, that the peace and reconciliation for which we pray seem less and less likely as time passes, that when we *do* get what we pray for it is through our own efforts, the co-operation of others, or lucky chance. So what value is our prayer? Does God ever intervene? Is there any place for prayer in the real world?

We come to worship today to know the comfort and strength of God's love. Yet sometimes we wonder if God truly loves a world filled with so much hatred and conflict where so many suffer in order to provide comfort and prosperity for the few, where people are constantly killing one another, where the first priority for most people is themselves. So does our conscience allow us to give thanks for God's love when so many millions live lives that are bleak and loveless? Is God's love for some and not others?

We come to worship today full of questions about the world, about God, about ourselves; we come, not to find all the answers, not to gain certainty and understanding of everything in all

the universe, but to ask, to seek, to explore, to develop our faith so that the nature of God and the ways of the world might become a little clearer to us, and so that we might find our calling - that we might discover what it is that we can do to overcome the evil and cruelty in the world and make it a better place, not for ourselves but for all people. In the quiet of this time of reflective worship, let us listen for the word of God and if we do not hear it go on listening - and if we *do* hear it work to transform ourselves and our church and our world that we may truly be part of God's kingdom.

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: Micah 3:5-12

Hymn 35:

God is unique and one
Father, Sustainer, Lord!
Patterns of life were spun
by his creative Word.
Of his intention, love and care
we are with growing trust aware.

Love came to earth in Christ,
our common life to share;
choosing to be the least,
willing a cross to bear.
He died, he rose, that we might live
and all our love, responding, give.

The Holy Spirit moves
people to trace God's plan;
such inspiration proves
more than the mind can span.
Each listening heart is led to find
the will of God for humankind.

He shall for ever reign,
ruler of time and space;
God in the midst of life,
seen in the human face.
We give expression to our creed
by love in thought, in word and deed.

Reading: Matthew 23:1-12

Reflection:

“Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.’”

Or, in the more familiar version of this, “Practice what you preach”.

What you say must be reflected in what you do. Otherwise, you have to fall back on that other old saying, the desperate refuge of angry frustrated parents everywhere: “Do as I say, not as I do.”

The New Testament often portrays the Scribes and the Pharisees as the villains of the piece. We read the gospels and may come away with the impression that Judaism in the first century was thoroughly corrupt and that it was the Pharisees in particular who were ultimately responsible for Jesus’ arrest and execution. In the verses following the ones we read from Matthew’s gospel this morning, Jesus pronounces a series of criticisms - we might even describe them as curses - against the Pharisees. Each begins with the words ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites’, and goes on to outline some aspect of organised religion that is evil or ungodly. He accuses the Pharisees of preventing people from entering the Kingdom of God; of making converts and corrupting them; of emphasising details of the law while neglecting justice, mercy and peace; of presenting a righteous face to the world while being inwardly sinful; and so on and so on. In every curse the Pharisees are represented as saying one thing and doing another. They don’t practise what they preach.

All this might lead us to think that Jesus was somehow disenchanted with the Jewish faith in which he had been born and brought up. Indeed it’s not uncommon to hear Christian preachers suggesting that very thing, that Jesus found the faith of his people to be empty and redundant, and that he presented them with a new kind of faith - ultimately to become the Christian Church - which avoided all the pitfalls of hypocrisy into which his people had fallen.

But when we review the whole of Jesus’ life and teaching, we find that, rather than being critical of the Jewish faith as such, he was a faithful member of it; someone who apparently worshipped regularly in the synagogue, who took part in the worship there, and who, as a child, was reported to have described the Temple as ‘my Father’s house’. None of these the actions of someone who was disillusioned with the faith, you wouldn’t think. And of course there are the telling words that Jesus speaks in Matthew’s gospel just before he begins his long tirade against the Pharisees, ‘the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore do whatever they teach and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach.’ Jesus complaint was not against the Jewish faith, but against the way it was being taught and represented by people who failed to practise what they preached. His words might be seen as a warning to anyone involved in organised religion to be careful that the rites and rituals, the traditions and the doctrines, do not overshadow the most basic elements of faith.

It is an easy trap to fall into, as the prophet Micah suggests when he talking about prophets whose words change according to their circumstances. It is easy for them to preach peace when they are safe and well-fed, but whose peace extends only to those who are strong and secure. Those same prophets who preach peace to the powerful declare war on the weak and vulnerable. Their peace is not real, their preaching is not practised. They are not real prophets, says Micah, and they will be disgraced and brought down.

Jesus’ words of criticism to the Pharisees must inevitably bring to mind the preaching and practice of the Christian Church today, and the practice of every Christian believer. We can ask

ourselves the same questions that Jesus raises with the Pharisees. How important to us is the right way of doing things? How upset do we become when the normal pattern of our worship is disrupted, or some part of the ritual is seen to be conducted wrongly or inappropriately? How closely do the words of our prayer in church match our daily living? What are our priorities in worship and what are our priorities in life - and are they the same?

Those are difficult questions to answer, because it is sometimes not so easy for us to translate the words we hear in church into the very down-to-earth business of relating to people every day. The classic example is the thorny question of what to do when you are approached on the street by a homeless person asking for money. The advice of Jesus in the gospel is quite clear about it. If you are asked for anything then you should give it, without thought of reward or return, without asking questions, without hesitation. You should give *more* than you are asked for. You should be generous and gracious in your giving.

We know that, but how many of us practise it? There are all sorts of complicating factors. Should we give money to someone we suspect will use it to damage themselves in some way? Should we lay ourselves open to be a target for all kinds of beggars when our generosity becomes known? How, in circumstances like that, do we practise what we preach?

Or another difficult problem. In our worship every week we give thanks to God for all that we enjoy, and many of us feel more than a little guilty about it. How can we be constantly giving thanks for what we have when we know that there are so many others in the world who have nothing? Where's the justice? Are we not worryingly close to the Pharisees whom Jesus curses when we say, in effect, thank you, God for making us like we are and not like those others?

These, and many other moral and ethical dilemmas, are without easy answers, perhaps without answers at all, and it perhaps all we can hope for that Jesus, in criticising the organised religion of his day, highlights the pitfalls of organised religion in our day. And it may be that his words to us would be the same as his words about the Pharisees: 'they sit on the seat of Moses, therefore listen to their teaching; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach.'

Like the Pharisees, we know right from wrong. We know, or we believe we know, that God calls us to justice and peace as individuals, as a church, and indeed as the human family. But we know too, and we confess, that there are many times when it seems too hard for us to live by the words we believe. So let us not make matters worse by concentrating on the doctrines and details of organised religion, but rather strive to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

HYMN 447:

I come with joy to meet my Lord,
forgiven, loved, and free,
in awe and wonder to recall
his life laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near
to find, as all are fed,
the new community of love
in Christ's communion bread.

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share
each proud division ends.
The love that made us, makes us one,
and strangers now are friends.

And thus with joy we meet our Lord,
his presence, always near,
is in such friendship better known:
we see, and praise him here.

Together met, together bound,
we'll go our different ways,
and as his people in the world
we'll live and speak his praise.

Communion:

In our homes, apart yet together, we gather at this table...
where bread and cup are transformed by the Spirit of God
into a meal of love and grace;
a supper of visions and dreams,
a table where all people are welcome.

Before the earth was formed, the Spirit of God swirled through the voids and shadows. As
humans were created, the breath of God filled the lungs of Adam and the soul of Eve.

On this day of Pentecost,
when we celebrate the breath of the Spirit coming upon the disciples, we invite the Spirit to
come upon these elements of bread and cup, and upon us, God's children, and we give our
thanks in singing praises with the saints and disciples of before, saying with them:

**Holy, holy, holy,
Lord, God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are filled with your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.**

**Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna to God in the highest.**

God of winds, pour out your Spirit to make this time come alive for us.
Make this symbolic meal awaken our sleepy hearts and stagnant souls.

May this time of eating and drinking be one
where we stir from our sadness and anxiety
and rise from our hopelessness.

May we begin to celebrate visions and animate the dreams
that have only been alive in our minds.

As we share this meal, let us remember our Lord Jesus Christ
that on the night that he was betrayed he had supper with his friends.

It was a solemn time around the table.
Breaking bread.

Drinking from the cup.
Jesus asking to remember him in our eating and drinking.

There was a time to mourn followed by a time to dance.

After the day of Resurrection,
the disciples ate on the beach with the risen Christ
Celebrating new life, new hope, new vitality.
And on this Pentecost, as we come to the table,
let us celebrate the Spirit of Resurrection
and the promise of fullness and depth in our own lives.

Gracious God pour out your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon these gifts of bread and wine,
that the bread we break and the cup we bless
may be the communion of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

By your Spirit unite us with the living Christ
that we may be his body of in the world. Amen.

The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ ...

Take and eat. This is the body of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

The cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ ...

This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

Prayer:

Spirit of God, who fed the multitudes,
provided the manna in the wilderness,
and blessed the bread and cup today,
we give great thanks for the meal eaten
and the grace so freely offered.

Inspire us as we move forward this day
and encourage us to transform our dreams into reality.

Spirit of Love, you pour out your life into young and old,
we pray for all those who are vulnerable, marginalised,
and abused because of their age.

May your love inspire our love in our community
so that all are included.

Spirit of joy, you pour our your energy into the poor and
oppressed,

we pray for all those who are exploited, downtrodden,
and made slaves because of our economy.

May your joy of freedom drive our work for justice
so that all are liberated

Spirit of peace, you pour out your comfort into all who

are in conflict,
we pray for all those who are caught up in war, violence
and estranged because of hostility.

May your peace lead us towards reconciliation,
so that all are living in unity.

Spirit of healing and reconciliation, pour out your grace upon all who suffer sickness and stress,
we pray for those who are alone, those who are in pain,
those who are confused, those who are uncertain of their future.

Spirit of God, be upon us and all people, now and always. 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:

May God's breath fill us.
May God's breath renew us.
May God's breath invigorate us.

That we may walk with confidence into the coming days.

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