



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

Sunday 10th December 2023

Call to Worship:

Among the poor and the proud, the persecuted and the privileged,
Christ is coming to make all things new.
In the private house and the market place, in the wedding feast and the judgement hall,
Christ is coming to make all things new.
With a gentle touch, with an angry word; with a conscience clear, with a burning love,
Christ is coming to make all things new.
That the kingdom might come and the world might believe; that the powerful might stumble and
the humble be raised,
Christ is coming to make all things new.
Within us, without us, among us, before us, in this place, in every place, for this time and for all
time,
Christ is coming to make all things new.

Into the dark places of the world where people are frightened and hungry
God bring light, bring love, bring peace.
Into places where people are fighting; into places where people have no homes
God bring light, bring love, bring peace.
Into the places where we feel unsafe; into situations that hurt us and scare us
God bring light, bring love, bring peace.

Prayer/Meditation:

Our time of waiting and preparation continues today as we gather again for Advent worship. We hear in the streets and in the shops the sounds of Christmas, the music of carols, the blaring of past Christmas hit songs; we see all around us the signs of festivity, the lights, the decorations, the advertisements - everything that anticipates the coming holiday season and forces us to take part.

But in our worship we look for other signs, signs of God, signs of wonder, signs of peace on earth; we look for the word of God in the Bible and, as we hear again words and stories that have become familiar to us, so we pray for fresh insights and new understanding that this season may not be for us a repetition of the worship and celebration of Christmases past, but may have fresh significance and new shades of meaning.

May our hearts be quieted, our minds be peaceful, our spirits open to the word of God as we wait; and may our worship this day bring us a step closer to the anticipated joy of receiving Jesus.

And as we wait, we admit that our thoughts are not fully concentrated on our worship, nor our anticipation completely focussed on the celebration of Christ's birth. There are so many other concerns at this time of year: gifts, invitations, plans for visits, meals and parties, concerts, food, television - all things which contribute to our enjoyment of the holiday and the celebration of Christmas, but which can so easily overshadow the simple story of Jesus' birth.

We need forgiveness for being so easily distracted, for getting our priorities all wrong and putting our enjoyment of a holiday above our commitment to worship and service. So may this time of waiting and preparation be also a time of renewing faith, of putting the important things first, of receiving and accepting the limitless grace and forgiveness of God, knowing that Christ is coming not for us alone, but for the whole world.

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: Isaiah 40:1-11

Hymn: 685:

Through all the changing scenes of life,
in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still
my heart and tongue employ.

Of his deliverance I will boast,
till all that are distressed
from mine example comfort take,
and soothe their griefs to rest.

O magnify the Lord with me,
with me exalt his name;
when in distress to him I called,
he to my rescue came.

The hosts of God encamp around
the dwellings of the just;
deliverance he affords to all
who on his succour trust.

O make but trial of his love:
experience will decide
how blest are they, and only they,
who in his truth confide.

Fear him, ye saints, and you will then
have nothing else to fear;
make you his service your delight,
your wants shall be his care.

Reading: Mark 1:1-8

Reflection:

In the church in which I was brought up, the second Sunday of Advent was celebrated as 'Bible Sunday'. Nowadays, it seems, many denominations have a Bible Sunday in October, and some in January, but Advent does seem an appropriate time to reflect on the scriptures, because in these few weeks of Advent, we turn to the Bible to hear again the nativity story with its cast of familiar characters.

Every Sunday our worship in church begins in the same way. A Bible is brought in and we all stand up.

The reason we stand, of course, is our respect for the Word of God in the Bible.

That of course is right and proper, but it can also be dangerous. We are not here to worship the Bible. We do not want to fall into the idolatry of worshipping a book instead of the God that is revealed through it.

We probably know people who have fallen into that trap; indeed we have probably fallen into it ourselves sometimes. The most obvious symptom of Bible-idolatry is the phrase 'but the Bible says', as if every word in the Bible is indeed the Word of God. It comes naturally to us, if we're not careful, to fall back on 'but the Bible says' as our defence in any argument - for example about ethics and morals. But when we look more closely at what the Bible says, we very quickly realise that this argument can't be defended in any logical way.

For example, we say you shouldn't steal, because the Bible says so in the Ten Commandments. What, then, are we to make of the incident in Exodus chapter twelve, where God colludes with the Israelites in the theft of all the Egyptians' most valuable possessions. The Bible says you shouldn't lie - 'thou shalt not bear false witness' - yet Moses was apparently happy to tell barefaced lies to Pharaoh in order to escape from Egypt. The Bible says that God encourages violence; the Bible says that the punishment for blasphemy should be death by stoning; the Bible says that if you injure someone then a similar injury should be inflicted on you; the Bible says that those who kill the children of God's enemies will receive blessings; the Bible says that women shouldn't be allowed to speak in church. So - when we say 'the Bible says' or even when we sing 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so', we should be aware of all the other things the Bible tells us as well, and perhaps begin to think of a different way of approaching this holy book.

It is this literal view of scripture as the very word of God, accurate in every detail, that often drives people to the opposite extreme. The questions they ask are: 'How can a collection of books, the most recent of which is nearly two thousand years old, have anything relevant to say to us today? Were these books not written to try to explain things which today are perfectly understandable as part of the natural world in which we live?

Many people today say that they just cannot believe something that they can't relate to with their minds as well as their hearts. If Christianity means believing the impossible, then they just can't accept it. It's probably this approach to the Bible that is the reason for the decline in church membership in recent years. More and more people are finding it harder and harder to accept the things they read in scripture and therefore have no interest in the Church.

So we come to looking for another way of reading the Bible that doesn't ask us to believe the impossible yet still acknowledges its importance and indeed its holiness. One thing we have to avoid is what one Bible scholar calls 'caf  Christianity', that is looking through the Bible as if it was a menu, and snacking on the bits we like while ignoring the bits we don't. That would be bordering on the dishonest, and would do nothing to help those who have been driven from the church.

Sometimes we look at the Bible the wrong way round. And we might discover that if we looked at it from a different angle - if we reversed some of the causes and effects - we would arrive at a Bible that was both holy and understandable in today's world. Let's look at a passage of scripture in more detail to see what we mean.

In mark chapter One, we read of John the Baptist proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. He began by appearing out of the desert quoting from the prophet Isaiah 'make a straight path for the Lord.' What is interesting is where this John the Baptist came from and who he was, and why he thought the people should listen to his words. The gospel has given us some clues to persuade us that John is worth listening to.

John says he is the messenger who has come to prepare the way for the Lord. This is a quotation from Malachi the prophet, who, incidentally, was not a person at all. The word Malachi is hebrew for 'messenger'. Then we're told that he lived in the desert, wore camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. If we were to search the Old Testament for a similar character we would discover in I Kings that Elijah also came out of the wilderness wearing hairy clothing and with a leather belt.

It becomes possible to understand that the story of John the Baptist was written to point to Elijah. When we remember that that connection would be obvious to the people Mark was writing for, we can perhaps see that he was trying to make the point that John the Baptist knew what he was talking about because he was a prophet like Elijah. So it wasn't that Mark wrote a factual account of John the Baptist and then realised that it was a fulfillment of the prophet Malachi with an uncanny resemblance to Elijah, but rather that Mark had Malachi and Elijah in mind the whole time, and wrote his story with the purpose of emphasising how important John's words were.

The Christmas story, and indeed the whole of the New Testament, is full of those pointers to the past which the evangelists employed to prove to their readers the truth of what they were writing, and we'll no doubt be looking at some of those signs over the next few Sundays. And as we do so, we may remember that the nativity stories about shepherds, angels, wise men, a cruel king and a newborn child who is God incarnate, are all *signs* rather than factual accounts. And by looking at the Bible in this way, we'll see that, far from being a book of fantasy that has no relevance, nor one that asks us to accept the impossible, it is an account of God's relationship that helps us come closer to the truth of Immanuel - God with us.

HYMN 319:

Thanks to God whose Word was spoken
in the deed that made the earth.
His the voice that called a nation,
his the fires that tried her worth.
God has spoken: God has spoken:
praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose Word incarnate
human flesh has glorified,
who by life and death and rising
grace abundant has Supplied.
God has spoken: God has spoken:
praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose word was written

in the Bible's sacred page,
record of the revelation
showing God to every age.
God has spoken: God has spoken:
praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose word is published
in the tongues of every race,
see its glory undiminished
by the change of time or place.
God has spoken: God has spoken:
praise him for his open word.

Thanks to God whose word is answered
by the Spirit's voice within.
Here we drink of joy unmeasured,
life redeemed from death and sin.
God is speaking: God is speaking:
praise him for his open word.

Prayer:

Loving God, at this time of waiting and expectation, we pray for others who wait. We think of those who wait for justice, those who live in lands where the people are oppressed, where there is no opportunity to speak out without fear of pain of death, where there is sickness and poverty and little hope of improvement. Give to them the hope that they do not wait in vain, but that their cries will be heard.

We think of those who wait for healing, whose lives have been marred by suffering and disease, who have been disabled by old age and frailty, whose lives have been stricken by debilitating illnesses and who long for comfort and strength. Give to them the hope that they do not wait in vain, but that their cries will be heard.

We think of those who wait for a sign. Young people uncertain of the direction their future will take, faced with career decisions that must be taken without full knowledge of the options before them; those unhappy at work who need a change but don't know where to turn; those who have no work to do. Give to them the hope that they do not wait in vain, but that their cries will be heard.

We think of those who wait for peace of mind. Those who have become depressed by the burdens of worry they carry, who can see no way forward that will bring them an untroubled life, who believe that the difficulties of life are intolerable. Give to them the hope that they do not wait in vain, but that their cries will be heard.

We think of those who wait for understanding, who are confused about the meaning of life, or believe it has no meaning; who study the scriptures searching for new light to dawn; who cast around among religions faiths and philosophies looking for an explanation of the world and its mysteries. Give to them the hope that they do not wait in vain, but that their cries will be heard.

And we think of ourselves and Christians throughout the world who wait to celebrate the birth of Christ. Fulfil our expectation and hear our prayers which we offer in the name of the one who came to be a light to all the world, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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

Hear our prayers. loving God, which we offer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn: 624:

Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation,
Spirit of life, by whom all things are made,
through the thick darkness covering every nation,
light to our blindness, come now to our aid!
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done

Rulers and peoples, still we stand divided,
and, sharing not our griefs, no joy can share;
by wars and tumults Love is mocked, derided,
his conquering cross no kingdom wills to bear:
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

Envious of heart, blind-eyed, with tongues confounded
nation by nation still goes unforgiven;
in wrath and fear, by jealousies surrounded,
building proud towers which shall not reach to heaven
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

Lust of possession causes desolations;
and meekness has no honour in the earth.
Led by no star, the rulers of the nations
still fail to bring us to the blissful birth:
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

How shall we love you, holy, hidden Being,
unless we love the world which you have made?
O , give us surer love, for better seeing
your Word made flesh and in a manger laid:
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

Benediction:

Let us go from here with confidence and hope.
Strengthening those who are tired and exhausted;
comforting those who are anxious and fearful.
Saying to them all:
“Be strong, and do not fear!
For God is coming—
Indeed, God is already here!

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.