



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

Sunday 17th December 2023

## Call to Worship:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us!  
God has anointed us to bring good news to the poor,  
To proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free.  
Let us worship the God of justice and peace!

## Prayer/Meditation: Creator God,

This is the day that you have made!  
This is the day you have called Holy:  
Sabbath day, a rest day, a time-out,  
out of the world and into the presence of God: a day for rejoicing.

Make us glad this day as we worship.  
Remove from us our distractions, our heart-worries,  
our to-dos and should-haves and all the constant stress & strain.  
And in its place, O God, give us more of you.  
Here at worship, our hearts are filled with peace  
our mouths with laughter,  
our tongues with shouts of joy.

Fill us to brimming and overflowing with the joy of the Lord:  
We are glad, yes, we are glad indeed,  
to be offering our praise this day!

Lord, we wait with eager expectation for the coming of your kingdom  
when the humble will be exalted and the hungry fed.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we prepare for your advent with searching minds and contrite hearts,  
trusting in your healing spirit and redemptive love.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we watch with those who wait and weep,  
longing to see the rule of justice and the reign of peace.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we seek You among the despised and rejected,

knowing that there we will find your light shining in the dark.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we proclaim sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed,  
trusting in your tender mercy and passion for justice.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we work with others to proclaim your truth,  
challenging the mighty and raising the meek.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we wrestle with our hopes and our fears, our struggles and our joys  
labouring with creation to come to new birth.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

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 61:1-4

Hymn: 138:

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.  
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;  
dear Desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver; born a child, and yet a King;  
born to reign in us for ever; now thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;  
by thine all-sufficient merit raise us to thy glorious throne.

Reading: John 1: 19-28

Reflection:

John the Baptist, the Gospel tells us, was travelling around baptizing people. This was a departure from traditional Jewish practice, and that—and the fact that he was drawing crowds of people—attracted lots of attention: people were interested, and the authorities were interested. Also the people were looking for someone—Jewish tradition promised the arrival of a messiah. Life under Roman rule was difficult, unless you were a Roman citizen, so the people of Israel and Judea were hoping for a messiah to rescue them, to drive out the Romans.

With these high expectations, they questioned John: are you the messiah? But John said, no, he was not. There was another coming, he said, for whom he was only preparing the way. He speaks of Jesus, the one to come.

John was baptizing people and calling them to repentance and forgiveness, to a new relationship with God. Jesus did so, too, calling his followers to a new life in the Spirit. In

using the words of Isaiah, Jesus harkens back to his own ancient tradition of caring, and sets out the heart of the Christian calling: to care for the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the outcast, the marginalized; to bring release to the captives; to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Just a few weeks ago, on the last Sunday of the church year, we heard the parable of the sheep and the goats from the Gospel of Matthew. This parable speaks of those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison—and those who do not. This is exactly in line with what we heard today from Isaiah—and again, with the words Jesus chose to introduce his public ministry. And we hear this message repeated again and again in Jesus' words and actions: care for the poor and the sick, strive for justice, and bring hope to the outcast and release to the captives.

We are now, of course, in the season of Advent, part of the church year, the season of waiting. In the northern hemisphere, people wait as the days become shorter. As the darkness grows, we—like our ancient ancestors—await the turning of the seasons and the return of long hours of daylight, the return of the sun and the warmth.

As Christians, we also wait. We await the birth of the Holy Child, the return of the Son, the Light of the World—just as John waited in his time for the coming of the Messiah. Our earthly waiting mirrors our spiritual waiting.

So we have this paradox set before us, between waiting and action, for we are called to both. Even in this time of quiet, of waiting, of anticipation, the world is also waiting for us. Just as John carried out his ministry while he waited for Jesus, we must remember that waiting does not preclude action. Often we think that we must either be contemplative, as in this contemplative season, or active, busy, doing. Yet we surely need both. Waiting, and doing.

In this paradox, perhaps, is the greatest lesson of Advent, and the greatest challenge. In the northern hemisphere, this is the time of year that the natural world slows down. The light wanes, the days grow shorter, animals and plants hibernate and wait for spring. We are invited to slow down as well. Our bodies want to slow down, to sleep more. And in the old days, this was the time to mend the fishing nets and farm tools, the time for sewing and telling stories around the fire, for going to bed early. Life slowed down. It was part of the natural cycle. But with all our modern conveniences, we pay little heed to the rhythms of nature—and besides, it's holiday season and there's too much to do!

So one side of Advent is to learn how to slow down, how to enter into this more measured time of year, to enter into the waiting and the quiet contemplation. It's a time to stop and rest, and breathe, and prepare.

And yet, and yet we know that even in the midst of what is to be a more unhurried time, the world still cries out in need, still groans in agony. The hungry still need food, the naked still need clothing, the sick and imprisoned need our attention, the poor and the downtrodden need justice. That is the heart of our call, and the heart of this season.

We may feel worn out by the needs of the world crying out from every corner of the globe: poverty, war, famine, genocide, disaster, homelessness, greed, and injustice. And this past year has been devastating, with floods and hurricanes and earthquakes and wildfires and war and violence. All over the world, including in our own country, children and adults go to bed hungry, some not knowing if they will survive the night .

How do we begin to meet these overwhelming needs? Since we are not God, we cannot fix everything. We can only do what we are called to do by the Spirit. And to understand that, we need Advent and other times of quiet contemplation where we can go deep inside and hear the whisperings of the Spirit as it calls us to our own individual and communal work in the world. Advent serves as a reminder of this need to take time out from the usual clamour of our lives.

Just as spring bulbs do not blossom without a waiting period in the dark soil, so we do not bloom and flourish without times of quiet and rest. The season of Advent is one of those times, a time of dark and quiet and preparation. We must advantage of this gift of time—not letting all our time in the next couple of weeks be totally caught up in the frantic holiday craziness. Find some time to reflect on John's call to repentance—which is not just about sin and forgiveness, but about turning around, turning back to God. In that process of turning around, if we are willing to listen, we may hear more clearly the promptings of the Spirit deep in the quietness of our heart, and receive a clearer vision of how we are called to live out the words of the prophet Isaiah to bring freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, and good news to the poor. And may the Advent season help we find that essential balance between being and doing, between action and contemplation, so that one may inform and nourish the other.

HYMN 129:

The race that long in darkness pined  
have seen a glorious light;  
the people dwell in day, who dwelt  
in death's surrounding night.

To hail thee, Sun of Righteousness,  
the gathering nations come,  
rejoicing as when reapers bear  
their harvest treasures home.

To us a child of hope is born,  
to us a Son is given;  
him shall the tribes of earth obey,  
him all the hosts of heaven.

His name shall be the Prince of Peace,  
for evermore adored,  
the Wonderful, the Counsellor,  
the great and mighty Lord.

His power increasing still shall spread,  
his reign no end shall know;  
justice shall guard his throne above,  
and peace abound below.

Prayer:

Compassionate God , we bring to you those dear to us -  
Some who will be travelling this Christmas  
Some who cannot be with us this year or at all

Some who are facing difficulties this Christmas.  
We thank you for all those who have lit up -who still light up- our lives with joy.  
And as we approach Christmas  
We pray that we may know in our hearts and in our minds  
That we are all held together now and for eternity  
In Your love.  
Our eyes and hearts and minds fixed on the vision You have given us of Your Kingdom.  
We wait, O God, for Your coming  
In poverty and childbirth, amid the straw and the tinsel  
And we dare to hope and long for a world  
Where wars cease  
Where people are free from the fear of terrorism  
Where all children go to school  
Where all people have healthcare  
Where the hungry are fed  
Where the homeless are housed  
And the unloved know of your love.  
And so we pray again with all our hearts - Your Kingdom Come!  
Strengthen all those who work to bring in  
Your reign of peace and justice and love  
Comfort those who suffer in body, mind or soul  
Fill us with Your Spirit, that we might be part of the building of Your Kingdom.  
May Your kingdom come, and Your will be done  
In a cynical and despairing world, O God,  
give us a quietly prophetic voice  
to proclaim your hope.

In a violent and angry world, O God,  
give us a quietly prophetic voice  
to proclaim your peace.

In a dismissive and disinterested world, O God,  
give us a quietly prophetic voice  
to proclaim your compassion.

In a lonely and inhospitable world, O God,  
give us a quietly prophetic voice  
to proclaim your love.

In a grieving and weeping world, O God,  
give us a quietly prophetic voice  
to proclaim your joy.

May we be so captivated by your hope, O God,  
that we cannot help but to whisper,  
to sing, and to enact,  
the message of your reign  
which is always coming into our world;  
And may our quietly prophetic lives,

be channels of your restoring grace  
wherever we may go.

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: 135:

Joy to the world,  
the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her King;  
let every heart prepare him room,  
and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world,  
the Saviour reigns!  
Let all their songs employ;  
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
repeat the sounding joy.

No more let thorns infest the ground,  
or sins and sorrows grow;  
wherever pain and death are found  
he makes his blessings flow.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness  
and wonders of his love.

Benediction:

Can we be a voice crying in the wilderness?  
Can we proclaim that God is active in the world?

Can we sing with angels,  
filling the towns and villages with light?

As people who are being changed,  
we go into a world that is being changed.

Ready to share the Good News  
that the long expected Jesus is coming,  
that we are being freed from whatever binds us.  
Glory be to God!

Who walks with us, sings with us, and struggles with us,  
each and every day.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with each of us and with all those we love, today and for ever more. Amen