



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 31st December 2023

Call to Worship:

In our looking into 2024, may the God of hope be with us.
In our memories of 2023, may the God of peace be with us.
In our celebrations of Christmas, may the God of joy be with us.
In our caring for the world, may the God of love be with us.
In our living of life in all its fullness, may we know that God is with us.

Prayer/Meditation:

We were heavy with sorrow, but joy interrupted.
We were deep in the night, but a star appeared.
We were silent with sadness, but the heavens rang.
And the splendour shone around them
When the time had fully come.

We were hardened by conflict, but love intervened.
We were frightened by shadows, but light took them away.
We were haunted by fears, but a child brought us hope.
And she laid him in a manger
When the time had fully come.

We were dismal and defeated, but faith set us on fire.
We were weary and complaining, but our hearts discovered praise.
We were doubtful and confused, but a door to life was opened.
And the guiding star went before them
When the time had fully come.

We were arrogant and angry, but his innocence disarmed us.
We were cruel, crude, and clumsy, but his grace made all things new.
We were selfish, narrow, greedy, but his joy we had to share.
And they offered him their treasured gifts
When the time had fully come.

We were sheep who had lost their way, but the shepherd knew our names.
We were strangers without a country, but our kingdom came to us.
We were children far from home, but God sent his Son to guide.
And the Word was flesh among us
When the time had fully come.

We have waited for a long time
for your hope, your joy, your love
to shine in the darkness of this world, Almighty God.

Even now, in our worship, we await you.
In our hearts, we still hope that your light will blaze forth,
banishing the shadows of this world
and guiding all the people back to you.

**Yet you did not come into this world
in a show of power and glory.
You did not shine forth for all of creation to behold.
A tiny spark -
a newborn baby,
visible to parents and curious animals.
A host of angels -
away from the populated areas,
singing to migrant workers.
A sparkling star -
guiding foreigners to see what neighbors could not.**

Open our hearts, merciful God,
to the sparks of your presence still in this world.
Open our eyes,
that we might behold your presence in the least likely of places,
and among the least likely of people.

**God with us,
kindle your spark within us,
that together we may shine forth your light,
we might banish the shadows of this world,
we might be the continuation of the Christmas miracle:
Emmanuel is in this world,
God is with us, now and evermore.**

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 61:8-11

HYMN 162

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign:

in the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Enough for him, whom cherubim worship night and day,
a breastful of milk, and a mangerful of hay;
enough for him, whom angels fall down before,
the ox and ass and camel which adore.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the Belovèd with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a wise man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him - give my heart.

Reading: Luke 2:22-40

Reflection:

I wonder if, like me, you have come to worship today with two stories in mind. We celebrate Christmas, the nativity, the birth of Jesus. We remember again stories of a long journey to Bethlehem, the search for accomodation, the birth of a baby, the visit of a choir of angels to a group of shepherds and the visit of those shepherds to the stable where the child was born, the later arrival of exotic visitors from the east who came bearing gifts, and the evil king Herod, jealous and afraid, seeking to destroy the newborn child.

Those are the stories we want to hear again, and to celebrate their meaning for the world; but there is another story. The story of today, of the world as it is and not as it was; the world of this year 2023, filled with anxiety and uncertainty; the world of war, the world of poverty, the world of danger, disruption and disaster.

It is hard to reconcile those two stories. We see at this time of year houses swathed in coloured flashing lights; front gardens populated by inflatable snowmen and reindeers; animated Father Christmases waving to passers-by from the windows. I

And I have to confess that the thought that occurs to me when I see all the coloured lights is sometimes 'How inappropriate'. There seems to be something somehow *wrong* with celebrating so extravagantly in the midst of this difficult and dangerous winter.

Today's reading from Isaiah, written at the end of the Babylonian Exile, celebrates power of God through hard times. It's written to people who were currently living in exile, or who had finally left it. Think about the stress, fear, anxiety, and sickness they must have experienced! The scripture reminds the people that the God of Israel is still powerful and still loyal. Only one God is the true God, and God alone has created the world and brings new beginnings. 'The Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations'.

Which brings us back to Christmas light. We, like the nation of Israel, also need the reminder that God created the world, is with us in it, and brings new beginnings. Christmas is not only a season to celebrate a baby's birthday but also to celebrate the same thing we celebrate at

Easter: God's infinite, unimaginable love for us and for the world, no matter how much we mess up.

We read today the story of Simeon and Anna, the end of the first chapter of Jesus' life story, the final episode in the story of Christmas.

In Simeon and Anna for in them we find two people coming face to face with God's incredible love and God's amazing grace - the love and grace of God made visible in Jesus Christ. In him, even as an infant, Luke tells us, they found the fulfillment of so many prophecies made in years past, for now, as the prophet Isaiah had foretold: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. ... They can say in the words of Isaiah, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." [Isaiah 9:2, 6-7]. And Simeon and Anna saw all this in Jesus, and they believed.

Listen to Simeon's words to Mary once again, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed'

When Simeon saw the Messiah - praise to God rang forth from his lips. And when Anna saw Him her heart was moved to thanksgiving as she recognized the love of God in that tiny child.

Perhaps on this first Sunday of Christmas we need the bright moments of the story - the ones that have stars and angels and choirs and presents and an adorable baby. Perhaps on this First Sunday of Christmas we need the coloured laser lights and the inflatable reindeer. Perhaps on this first Sunday of Christmas, it is too easy to relate more to the stress, anxiety, sickness, and fear that is the story of the life of our world. The real miracle today and every day is that Christ is with us in all of it. In Jesus, God has said, "I am with you."

From exile to restoration, from fear to hope, from sickness to health, from birth to death, God is with us and has been with us since the beginning of time. Nothing we do, no mistakes we will ever make, no fears and anxieties, can separate us from God. To be in right relationship is to seek God in all of our lives—no matter how beautiful or how messy, how joyful or how stressed our lives become. Immanuel. God is with us.

HYMN 147

Silent night. holy night:
sleeps the world; hid from sight,
Mary and Joseph in stable bare
watch o'er the child beloved and fair,
sleeping in heavenly rest.

Silent night, holy night:
shepherds first saw the light,
heard resounding clear and long,

far and near the angel-song,
'Christ the Redeemer is here'.

Silent night, holy night:
Son of God, O how bright
love is smiling from your face
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at your birth.

Prayer

God with us, you know your world, and we open our hearts and minds to you, sharing our concerns and listening to your concerns and your calls to act.
With a baby laid in a manger, we pray for all mothers and babies and those who support them...
With a father learning a new role, we pray for all at new beginnings and living with uncertainty...
With Simeon and Anna, we pray for all who wait in hope or fear, for life or death...
With seekers and worshippers, we pray for your Spirit to work in hearts, minds and faith communities...
With those who speak up, we pray for your will to be done and your kingdom to come on earth...
With those in poverty, we pray for transformation of systems and an end to exploitation...
With those in hospital, we pray for comfort and healing...
With those in caring professions, we pray for strength and stamina to cope compassionately with the many sick and suffering...
With all of creation, we pray for climate justice and an awakening to our responsibilities...
God with us, send your Spirit to transform and guide us, and so to change your world in your ways. Amen

I invite you now to spend a few moments in your own prayer, in words or silence, or simply reflection on the words we have heard and the stories 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 178

Who would think that what was needed
to transform and save the earth
might not be a plan or army,
proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
that a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,
monarchs scorn and angels sing;
such a place as none would reckon
hosts a holy helpless thing;
stabled beasts and passing strangers
watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven
coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science
span the past from which we move,
yet experience questions whether,
with such progress, we improve.
In our search for sense and meaning,
lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven
coming here on Christmas Day.

Benediction

The child is born! Alleluia!
Our God has come among us!
Let the whole earth rejoice!
Let us leave the manger and return to our daily routines,
knowing that we have seen the Lord,
and glorifying and praising God
for all that we have heard and seen.

Alleluia! Our God is now here!
Go forth, with full confidence and joy
that you have seen the Messiah.

Alleluia! Our God is now here!
Go forth to spread the Good News wherever you go,
sharing God's love and promise with all whom you meet.
Go into the world to find the lost,
heal the broken,
feed the hungry,
release the prisoner,
rebuild the nations,
bring peace among people,
and make music in every heart.

Alleluia! Our God is now here!
In the name of our God,
Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit,
we cry out with the angels in the heavens
and the shepherds in the fields:
Alleluia! Our God is now here!

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

