



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

Sunday 3rd December 2023

Hello again. Welcome to worship for Sunday 3rd December 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:

All the nations stream to the house of the Lord.
Loving God, teach us your ways,
We will walk in the path of the Lord,
We will walk in the light of Christ.
God will judge between the nations.
We will hammer our swords into ploughshares,
Nation will not lift sword against nation
We will walk in the light of Christ,
God will show us the ways of peace and of justice;
We will walk in the light of Christ.

Prayer/Meditation:

It's the first Sunday of Advent. A time of waiting; a time of preparation; a time of anticipation. Let us appreciate and value this time for the opportunity it provides to reflect on our faith and to explore the meaning of the birth of Jesus, and the chance it gives to withdraw from the secular world - where Christmas has been under way for the last three weeks - and in quiet waiting, think about who it is we are waiting for and what kind of reception we should be offering.

Let us use this time of Advent to make preparations in our hearts and our homes and our church, to separate out in our minds the faith from the tradition, the gospel from the myth, the truth from the legend, that the worship we offer over the next few weeks may be grounded in the Good News of the coming of Jesus.

Let us get excited at the prospect of celebrating another Christmas. Along with our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith who are preparing to celebrate the Festival of Lights, and those of no faith at all for whom this time is a season of holiday, rest and family, let us look forward to participating in the joy of the season.

Let us wait with hope; let us prepare with eager expectation; let us anticipate with excitement the birth of the Anointed One, the Son of God, the Messiah.

Let's Pray:

Loving God, on this day when the Christian year begins, we give thanks for your word in Scripture and the opportunity to read again stories of faith and service, examples of preaching and teaching, challenges of belief and theology, mysteries of language and interpretation.

Forgive us that we are sometimes slow to listen. We do not make time to read the scriptures as we should, allowing instead the pressures and responsibilities of life, our many interests, pleasures and concerns to crowd out the time we spend in study and reflection.

We become casual or complacent in our worship, no longer expecting to be challenged, no longer moved to a sense of wonder, no longer hungry for spiritual nourishment.

We neglect the opportunity for fellowship, turning in on ourselves, imagining we know all there is to know, more concerned with our own insights than those we can gain from others.

We ignore or fail to hear your voice in creation, our senses dulled by over-familiarity; no time to pause and ponder, to reflect on deeper realities.

Loving God, speak afresh through the pages of scripture, through the worship that we share, the experience and insight of other Christians, and through an awareness of the spirit of God in our hearts and relationships. Teach us, when all seems silent, to listen again more carefully. Speak, loving God, and give us ears to hear.

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: Jeremiah 33:12-18

Hymn: 131:

The Voice of God goes out to all the world;
his glory speaks across the universe.
The Great King's herald cries from star to star:
'With power, with justice, he will walk his way'

The Lord has said: 'Receive my messenger,
my promise to the world, my pledge made flesh
a lamp to every nation, light from light:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way'.

The broken reed he will not trample down,
nor set his heel upon the dying flame.
He binds the wounds, and health is in his hand:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Anointed with the Spirit and with power,
he comes to crown with comfort all the weak,
to show the face of justice to the poor:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

His touch will bless the eyes that darkness held,
the lame shall run, the halting tongue shall sing,
and prisoners laugh in light and liberty:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Reading: Mark 13:24-37

Reflection:

Our scripture readings this morning are on the Advent theme of waiting and of expectation. It was during Jeremiah's lifetime that Jerusalem was sacked by the invading Babylonians and many of the people carried off into exile. Jeremiah was one of those prophets who was sure that this terrible state of affairs could not last, and that the people would once more return to Jerusalem where they would be able to worship their God in their Temple.

This kind of prophecy is common in times of trouble. Things might be bad now, the prophets say, but just you wait; the situation will improve.

We use these prophecies as part of our Advent observance because part of the meaning of Advent for us is waiting.

During these four weeks we recall how the people of Israel waited for a Messiah. And so in Advent we wait. It is more difficult for us in a way because we know what it is we are waiting for; there is none of the eager anticipation in waiting for something or someone we know is going to be great, but don't know in exactly what way he is going to be great, we are waiting for Christmas. We know exactly what is going to happen over the next few weeks; we have read the story before and find it hard to share the anticipation.

The church also uses Advent to remind itself of the doctrine of the second coming - the belief that Jesus will in some way return again to the world. For some Christians, this is where the real excitement and anticipation lies, for no-one knows the day and the hour when the Lord will return. But for many other Christians, the whole idea of a second coming is yet another of those supernatural problem areas which make traditional Christianity so difficult.

The picture we carry in our minds of the coming of the Son of Man is perhaps like something out of classical art, with the son descending on a cloud, or maybe in a chariot, and accompanied by Gabriel and his brass band of angels. And truly, Jesus is reported in Mark's gospel, to have said: 'Then the Son of man will appear, coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will send the angels out to the four corners of the earth to gather God's chosen people from one end of the world to the other.'

Even today many Christians look to the skies for the second coming of Christ. But I am reminded of my favourite quote from my favourite Bible scholar, John Dominic Crossan, who said: "My point is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."

We can interpret Jesus differently. We can abandon any notion of a sudden supernatural breaking in to the life of the world by a God who has decided that time has come to bring it all to an end. We can suggest that Jesus wasn't talking about a second coming at all, but about a future time when the gospel of the Kingdom to which Jesus was so committed will finally be received and understood and acted upon; a future time when his words of love and acceptance

and welcome and justice will be accepted and practiced by all people and nations. It will be a time when all God's people will be gathered together from the four corners of the world.

When that happens, it will be his second coming. It was what he worked towards in his own ministry; he seemed unaffected by the hatreds and bigotries of his own time; he had no time for racial or religious discrimination or for revenge and punishment; he treated people with love and care; he offered God's healing power to all those who needed it, regardless of who they were; he did as John the Baptist predicted and baptised not with water but with the spirit; he loved people regardless of who they were, where they were from, what they believed or what they had done.

All this was the beginning of a great change for those who followed him; some of those who were with him loved long enough to see Jerusalem again destroyed, this time by the Romans; they worked and they waited, and they saw the beginnings of the Christian church.

Today, christianity exists all over the world, and still works and waits for the coming of the son of Man, for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. And even after two thousand years the world - and that includes ourselves sometimes - still resists the coming of the kingdom; even today, we find some of what Jesus teaches difficult to accept and even harder to put into practice.

As we get ready for the coming holiday, Advent calls us to prepare for something much bigger than the yearly arrival of Christmas. Advent calls us to pay attention to the world around us, even as it is wracked with suffering, violence, and hunger.

We wait, and we hope, knowing nothing other than to keep working, keep watching, and keep awake.

In our world torn by pain and division, we look at the pain all around us and we wonder, "how long?" How long will people in our own country and around the world have to live in fear in their communities, in their schools, and in their own homes? How long will we live at odds with our neighbors and endure division in our families? How long will people have to endure violence and hunger and pain, right up to our own doorstep?

In our lowest points, we are tempted to wonder if things will be this way forever.

But this season that we begin today - Advent - has a presence that calls us to look deeper. It whispers to us, urgently, in the dead of winter: "*Keep awake!*" It is a call of urgency and longing, but also a call of promise: there is hope. Things will not always be as they are.

Something is coming that is even bigger than Christmas.

The world still waits for justice. The world still waits for peace.

The world still waits for God.

Like the people of Israel, and like the disciples, we wait in darkness, knowing that we cannot know the specifics. We can only stay ready for what we know is coming - opportunity. Victory. Hope. Peace on earth.

Advent speaks to us, saying: the night is long and difficult, but the dawn is coming.

Watch and wait, Jesus said. The time will come when all humankind will be gathered together under God and there will be no judging one of another, no bigotry, no hatred, no prejudice, no fear. Watch and wait, for the time is coming.

At Advent we watch and wait. Let us pray that our welcome of Christ this year may open our eyes and our hearts to know that whoever welcomes the least of his children, welcomes him.

HYMN 637:

The Day of the Lord shall come, as prophets have told,
when Christ shall make all things new, no matter how old.
And some at the stars may gaze, and some at God's word,
in vain to predict the time, the Day of the Lord.

Chorus

The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;
the lamb with the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;
and nations for war no more shall study or thirst.

The Day of the Lord shall come-a thief in the night,
a curse to those in the wrong who think themselves right,
a pleasure for those in pain or with death at the door;
a true liberation for the prisoners and poor.

Chorus

The Day of the Lord shall come and judgement be known,
as nations like sheep and goats come close to the throne.
Then Christ shall himself reveal, asking all to draw near
and see in his face all faces once ignored here.

Chorus

The Day of the Lord shall come, but now is the time
to subvert earth's wisdom with Christ's folly sublime
by loving the loveless, turning the tide and the cheek,
by walking beneath the cross in step with the weak.

Chorus

Communion: Among friends, gathered round a table, Jesus took bread, and, having bleesed it, he broke the bread and gave it to his diciples saying, 'This is my body which is given for you.' In the same way he took wine, and, having given thanks for it, he poured it out and gave the cup to his disciples saying, 'This cup is the new relationship with God, sealed with my blood. Take this and share it. I shall drink wine with you next in the coming kingdom of God.'

So now, following Jesus example, we take this bread and this cup; the ordinary things of the world through which God will bless us.

Loving God, we give thanks for your love revealed to us in Jesus, and we thank you that through him, through his life and example, his death and resurrection, we can live in the faith that your kingdom will come, and that in life, in death and beyond death you are with us.

Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now, as we do now what you did in an upstairs room, breathe your Spirit upon us and upon this bread and this cup, that they be spiritual food and drink for us, renewing, sustaining and making us whole, and that we may be your body on earth, loving and caring in the world. Amen.

The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said: This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way, he took the cup after supper, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

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

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

Prayer:

In the dawn of Advent
in the gloom of a dark world:
we see people in conflict,
we see missiles pointing skywards
we see frightened crowds of refugees,
the outline of the shanty town,
the slow queue for medicines,
of wasted fields and wasted bodies.
And in the human heart,
there too revealed
the fear, suspicion and prejudice,
the greed and the grasping
that condemns others to live without hope
and die without comfort.

So we earnestly pray
that at this time of warning and of hope,
we might not turn from the signs of distress
that convulse our world,
but understand their meaning,
struggle to meet the challenge they present,
and embrace them as the loud overture
which heralds a new and wondrous revelation
of the promised kingdom of God
when all people will be made whole before him,
rejoicing in each other's gifts,
and abounding in love for one another.
Lord Jesus Christ,
your world awaits you.
For you we long.

We praise God
for those who prepared the way for the Saviour -
for the people of God,
their prophets and their rulers,
struggling to grasp the marvels of your ways
until they became a cradle for the Messiah.
We praise God for still coming to us,
for being with us,
working to bring a new creation
which shall have a place for all,
and where all will be at home.

We pray that the people of the world
may find a new will to remove from the earth
the poverty and the ignorance
and the unequal distribution of resources
which foster the poverty and disease
which ravage the face of the earth,
weakening and disrupting human society,
reducing the span of life,
and forcing children to be adults before their time.

We pray for those who work to heal,
hampered by lack of medicines,
themselves victims of disease,
that they may gain strength from those they tend
and hold to their vision of wholeness for all.

We pray for traditional healers,
struggling to understand new approaches,
fearful of losing their place in order of things.
And we pray for the pharmaceutical companies,
trying to find a balance
between market forces and human need.

We pray for those who from a distance
seek ways of responding to world crisis;
governments, charities, the United Nations;
those who seek to raise awareness and resources
to bring hope to millions,
offering support to volunteers, agencies and churches
who live day by day with the suffering of their people.

We bring these prayers to you, merciful God,
in the name of Jesus Christ who daily moved
amongst those who were ill and in pain,
bringing hope and healing and wholeness.

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: 603:

Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,

urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for that Word, the Word of life which fires us,
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:
Lord of the Word, receive your people's praise.

Lord, for our land, in this our generation,
spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:
for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

Lord, for our world, when we disown and doubt you
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;
past put behind us, for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

Benediction:

Let us watch and wait, for the Lord is coming; and may wisdom, kindness and forgiveness be our
watchwords.

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

