



The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk Christ Church United Reformed Church

Sunday 14th January 2024

Call to Worship

Let all the earth acclaim the Lord!
Worship the Lord in gladness;
enter his presence with joyful songs.
Acknowledge that the Lord is God;
he made us and we are his, his own people,
the flock which he shepherds

Prayer/Meditation:

Speak with authority
in our lives, Christ.
Speak to us today,
and to what is in us,
so that we might be whole.

Speak to us today,
with love,
with hope,
and with strength,
so that we might hear you,
and know, deep inside,
that we are your people,
and that you are our God.

Loving God,
whose touch can heal the broken places of life,
touch us today...

God of peace,
whose spirit of peace can quiet our spirits
of confusion and despair,
reassure us today...

Forgiving God,
whose call to repentance promises grace upon grace,
place your mercy in our souls today...

You who heal the sick and liberate the imprisoned,
who bring justice in the midst of oppression
and strength in the midst of weakness,

pour out your spirit of power upon us today.

Open our hearts to new faithfulness,
redirect our waywardness,
and hold us gently in your goodness.

We confess our need to you,
and we turn to you with hearts filled with hope,
remembering the promises you have made to us.

May your name be glorified in us and through us.
We ask it through Christ Jesus,
your only begotten son,
he who is our Lord and our Saviour,
our brother and our friend.

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: Psalm 139:1-12

HYMN 731:

You are before me, Lord, you are behind,
and over me you have spread out your hand;
such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too high to grasp, too great to understand.

Then where, Lord, from your Spirit shall I go,
and where, Lord, from your presence shall I fly?
If I ascend to heaven you are there,
and still are with me though in hell I lie;

and if I take my flight into the dawn,
or if I dwell on ocean's farthest shore,
your mighty hand will rest upon me still,
and your right hand will guard me evermore.

If I should say 'Darkness will cover me,
and I shall hide within the vale of night',
surely the darkness is not dark to you,
the night is as the day, the darkness light.

Search me, O God, search me and know my heart;
try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
keep me from any path that gives you pain,
and lead me in the everlasting way.

Reading: John 1:43-51

Reflection:

A few years ago, the United Reformed Church embarked on a publicity campaign with the strapline 'God is Still Speaking'. Its twofold purpose was firstly to remind people that the church is not - or should not be - frozen in time and in thrall to ancient creeds and beliefs that may no longer be understood or even relevant, and secondly to try to reach non-Christians who may believe that God - if there is a God - is silent and distant and unconnected to the realities of human life.

When we study the scriptures, we can find story after story that describes God's communication with individuals and groups of people. We read two of them this morning, but there are many many others, and it may be helpful to look at some of them, see how God spoke in the Bible, and try to discern how God speaks today.

For example, you will remember the story of the child Samuel in the temple. Samuel was the child-apprentice of the priest Eli, living and working in the ancient temple at Shiloh, in what was later known as Samaria.

At evening, when the markets outside had closed, the daily services ended, the worshippers all gone home, there was plentiful silence. Adequate silence in which to hear the Lord speaking within the soul. That's how it was for Samuel. In the silence of deep night, God called to the child. After first mistaking the voice for Eli, Samuel was able to listen to what God had to say to him. In this story we encounter the God who comes to us in the silent periods of our lives.

"Silence is golden" according to the old saying. If that is true, then most of us live in extreme poverty, desperately short of the gold of silence. There is very little silence in our hectic lives. It is all noise, noise and more noise!

All the space around us in the modern world seems clogged with multiple sounds - a real cacophony of competing sounds. Samuel had no such distractions..

Silence may be one of the ways in which God approaches us, address us, soothes us, stirs us, calls us, and renews us. Because silence does not come readily in our noisy, frenetic world, it takes some effort to create space and silence in our lives. And if we can't make that effort, then maybe the still small voice of God is drowned out.

We also heard from Psalm 139 this morning. The sections set for today's reading concentrate on God's intimate knowledge of us. Our path; our words; our thoughts; are all searched by the Living God. From the beginning of our lives, God is with us, coming to us with precious thoughts for our welfare; thoughts more numerous than the sands of desert or sea shore.

This approach by God is not limited to set locations; like sacred sites, or holy temples, or in the hours set for public worship. The Psalmist sings of the God who comes to us no matter where we are. Even at the most remote fringes of the oceans, God will be there. In deep darkness, God is with us. If we fly up among the stars, God will be there for us.

Psalm 139 does not argue the case. It celebrates it. It is like a great hymn of delight in God's willingness to seek us out everywhere. Whether we recognise it or not, God will always be

with us. Nowhere is too far, no place is too humble, no situation too dark, no circumstance too secular. God is with us everywhere.

But more than this, in his letter to the fledgling church in Corinth, Paul states that God dwells within our very being. Now such a statement, from a devout Jew like Paul, is bold, radical and revolutionary.

The Jews of Paul's time believed that God chose to reside in the central, sacred enclosure at the core of the vast temple complex on Mt Zion. They called this space the 'Holy of Holies', and it was there that God could be most fully encountered. But Paul throws that idea aside when he declares that our bodies are the temples where God's Presence chooses to reside. Now much nonsense has been tossed around about our bodies being temples, but the basic idea is that if God lives in a temple at all, then our bodies must be temples for God dwells within our bodies.

So here we have Paul suggesting another place where God comes to us: within our own being. "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." God does not scorn our human flesh and blood. We encounter God in our bodily lives. If we want to find God, we can take a look within, where light and darkness wrestle for supremacy, and where light refuses to give up.

However, the prime approach, the most complete and reliable approach, comes through Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospel reading from John for this Sunday follows on from that moment when John the Baptist points to Jesus and says: "Behold the Lamb of God." From that time on disciples are drawn to Jesus. We read about the calling of Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathaniel, and others not named.

For Christians, God's incomparable approach is through Jesus. Nothing equals this. Nothing is more certain, or more reliable. The words and deeds, and the unique person of Jesus, have been for many generations a veritable highway for the coming of God into human experience.

This approach by God is the measuring stick for all other spiritual experiences. If at any time we think God has approached us and called us to do something not compatible with Jesus' words and example, then we know we were sadly misled.

If you want hear the voice of God, listen to the words of Jesus of Nazareth, and if you want to hear the voice of God speaking directly to you, take some time in silence to reflect upon the words of Jesus, remembering that the spirit of God, a spark of the divine, dwells within each human body.

And listen for the voice of God, too, in the words of those around us, in the words of advice, support, encouragement and love offered by those closest to us, in the words of suffering people around the world crying out for help and hope, and listen to the thoughts of your own mind and the feelings of your own heart.

God is still speaking. God speaks constantly, but not always loudly and obviously, but if we can discern God's voice through the noise of the world, if we can hear the voice of God in the words of Jesus, and if we can recognise God's voice in our own thoughts and our own relationships, and if we can appreciate that there is nowhere we can go that God is not already present - including within ourselves - we can perhaps say that - yes - God is still speaking, and

proclaim with with the prophet: *many nations shall come and say, 'let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of God... for all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.*

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.

Let us pray.

In love You created us,
and in love You sustain us, day after day.
So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to You,
knowing that You hear us, and will respond.

We offer our prayers for the world around us.
We pray for those who find themselves in bondage:
those forced into slavery or prostitution,
those oppressed by governments or economic systems,
those enslaved by personal addictions.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, speak to us.

We pray for those who struggle to raise their children
in the midst of violence or poverty;
those who can only stand by and watch as their sons or daughters die
of starvation or malnutrition,

of preventable disease,
or from gang violence.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, speak to us.

We pray for those who refuse to participate in violence or injustice,
who courageously stand up for what they know is right,
regardless of the personal consequences.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, speak to us.

We also pray for those who oppress others,
who are unable to break free from cycles of violence and anger,
who are no longer able to empathize with their victims.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, speak to us.

We pray for all who suffer this day,
whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually.
May Your presence surround and sustain each one,
so that they may know your love and live.

Gracious God, hear our prayer,
and in Your love, speak to us.

Finally, God, we pray for ourselves—members of Your Body here on earth.
Break down the barriers that divide us from one another.
Unite us in our common allegiance to You as Lord and Saviour.
Grant us compassion and humility in our relationships.
Release the gifts You have given to each one,
so that in us and through us,
Your kingdom might come and Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

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 prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 613:

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
in living echoes of thy tone;
as thou hast sought, so let me seek
thy straying children, lost and lone.

O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
the wandering and the wavering feet;
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
thy hungering ones with manna sweet.

O strengthen me, that while I stand
firm on the rock and strong in thee
I may stretch out a loving hand
to wrestlers with the troubled sea.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
the precious things thou dost impart;
and wing my words that they may reach
the hidden depths of many a heart.

O use me, Lord, use even me,
just as thou wilt, and when, and where,
until thy blessed face I see,
thy rest, thy joy, thy glory share.

Benediction:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Send us out to live lives that glorify you
Help us to be people of peace
Empower us to recognize your call
In our families
In our communities
In our work places and schools
In our churches and in our world.

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