



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

Sunday 21st January 2024

## Call to Worship

We are searching for a light to guide us.  
Arise, shine for our light has come!  
We are longing for inspiration to motivate us.  
The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.  
We are wishing for the world to change.  
Look around: people are looking for God's light in us.  
We are ready to see what God's love can do!  
Our hearts rejoice in God's glory!  
We join together to shine!

## Prayer/Meditation:

From deep within us we know of a loving presence.  
All around us we see glory, beauty, life and light.  
We have no words for what we experience so we cry out, "God!".  
In this moment of worship may that loving presence grow deeper,  
may our awareness of the divine presence around us grow more intense.  
May we, gathered in this place, learn to pay more attention to God,  
who loves us at all times and in all places.

God, of love and life, in this moment of prayer  
be more and more in us  
that we might live more and more in you.

Keeper of every moment in eternity:  
we come, not only to hear  
those words which can transform us,  
but to be filled with your grace and hope.  
We have come, not out of habit,  
but to respond to your call,  
willing to be called away  
from the familiar ways of our lives.

Walker of our journeys,  
in the midst of our harried lives,  
you call us to lay aside all that entangles us,  
to follow you into service to others.  
You invite us to step into  
the waters of life and hope,  
reaching out to draw others

to our side so, that together,  
we might enter your kingdom  
of laughter and joy.

When uncertainty fills every date  
in our diaries,  
you come, Grace's Companion,  
to offer that hope which anchors  
us in God's heart;  
to place our feet firmly  
on that rock called peace;  
to bring us safely to that haven  
filled with God's steadfast love.

God in Community, Holy in One,  
Rock of every age,  
we offer the prayer Jesus taught to his friends:

**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: Mark 1:14-20

**HYMN 96:**

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
there is no shadow of turning with thee;  
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;  
as thou hast been thou for ever wilt be.

**Chorus**

Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness,  
morning by morning new mercies I see;  
all I have needed thy hand hath provided,  
great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,  
sun, moon and stars in their courses above,  
join with all nature in manifold witness  
to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

**Chorus**

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

**Chorus**

Reading: John 1:35-42

Reflection:

This morning's gospel call of the disciples to become fishers of people is possibly both the most famous - as well as the most misunderstood - call to mission in the history of the Christian Church.

At its most simplistic it sounds a bit like a mission to build numbers, to bolster the Church's obsession with that most elusive of results - church growth. Don't catch fish - treat people like fish - hook them, net them, catch them with baited words, reel them in - fill the pews. That is what the word "evangelism" has come to mean for whole branches of the Church. And yet if you listen carefully, that is *not* what Jesus said - and nor does it correspond with what actually happened with the disciples. That is just *not* what Jesus taught them to do.

And did they need teaching? To someone who doesn't fish, being offered fishing lessons probably seems completely superfluous. Throw a net into the water you catch fish. Bait a hook and throw it into the water, you catch a fish.

What is there to learn?

Well, as any real fisher will tell you, even when fishing only for fish, there is a lot to learn. The fishermen in Jesus time had to learn to fish at night when the nets would be harder for the fish to see - and when the fish might be attracted to a light in the boat. Certain types of fish only feed at certain times and are attracted to very specific bait. Some types of fish are found at specific depths and even at specific temperatures and at specific times of the year. These days it is even more of a science. For example modern tuna boats now use sea surface temperature maps generated from satellites to identify the warm patches where the tuna congregate. And that is only one of a host of things a fisherman needs to know.

It may well have a lot more meaning then for a fisherman to be asked to learn a new way of fishing.

*"Come with me and I will show you how to be fishers of people."*

In Mark's probably reconstructed memory, that was what Jesus was saying. But that doesn't mean simply preach at those we might invite. We have to be concerned for them as individuals, and these days we would recognise people as individuals facing unique situations, rather than as scalps or trophies.

We read in the gospels that these disciples were wilful, they were slow to understand and at times they were not in tune with what Jesus was trying to do. On the other hand as they lived and worked with Jesus, they seemed gradually to wake up to what it was that Jesus was asking of them. Of course they had doubts, and you might wonder why this did not cause Jesus to give up on them. But here is a thought. Perhaps it was *because* of their doubts that Jesus selected them, because doubts are essential to honest thinking. As Tennyson wrote in his poem dedicated to his late friend, Arthur Hallam, *In Memoriam A. H. H.*:

*There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.*

When we hear people try to turn Jesus' teaching into simple recitations of a formula leaving no room for thought or doubt we might worry that they may overlook the way Jesus himself approached others.

Jesus showed by his actions he was not interested in reacting to labels. He showed by illustration and actions that the so called heretics of his day, the Samaritans, should be treated as individuals and that if for example the despised Samaritans showed compassion, this was to be genuinely valued. His disciples are called to share these same attitudes in living out their mission. The fact that some modern-day, self-claimed disciples, appear to be judging and even rejecting others in terms of labels like "Muslims" or "sinners" suggests that they may not be exactly getting the message.

Jesus showed by his actions he was more interested in the spirit of the law than the detail. If compassion was called for, this for Jesus took precedence over any imagined conflict with religious custom. This too was part of effective fishing.

Those called to follow Jesus in his day found themselves with unexpected responsibilities, constantly encountering what we would now call situational ethics. What for example should one do when the institutional church puts its own wealth ahead of its duty to the people? Jesus reportedly cleared the temple.

What should one do when ostentatious display of religious status gets emphasized ahead of service? Jesus risks his own safety and condemns it.

What should one do when religious custom identifies the untouchable leper? Jesus reaches out and touches with the healing hand.

Each of these actions tell others about the way he is inviting others to follow.

Yet the thing about situational ethics is that situations change. It is not so much Pharisees as those with titles like bishop or minister or church leader that should now be our focus. With lepers now far less common, today's untouchables may well be the addict, the alcoholic, the beggar, the homeless.

Our modern-day Samaritans may just as easily be those we call extremist Muslims, or atheists speaking out words of condemnation.

One of the sad things about traditional Christianity is that it is slow to react to change and is often left behind as the world moves on.. To win hearts and minds, at a minimum, religion must be seen as relevant to current issues. This is why a strong presence of the church has to be involved in debates like genetic engineering, like climate change, like food production, like war, and sustainable energy policies.

When for example the Catholic Church waited for centuries before acknowledging the truths discovered by scientists like Galileo or Darwin, it is another way of telling the general population that the Church is happy to be left behind in the modern world.

Conversely when the Christian Aid is among the first to bring relief to a disaster area, or when the current Pope weighs into the current problems, the Christian message wins the right to be heard.

But it is not just the Church leaders. What for example are **we** saying about the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, hunger and poverty in our own society?

In his day Jesus called a cross-section of men and women to mission. Today the need is probably as strong as ever, since the need for compassion, for justice, for those concerned for their fellows and even a concern for the planet itself is as urgent as ever. The call for those prepared to share the tasks for the kingdom, may have changed in form - and the specific tasks and challenges change year by year and even day by day. How the fishing is to be done in a modern age must be continually relearned, but remember the gospel only has our present generation to depend on - and as for all the generations in the past, the success of this gospel depends on.....well... those like us.

HYMN 572:

Colours of day dawn into the mind,  
the day has begun, the night is behind.  
Go down in the city, into the street,  
and let's give the message to the people we meet:

Chorus

So light up the fire and let the flame burn,  
open the door, let Jesus return.  
Take seeds of his Spirit, let the fruit grow,  
tell the people of Jesus, let his love show.

Go through the park, on into the town;  
the sun still shines on, it never goes down.  
The light of the world is risen again;  
the people of darkness are needing our friend.

Chorus

Open your eyes, look into the sky;  
the darkness has come, the Son came to die.  
The evening draws on, the sun disappears,  
but Jesus is living, his Spirit is here:

Chorus

Let us pray:

In Jesus we see what God is like - that's why we call him Lord. We see him giving of himself without counting the cost, offering his own life for others.

So now we pray for all those who seek to offer love, however hesitant, partial or imperfect their love may be. May they be inspired by the love of God.

We pray for those new in their faith, still learning about Jesus, still uncertain of their commitment, still discovering what love is. May their love always grow.

We pray for those established in their faith, facing the daily risk of growing complacent, stale, settled into a comfortable routine. May their love be ever fresh.

We pray for those whose faith has crumbled, no longer holding the trust they once held, no longer able to feel God present in their world, no longer seeking to serve and follow Jesus. May their love be renewed.

We pray for those who have never had faith, those consistently unmoved by the message of the gospel, those who resist its challenge and who wilfully turn away from anything that smacks of religion. May love be born in their hearts.

We pray for those whose faith is costly, those who sacrifice money, time, energy, security, health and even life itself in the service of others. May their love shine out to others.

And we pray for those who need something to put their faith in - the poor, the hungry, and the homeless, the sick, the suffering and the bereaved, all those broken by the tragedies and crises of human life. May they experience the love of God in the love of others.

The love of Jesus was for all people, whoever they may have been - that's why we call him Lord. May love reach out into every heart in every place, and may we be part of that, learning to love as he did, learning to love as we are loved, learning to recognise and respond to the love of God, the love we see in Jesus, who we call Lord.

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 574:

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!  
God's saving news to all the nations take:  
proclaim Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord and King,  
that all the world his glorious praise may sing.

Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all;  
he will in grace respond to all who call:  
how shall they call if they have never heard  
the gracious invitation of his word?

Go. forth and tell! The doors are open wide:  
share God's good gifts-let no one be denied;  
live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,  
your ransomed powers for his sole glory use.

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, arise!  
Go in the strength which Christ your Lord supplies;  
go till all nations his great name adore and serve him,  
Lord and King for evermore.

**Benediction:**

The Spirit of Jesus speaks to us:

As you go out into the world  
Follow me

At home with your household  
Follow me  
At school and work  
Follow me  
In everything you do this week  
Follow me  
And as you do, remember that I am with you always,  
even to the end of the 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