



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

Sunday 28th January 2024

## **Call to Worship (Psalm 46)**

Come, behold the works of the Lord;  
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.  
He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

## **Prayer/Meditation:**

We are the Church, and we unite with Christians all over the world on this day to offer our worship. From the splendour and formality of worship in the great cathedrals of the world to the poverty and simplicity of those who gather in each other's homes or in the open air to pray and sing together, we are one with them all, for with them, we are the Church.

We are a community. From different backgrounds and different circumstances we gather, bound together by the love of God and by our desire to follow Jesus. We rejoice in the support and encouragement we receive from one another and give thanks for the spirit of community that lets us know that this is a place where we belong.

We are a family. Closer to one another than merely members of the same organisation, united by more than our common commitment to the kingdom of God, we are drawn in our worship into relationship with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, called to love and care for one another.

We are a fellowship of disciples, gathered here not just for our own benefit or interest, but to affirm our commitment to the kingdom of God and to seek ways of serving the kingdom that are relevant and effective.

We are the Body of Christ, aware of the great responsibility that is upon us to proclaim the good news, to love, help and nurture those around us, and aware too of our own shortcomings.

In our worship today may we find strength, encouragement and inspiration that we may leave here more determined and more able to serve God in the church and in the world.

## ***A reluctant prayer of Confession***

It can be quite depressing - demoralising - to be here Sunday after Sunday at this same point in our service of worship recalling our weaknesses and wrongdoings and omissions and seeking

forgiveness and a fresh start. We do it because it is part of our worship tradition and because we know it is good to be aware of the improvements we need to make to our lives. But we do it too out of habit, because our tradition has taught us that we are weak and sinful. Sometimes that damages our self-confidence, sometimes it frustrates our sense of achievement at a job well done, sometimes it emphasises for us all that is wrong in our lives and causes us to forget all that is right, sometimes our confession makes us feel worse, not better, and we wonder if we can ever live up to the expectations that our faith seems to put upon us.

And when we look at the state of the world and acknowledge our part in the suffering of others and the corporate culpability of our Western society in the oppression of the poor, we despair that there is nothing we can do, that we perpetrate and perpetuate poverty and conflict without having any choice in the matter or control over events.

So let us have a more balanced view of our lives and our service to God; let us seek forgiveness for those things in which we truly do fail; but let us give thanks for our successes; let us feel proud of our achievements; let us acknowledge that in matters over which we have no control we may still have some influence, however small; and let us resist the pressure we sometimes feel to take a pessimistic view of our church and our faith, but rather celebrate that, even with all our failures and flaws, we are called to serve the kingdom of God, to proclaim the gospel of Christ and to work for a world that is better, safer and fairer for everyone - and that is *good* news.

#### **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: Genesis 3:1-13

#### HYMN 34:

Holy, holy, holy!  
Lord God Almighty,  
early in the morning  
our song shall rise to thee;  
Holy holy, holy!  
merciful and mighty,  
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy!  
All the saints adore thee,  
casting down their golden crowns  
around the glassy sea,  
cherubim and seraphim  
falling down before thee,  
who wast and art  
and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy!

Though the darkness hide thee,  
though the sinful human eye  
thy glory may not see,  
only thou art holy,  
there is none beside thee,  
perfect in power,  
in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy!  
Lord God Almighty,  
all thy works  
shall praise thy name,  
in earth, and sky, and sea;  
Holy, holy, holy!  
merciful and mighty,  
God in three Persons,  
Blessed Trinity!

Reading: Matthew 22:23-33

Reflection:

Every ancient belief system has its own story; the story of Adam and Eve is one of many similar stories from different peoples and cultures.

It is maybe more difficult for us to imagine from our modern perspective, but the world must have been a very awesome and frightening place for people who had no understanding at all of natural processes. They must have been full of questions. Where did we all come from? Why are we here? Why are things the way they are?

In order to try to answer some of these questions, stories developed (we call them *myths*) that told tales of long far-off times when the world was just beginning. Stories of Gods and heroes, battles and miracles; supernatural beings who walked the earth; terrible monsters and giants and strange animals that could talk and change the course of events. To us these myths are just stories, be they from Babylon or Egypt, the Far East or South America. But to the societies in which they originated, they were *their* story, told and re-told with reverence and care - for they were the stories of the beginnings of their people. They were stories that were owned and acknowledged by the people, they were *their* stories.

The story of Adam and Eve is the story of the people of Israel. It tells of a special relationship between the first people and their creator-God. This is a God who is accessible; who takes a stroll in the garden of an evening with his special people; who provides for them a good garden in which to live; who gives them all they need to sustain life; who allows them to do anything they want except eat the fruit of a certain tree.

And of course they disobey, and suddenly all the good things that have been provided for them are lost. They are punished for their disobedience by having their beautiful garden taken away from them. No longer do they have all they need at their fingertips; now they have to work and toil for their food and shelter; now the woman must endure the pain of childbirth; now the soil will be barren and unco-operative and all life will be a struggle for survival.

That is part of the Israelites' story. It explains why childbirth is so difficult; it explains why it takes lots of hard work to produce enough food to live on; it explains why their God does not always appear to look after them very well. It is all the fault of the first people; their disobedience has brought an uncomfortable and often miserable existence to all their descendents. That is the Israelite story.

But any story can have real meaning and significance if it is owned by a people, if they can say that it is their story, so when the early Christian Church found itself separated from the Jewish faith by its belief in Christ as the Messiah, it found *new* significance in the story of Adam and Eve. It took the Israelite story and made it its own.

The early Christian story concentrates on the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In going against the command of God not to eat the fruit, they condemned themselves and all their descendents not only to a long-lasting punishment, but, even worse, to an inheritance of sin. The first sin of Adam and Eve became the pattern of human life from then on. It came to be understood that humans are born into sin. Early Christian scholars who believed in the literal existence of Adam and Eve said that sin was inherited at birth; that this original sin was inevitable and unavoidable, and could only be overcome by faith in Christ, who came so that the sins of the world might be taken away.

By shifting the emphasis of the story and highlighting its spiritual aspect, by making it more than a simple explanation of the way the world is, and turning it into an account of the origin of sin, the Christian church was able to claim ownership of the story and say 'this is our story'. It is the story that begins to explain why there was a need for Jesus to come to the world.

Again, it was only possible for the story of Adam and Eve to remain real and relevant if it actually *meant* something to the people. If the Christians had been unable to adapt and extend it, if they had been unable to see how it fitted in with their world-view and in particular with their beliefs about who Jesus was, then it would have been no more than an interesting story, the story of a different culture. Not *their* story.

Now comes the tricky part.

Christianity has moved on a lot since its first theologians adopted the story of Adam and Eve into the Christian message. The world has moved on a lot since the garden of Eden. The Christian story tells us that God created a garden that was good, and in this garden lived the first man and the first woman in an environment of perfection and in a state of bliss. But they disobeyed and all the good things were taken away, the perfection was destroyed, and life became difficult and full of sin.

But that's not what the scientists tell us. The cosmologists and geologists and geneticists and archaeologists. In several centuries of scientific observation it has become ever clearer that there was never a time when the world was perfect, that there was no golden age when the first humans lived a life of ease and plenty which they somehow lost along the way. On the contrary, the development of the human race to its present state has been a history of struggle and hardship, of disease and disaster gradually overcome until now, when at least some of us are living lives of comfort and safety that would have been unimaginable for our ancestors of even a few hundred years ago.

And as our scientific understanding develops, so we move further and further away from the story of the garden of Eden until it is no longer *our* story. But we can reclaim it by again

shifting the emphasis. The early Christians changed the emphasis from explaining the world to explaining sin. Now contemporary Christians are changing the emphasis from the people to the garden itself.

In Genesis chapter 1, God creates the world and sets it going, commanding the land to produce vegetation and the creatures to be fruitful and multiply. God creates a world full of potential for growth and development. God doesn't make more and more birds, plants, animals and fish - he gives them the ability to reproduce themselves. The created world in Genesis is a world full of potential. And the Lord God took the man and put him in the middle of the garden to till it and keep it. It was the man's job to look after this garden that God had made, so that from the beginning the man and the garden are intimately connected. And the first people are given the choice of working along with God to create, order, arrange and care for creation, or to use the garden for their own pleasure.

They were part of their environment, they could not be separated from it. And when they abused it, their whole world became unbalanced and fell out of harmony and everything was affected.

Does that story mean anything to us? A people given a world that is safe and comfortable, which contains in it all that's needed to sustain life? A world that is full of potential for evolution and growth? A world that can so easily be thrown out of balance and even destroyed when the people choose wrongly and selfishly?

Jesus said in our reading from Matthew, 'He is God not of the dead but of the living.'

So could the story of Adam and Eve be *our* story?

HYMN 123:

Think of a world without any flowers,  
think of a wood without any trees,  
think of a sky without any sunshine,  
think of the air without any breeze:  
we thank you, Lord, for flowers and trees and sunshine;  
we thank you, Lord, and praise your holy name.

Think of a world without any people,  
think of a street with no-one living there,  
think of a town without any houses,  
no-one to love and nobody to care:  
we thank you, Lord, for families and friendships;  
we thank you, Lord, and praise your holy name.

Think of a world without any worship,  
think of a God without his only Son,  
think of a cross without a resurrection,  
only a grave and not a victory won:  
we thank you, Lord, for showing us our Saviour;  
we thank you, Lord, and praise your holy name.

Thanks to our Lord for being here among us,  
thanks be to him for sharing all we do,  
thanks for our church and all the love we find here,  
thanks for this place and all its promise true:

we thank you, Lord, for life in all its richness;  
we thank you, Lord, and praise your holy name.

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God,  
as we come to you in prayer  
we lay our heart before you.

we admit to you our own shortsightedness.  
But you already know,  
we think more of our self than our neighbour next door,  
let alone our neighbours that live around the world.  
we get so caught up in the needs in our own house  
we forget to think about, much less pray for  
people whom we've never met.

As we try to pray for starving children  
in countries we cannot place on a map,  
as we attempt to join in solidarity with women  
being sold into slavery,  
as we struggle to comprehend the motivation of men  
who abuse or neglect their families,  
the chasm between our quiet, sheltered life  
and their lives of turmoil becomes clear.  
we struggle even to SEE the other side of the divide.

How, O God, can we believe that we know how to pray for their needs,  
when we honestly have no idea what those needs may be?

And so, humbled, we come before you now,  
placing our faith wholly in you,  
trusting that you know those needs  
which are obscured to our short-sighted eyes,  
believing that in your love and mercy  
you will reach out and touch the lives we cannot comprehend.

As we pray, Holy One, we feel your call on our life.  
As clearly as the disciples mending their nets,  
"Come, Follow me."  
our soul resonates with the challenge to shift our focus,  
from figures and statistics, to women and men.

We know with every fibre of our being  
that you are calling us to be part, somehow,  
of your healing, life-giving touch,  
both in our community and around the world.

Lord of Life,

may our squinting glance  
across the chasm of miles, language and culture,  
our desire to see your will done on earth as it is in heaven,  
our prayer for our neighbour,  
not end with these words,  
but continue day by day, moment by moment,  
in our actions.

May this prayer, through your grace,  
become for us the way we are connected through your love  
with all creation.  
May our prayers transform our life.  
And may all our words and deeds,  
all of our being,  
be an offering to you.

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 642:

We utter our cry: that peace may prevail!  
that earth will survive and faith must not fail.  
We pray with our life for the world in our care,  
for people diminished by doubt and despair.

We cry from the fright of our daily scene  
for strength to say 'No' to all that is mean:  
designs bearing chaos, extinction of life,  
all energy wasted on weapons of death.

We lift up our hearts for children unborn:  
give wisdom, O God, that we may hand on,  
replenished and tended, this good planet earth,  
preserving the future and wonder of birth.

Creator of life, come, share out, we pray,  
your Spirit on earth, revealing the Way  
to leaders conferring round tables for peace;  
that they may from bias and guile be released.

Come with us, Lord-Love, in protest and march,  
and help us to fire with passion your Church,  
to match all our statements and lofty resolve  
with fervent commitment in action involved.

Whatever the ill or pressure we face,  
Lord, hearten and heal, give insight and grace  
to think and make peace with each heartbeat and breath  
choose Christ before Caesar and life before death!

**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 evermore. Amen