



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

Sunday 7th January 2024

Welcome to worship for Sunday 7th January 2024. Our worship today includes the sacrament of Holy Communion. You are warmly invited to participate, and I'd invite you to provide yourself with a little bread and wine, or a cracker and some fruit juice, or any thing that can symbolise for you the body and blood of Jesus. I'll be using an oatcake and some grape juice.

Let us worship God:

Call to Worship:

My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make melody.

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples,
and I will sing praises to you among the nations.

For your steadfast love is higher than the heavens,
and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds

Prayer/Meditation:

God of wisdom and truth,
at the beginning of this new year
we look back and we look forward.

In the year that has passed
we experienced joy and we experienced sorrow;
we felt blessed and we felt challenged.
Some things went by much too fast,
and some things lingered for far too long.

Here in this place
we are reminded that you are present through it all.
We are reminded that we are never alone.
We are reminded that nothing can separate us from your love.

So at the beginning of this new year,
we pause now in silence
to reflect on the year that has passed.

We remember the things from this past year that we are most thankful for.
We recall the moments we were the happiest.
We consider the times we felt most alive.

We recognize the times we gave and received the most love.

We are grateful, God, that you were present in those times.

We also remember the things from this past year that we are least thankful for.

We recall the moments we were the least happy.

We consider the times we felt life draining from us.

We recognize the times we gave and received the least love.

We are grateful, God, that you were present in those times too.

Gracious God,

at the beginning of this new year,

we also look forward to the year to come.

We are confident that you will be with us still,

when we are thankful and when we are not;

when we are happy and when we are sad;

when we feel alive and when we feel drained;

when we give and receive love and when we do not.

God, the world we live in is messy and challenging,

it is the world of King Herod,

a world of pain,

a world of doubt,

a world of fear,

a world of jealousy,

a world of violence,

a world of domination,

a world of injustice,

a world of human failings.

Yet, God, you are with us always.

So give us grace and give us courage

to live faithfully in this imperfect world.

Remind us always of the promise of your kingdom,

emerging around us and through us.

It is for this kingdom that we now pray,

using the words Jesus taught 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: Matthew 2:1-6

HYMN: 187:

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim:

gold of obedience and incense of lowliness
bring and adore him, the Lord is his name.

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,
high on his heart he will bear it for thee,
comfort thy sorrows and answer thy prayerfulness,
guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
of the poor wealth thou would'st reckon as thine:
truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness,
these are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
he will accept for the name that is dear:
mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim:
gold of obedience and incense of lowliness
bring and adore him, the Lord is his name.

Reading: Mark 1:4-11

Reflection:

This particular Sunday of this particular year sits rather uneasily in the Christian calendar. It is technically the first Sunday of Epiphany when we might expect to be celebrating the arrival of the wise men to offer their gifts to Jesus. Our reading from Matthew this morning is one of the readings for Epiphany

But this Sunday is also the day when we are asked to celebrate the baptism of Jesus, in which we remember not just Jesus' baptism by John. Our reading from Mark is one of the readings for this Sunday.

Even though these two readings are meant to celebrate different things, they do share a common theme, and that is the greatness, the kingship, of Jesus.

The wise men who came from the East to search for Jesus were quite specific in their request, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' There seemed no doubt in their minds, nor in the mind of Herod or his advisers, that the one they were looking for was a king. For the wise men an object of reverence and worship; for Herod a potential threat to his throne and dynasty.

It's always interesting to ask why the authors of the gospels, writing from the perspective of a Christian church that is already established and growing, should include the stories they do in their accounts of Jesus' life, and Matthew seems to be making a kind of double edged point here. He is saying that Jesus is going to be a king, and a king acknowledged and respected not only by his own people the Jews, but also by the rich and powerful kingdoms of the east, symbolised by the wise men. Matthew's first point, then, is that Jesus is a king; and his second is that he will be a *good* king, respected by others, better, perhaps than any king the nation had ever had before. No wonder Herod was so upset.

In our reading from Mark, we find John the Baptist preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah, and proclaiming what kind of Messiah it was that he thought was on the way. John doesn't mention anything about a king, indeed, it seems that John's Messiah was expected to be a great religious leader.

And John described the coming one as 'one who is more powerful than I'. Coming from someone such as John who in today's terms would be a celebrity, an important figure in Jewish society certainly in and around Jerusalem, this was a high recommendation indeed. 'You think I'm popular and a powerful religious leader?' he seemed to be saying, 'Well I am nothing compared to the one who is to come. I am not worthy even to stoop down and untie his sandals.'

Although John doesn't mention the word 'king', there may well have been little doubt in the minds of those who followed him that he was talking about one who was to come would fill the shoes of the great kings of Israel and Judea. In those golden years of the kingdoms, the king reigned over the political, military *and* religious life of the nation. As the visit of the magi in Matthew's gospel spoke of the king who would be acknowledged as a political leader, so John welcomed the one who would be a religious leader. A political and military king like David, and a head of the religious life of the people, also like David.

In the following years and centuries, the Christian church embraced with enthusiasm the idea of Christ the King. Hymn and song books in particular are stuffed full of images of kings and crowns and thrones, many churches celebrate a special feast on the last Sunday of the Christian year, the Sunday before Advent, the feast of Christ the King, and of course we routinely talk about the Kingdom of God.

In these two readings from Matthew and Mark, then, we have a king who is a leader of a nation and a king who is a religious figure. These two king figures have arisen out of the Messianic expectation of the people of the time and have been adopted and magnified by the Christian church throughout its history from the very beginning of the church, when the gospels were written, right up to the twentieth century, when the feast of Christ the King was established.

But as always when we are studying the Bible, we find that there is always another way of looking at things, and that here there is another king, a third king, which we find mentioned in the gospel according to John. After performing the miracle of feeding the five thousand, John tells us, 'Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, and he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.' It would seem, strangely given all that we have read and said, that perhaps *Jesus didn't want to be a king*.

When we look at the way Jesus related to other people, particularly the poor, the sick and the marginalised, it seems very obvious that he didn't treat them as if he were their king and they were his subjects. The very highest status we might justifiably attribute to Jesus is that of a teacher, a rabbi. He certainly didn't behave like a king to them.

Of course we cannot say that the expectations of the Messiah described by Matthew and Mark were wrong. Nor can we say that the whole Christian church has been misguided for the last two thousand years in its reverence of Christ as King. But what we can perhaps say is that these expectations and that reverence describes only one aspect of Jesus. The idea of Jesus the King does not and should not overshadow the idea of Jesus the Teacher, Jesus the Healer, Jesus the Carpenter, Jesus the Leader, Jesus the Friend - and all the many other images we may have of Jesus to help us understand who he was and what he did.

We are perhaps not helped by our constant use of the expression 'the Kingdom of God', because of course to have a kingdom implies that we must also have a King. Some scholars have taken to using more accurate expressions like 'God's rule' or 'God's realm', in which the gospel values of love and justice and peace are seen to be supreme without the need for a single ruling

figure who holds all the power. For if there is one thing we can see quite clearly about Jesus from all of the gospels it is that he is not one who exerts power over other people. He is, as the song says, a servant king. One who allowed himself to become utterly helpless in the face of political and religious power, and whose passion for justice and peace expressed through non-violence led to his execution. In this image Jesus is a kind of anti-king who will not enforce his will, but who will teach, persuade, lead by example, and bring about God's realm not through victory and the suppression or destruction of enemies, but by converting conflict to peace, oppression to justice and hatred to love.

From heaven you came, helpless babe, entered our world, your glory veiled; not to be served but to serve, and give your life that we may live.

HYMN: 522:

From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, your glory veiled;
not to be served, but to serve,
and give your life that we might live.

Chorus

This is our God, the Servant King,
he calls us now to follow him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.

There in the garden of tears,
my heavy load he chose to bear;
his heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but yours', he said.

Chorus

Come see his hands and his feet,
the scars that speak of sacrifice,
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered.

Chorus

So let us learn how to serve,
and in our lives enthrone him;
each other's needs to prefer,
for it is Christ we're serving.

Chorus

Communion:

As Jesus shared meals with his friends long ago, so today we share this symbolic meal together. Separated by distance but united by faith, we eat and drink in his memory; we remember his life, his words and relationships; and we give thanks to God that his Spirit is with us to the end of the age.

The table of bread and cup is now made ready. It is our table, in our home; it is the table of Jesus and all who love him; it is an ordinary table, made holy by the presence of God's

Spirit; it is the table of sharing with the poor of the world, with whom Jesus identified himself; it is the table of communion with the earth, in which Christ became incarnate.

So come to this table, you who have much faith and you who would like to have more; you who have shared this meal often and you who have not done so for a long time; you who have tried to follow Jesus and you who have failed; come. It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.

Let us hear the story of the Last Supper as told by the apostle Paul:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, "this is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way he took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Let us pray.

Loving God, through your goodness we have this bread and wine to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. May we know your presence in the sharing of this bread, so that we may know your touch in all bread, all matter.

We celebrate the life that Jesus has shared among his community through the centuries, and shares with us now. Made one in Christ and one with each other, we offer these gifts of bread and cup and with them ourselves, a single, holy, living sacrifice.

And now we join with all your people in offering our prayer and praise...

Hear us, O Christ, and breathe your Spirit upon us and upon this bread and cup. May they become for us your body, vibrant with your life, healing, renewing and making us whole.

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 also 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.'

This bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ. Take and eat, this is the body of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

This cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ. This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ; do this in remembrance of him.

Prayer:

And now hear us as we bring our prayers for others: for those who look forward in this New Year to new developments in relationships, to new baby in the family, to a new job or a new beginning - bless and shield them on their way.

We pray for those who find it hard to look forward, to those whose lives are blighted by fear or despair, those chained by addiction, those caught in pain or disability, those struggling with illness, those saddened by loss - that they may know new strength, new hope, new purpose, new peace.

We pray for those who will face new challenges and opportunities - that they may be able to meet them with wisdom and courage.

We pray for those who work and battle daily to bring health and peace to people and to nations - that they will find new strength and vision.

We pray for those at war, under oppression, or in poverty - that they may know the chance of a new beginning.

We pray for our own family and friends, especially those away from home and who are much in our thoughts at this time - that your love will bring them closer to us.

We pray for the church throughout the world - that your faithful people everywhere are revived and renewed by the contemplation of this holy and hope-filled season - and for your church here, that in this community of faith we may walk forward together into the year ahead with hope and resolution, sharing one another's needs, bearing one another's burdens, listening to one another's concerns and insights, and deepening our common witness and service, so that we might play our part in bringing your kingdom a little closer to this world.

God of all life, at this new beginning, we give thanks for all those who have lived with us here and are now in your loving eternity, beyond the constraints of earthly time and space. Keep us ever in mind of them, that we may follow them, just as they followed in the steps of Jesus.

May your spirit, which sang in them, sing in us until the Kingdom of Heaven rules on earth.

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 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 live in peace; love and compassion in the name of Christ;
and may the Spirit of God which filled John and Jesus,
fill our hearts, minds and spirits;
may the power of God which upheld them,
strengthen us for each day;
and may the love of God which directed their every action
be our guiding light and our shining star,
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