



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

Sunday 25th February 2024

Call to Worship:

Lent calls us to journey, this and every day,
following Jesus wherever he leads us.

**Lent calls us to journey:
to the place where all are welcome;
where struggle and sacrifice lead to life in abundance.**

Lent calls us to worship together,
to tell future generations the good news.

**Lent calls us to practice justice,
to bring God's hope to all people.**

Lent calls us to faithful living,
to trust the One who gives us life.
**Lent calls each of us to take up our cross,
to trust the One who bears it with us.**

Lent calls us to journey with God.
**Let us worship God, who walks with us,
this and every day.**

Prayer/Meditation:

O, God of love, power and faithfulness,
We journey with your son,
ever closer to Jerusalem,
to his cross, his true destiny.

We hear his words
“Take up your cross and follow me,”
but we aren't sure if it's the crosses of this life,
or the actual cross of death.

We hear his words,
“deny your self,”
and wonder which self it is;
the self we put on for others,
or the self centered self
that wants it all for ourselves?

Whichever it is,

it seems as if Jesus
is asking a lot of us
and we aren't sure we can do it.

God we need your holy spirit
to be able to do this.
God we need your grace and mercy
to be able to do this.

We remember
that you empowered your disciples,
the early Christians,
and others who decided to follow you,
we believe that you will do the same for us.

Yet it is too easy, God
for faith to become an escape
—a way to avoid the pain of being human and alive;
or a path to success
—a way to persuade the universe to give us the things we want;
or a system of control
—a way to bend others to our will

But the faith you offer is different, Jesus,
more dangerous and compelling;

It's the faith that carries the cross,
that embraces death
and lays itself down for the sake of others;

It's the only faith that can lead us to resurrecton
to life renewed and overflowing.

We praise you for this faith, God,
and open our hearts to receive it.

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 17:1-7

Hymn 64:

I lift my eyes
to the quiet hills
in the press of a busy day;
as green hills stand

in a dusty land
so God is my strength and stay

I lift my eyes
to the quiet hills
to a calm that is mine to share;
secure and still
in the Father's will
and kept by the Father's care.

I lift my eyes
to the quiet hills
with a prayer as I turn to sleep;
by day, by night,
through the dark and light
my Shepherd will guard his sheep.

I lift my eyes
to the quiet hills
and my heart to the Father's throne;
in all my ways
to the end of days
the Lord will preserve his own.

Reading: Mark 8:31-38

Reflection:

In Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, twelve-year-old Pi decides to explore a number of different religions in his native India. Investigating Christianity, he has a conversation with a Roman Catholic priest, Father Martin, who explains to him about the crucifixion of Jesus. Pi, reflecting later on the conversation, thinks to himself:

"That a god should put up with adversity, I could understand. The gods of Hinduism face their fair share of thieves, bullies, kidnappers and usurpers But humiliation? Death? I couldn't imagine Lord Krishna consenting to be stripped naked, whipped, mocked, dragged through the streets and, to top it off, crucified -- and at the hands of mere humans, to boot. It was wrong of this Christian God to let His avatar (His Son) die. That is tantamount to letting a part of Himself die.. If God on the Cross is God shamming a human tragedy, it turns the Passion of Christ into the Farce of Christ. The death of the Son must be real. Father Martin assured me that it was. But once a dead God, always a dead God, even resurrected. The horror must be real. Why would God wish that upon Himself? Why not leave death to the mortals? Why make dirty what is beautiful, spoil what is perfect? Love. That was Father Martin's answer."

Pi's confusion here was exactly the same as Peter's in our story from the gospel according to Mark. Mark doesn't tell us what Peter actually said -- only that Peter "took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him." But Jesus' response is startling. "Get behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

We might have some sympathy with Peter. It can't have been easy to hear your leader say he was going to suffer and die. "Surely not!" Peter might say. "What kind of god would suffer and die for humans?" we hear Pi say. *Love* was Father Martin's answer.

So Jesus explains, and uses the image of the cross. Of course, the people in Jesus' time would understand the reference to the "cross" that was used by the Romans for executions. We often refer to the "cross" as something we personally carry in life -- sickness, for instance, or a difficulty of some kind, or a personal problem. While these understandings are valid enough, this isn't what Jesus is talking about here.

What he's talking about is discipleship. Jesus lays out the cost of discipleship here. This "cross" Jesus talks about is what sets apart those who want to be his followers from that part of the world that focuses only on selfishness, oppression, and greed.

Jesus reminds us that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Those who are really serious about being Jesus' disciples will lose their lives. In effect we die and become new people, as is prefigured in the Old Testament story of the covenant with Abram which we read today. To emphasise this transformation, Abram is given a new name. He has become Abraham, the father of a nation.

Jesus doesn't seem to be saying here that those who want to save their life *might* lose it, *might* have to give up something crucial. He's saying lose it! He's saying that if we're serious, life will be different. We won't fit into the world in the same way.

But strangely, we look around and see people we consider to be very good people, very godly people, looking very normal. They work and play and pray and move about in society quite normally. They seem to fit. And we do the same. *We* work and play and pray and move about in society quite normally. *We* seem to fit. There certainly are still those who physically lose, or are in danger of losing, their lives for the sake of the gospel: people like Martin Luther King, missionaries in the Middle East, people who work with the poor in Latin America or Africa - whoe spewak out against corruption and oppression. But we can't imagine that ever happening to us. Are we in danger of having the son of man be ashamed of us when he comes in the glory of his Father with the Holy Spirit? Does Jesus have nothing to say to *us* in this part of Mark's Gospel?

Of course he speaks to us.. This image of losing our lives isn't only physical. When Scripture speaks about "the world" in this way, it means the world's way of operating -- the system, not the planet. It's not speaking of the created stuff of the world, that wonderful gift of earthly beauty, but the way we deal with it and with each other -- *kosmos* meaning "orderly arrangement" or "system." Jesus challenges us to consider where that *kosmos* came from. God didn't set up our political or economic or social systems; we did. God didn't tell us to look at other people as markets or competitors or enemies; we did that ourselves. What Jesus challenges us to do is to lose that way of thinking -- *die* to it -- and take on God's order, God's way, God's *kingdom*. Then the planet becomes ours in trust from God, other people become our brothers and sisters, and our goal becomes fostering God's way of operating rather than this world's, rather than business as usual.

Jesus was crucified because the religious and political and social establishments -- Jewish and Roman alike -- found him to be a threat. Jesus' disciples can't expect anything different, can they, if they are real disciples and not just disciples in name only? Few of us, I hope, will get hung on crosses to die. But many of us may find ourselves looked at strangely sometimes, or shut

out of “the best” company, or made to feel disrespected and unwelcome, simply because our values are not the ones “everybody” -- the world -- accepts. Our business as disciples of Jesus is to follow him, not what “everybody” does, or even “the best” or “the leaders.”

Peter eventually understood discipleship and as we know, paid the ultimate cost of that discipleship. Most of us, I hope, will at least come to understand a disciple’s connection to Jesus as the young boy Pi did. He said, “I couldn’t get Jesus out of my head. Still can’t. I spent three solid days thinking about Him. The more He bothered me, the less I could forget Him. And the more I learned about Him, the less I wanted to leave Him.”

If we are his disciples, our goal is not to get ahead but to get closer to God, not to be successful but to be faithful, not to gain this world’s approval but God’s.

HYMN 654:

We turn to you, O God of every nation,
giver of good and origin of life;
your love is at the heart of all creation,
your hurt is people's pain in war and death.

We turn to you that we may be forgiven
for crucifying Christ on earth again.
We know that we have never wholly striven
to share with all the promise of your reign.

Free every heart from pride and self-reliance,
our ways of thought inspire with simple grace;
break down among us barriers of defiance,
speak to the soul of all the human race.

On all who work on earth for right relations
We pray the light of love from hour to hour.
Grant wisdom to the leaders of the nations,
the gift of carefulness to those in power.

Teach us, good Lord, to serve the need of others,
help us to give and not to count the cost.
Unite us all to live as sisters, brothers,
defeat our Babel with your Pentecost!

Prayer:

I invite you now to spend a few moments in your own prayer, in words or in silence, or in reflecting upon the words we have read and the stories we have heard in our worship today. . .

Hear our prayers, loving God, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 602:

Forth in the peace of Christ we go;
Christ to the world with joy we bring;
Christ in our minds, Christ on our lips,
Christ in our hearts, the world's true King.

King of our hearts, Christ makes us kings;
kingship with him his servants gain;
with Christ, the Servant-Lord of all,
Christ's world we serve to share Christ's reign

Priests of the world, Christ sends us forth,
this world of time to consecrate,
our world of sin by grace to heal,
Christ's world in Christ to recreate.

Prophets of Christ, we hear his Word:
he claims our minds, to search his ways,
he claims our lips, to speak his truth,
he claims our hearts, to sing his praise.

We are his Church, he makes us one:
here is one hearth for all to find,
here is one flock, one Shepherd-King,
here is one faith, one heart, one mind.

Benediction

For those who have watched over us,
for those that have protected us,
for those that have shielded us,
thanks be to the Lord,
maker of heaven and earth.

For the roof that shades us from the sun,
for the walls that shield us from the storm,
for the bed that warms us in the night,
thanks be to the Lord,
maker of heaven and earth.

To the one who keeps us from evil,
to the one who preserves our life,
to the one who watches over our coming and going,
thanks be to the Lord,
maker of heaven and earth.

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