



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

Sunday 4th February 2024

Welcome to worship for Sunday 4th February 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:

In all our weakness and strength,
with our youth-filled spirits and aging bodies,
we come to be your people, O God.
Strong in faith and eager with questions,
singing our praise and whispering our prayers,
we come to be your people, O God.
Filled with saintly determination
yet mindful of our human limitations,
we come to be your people, O God.
Made strong in your endless love for us,
we know ourselves to be yours and
we come to be your people, O God.
May we truly become your people today.

Prayer/Meditation:

Gather us in, the brokenhearted and the joyful.
Gather us in, the weak and the strong.
Gather us in, the fearful and the brave.
Gather us in, the young and the old.
Gather us in, to sing of God's works.
Gather us in, to praise Jesus Christ.
Gather us in, to worship and wonder.
Gather us in, to know of God's love.

Lord,
In the midst of Winter,
when the days are cold and wind can pierce
..... remind us of the warmth of your love.

In the midst of Winter,
when days are short, dawn comes late, and dusk arrives early
..... remind us that in the darkness your light still shines.

In the midst of Winter,
when the flowers of spring still lie hidden in the earth,
when leaves are off the trees,
and the world can seem bleak
.... remind us that Easter is but a short time away.

And when in our lives
we feel as if we are experiencing a season of winter,
reach out to us with the power of your resurrection
so that we may feel the warmth of your love
and see your light
that alone can take away the darkness of our soul.

God of Light,
we confess that we have gone astray and have left Your light.
We follow the dim lights of the world of success and fortune.
We follow the dim lights
that call us to be more religious by following rules.
We follow the fading light of personal salvation.
Forgive us for not seeking the true Light,
of Your love for all the world.
Forgive us for not following the ways of Jesus,
who commanded us to love one another.
Call us to be light-bearers of love, compassion and justice,
in which the Mystery of Your Love is revealed.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, we pray.

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: Isaiah 40:21-31

HYMN: 492

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways!
Reclothe us in our rightful mind;
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs
who heard beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word,
rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity
interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all
our words and works that drown
the tender whisper of thy call,
as noiseless let thy blessing fall
as fell thy manna down.

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!

Reading: Mark 1: 29 - 39

Reflection:

You may recall that last Sunday we looked at the story of the Garden of Eden, and wondered how that mythical story could still have relevance in the present day. We discovered that valuable truths could be gleaned from the story and others like it, by interpreting it from our contemporary perspective of scientific understanding.

It's easy to do that with many of the stories from the Old Testament, but what if we try to apply the same thing to the gospels? Are we in danger of denying the truth of the life, ministry and mission of Jesus? Are we in danger of dismissing the gospel stories of Jesus' miracles and healings and exorcisms as just some kind of superstition? On the other hand, if we accept all the gospel stories as literal fact without the need for interpretation, and without looking at them through the eyes of those who first heard them, are we in danger of obscuring the central message of Jesus' mission and teaching?

What about the assumption that Jesus had God-like strengths and gifts? The gospel in several places implies that Jesus seems worn out by the end of the day, and needs to go off to a quiet place alone for a time of prayer and meditation. Jesus according to the gospel showed many human weaknesses and limitations. He reportedly could preach a great sermon, but not all who heard him were affected to the extent their lives were changed. Certainly he was a great debater, but his replies enraged some as well as convinced others.

But beneath all there is of course the question we would prefer that was not asked. In his healing was Jesus actually doing what all would agree are miracles? There is a common belief

that Jesus could do actual miracles in which the laws of nature were suspended at will. Yet if so, since the laws of nature are very firmly in place for us today, does that mean that whatever Jesus was doing is actually beyond our reach? Some get angry when this is questioned because they say it is not right to even raise such matters where faith is sufficient.

But can we at least allow the answer that there is no way of knowing. Whatever Jesus was doing was recorded years after the event - and Mark as the recorder was not there.

Jesus' times were very different from our own. For example, leprosy in those times was associated with many skin conditions other than Hansen's disease. Even death was hard to establish without stethoscopes and a host of modern techniques. When someone is reported as recovering, if you don't know whether they had a condition not able to be dealt with by natural processes of the body's immune system, and if you have no way of checking whether the cure was effective, certainty about miracles is impossible.

We already know that different versions of the same event in the gospels can differ in some details. We might suspect that a degree of exaggeration may have crept in, and there may be few, if any, stories that show Jesus was operating outside the laws of nature. Clearly miracles were part of the thinking in those days when demons and strange happenings were rationalized with a different mind-set to what we might consider today. Perhaps we can only appreciate what is written if we try to see it with the ancient mind rather than with a modern analysis.

We might also note in passing that while miracles are frequently mentioned by the gospel writers, the most prolific New Testament writer Paul does not consider it important enough to even mention one miracle of Jesus outside the resurrection.

If we discovered that Jesus was not some all powerful deity who could click his fingers and heal with a touch, would that cause us to abandon our faith? No, because if Jesus were indeed superhuman and could deal with every situation, this is so far from the realities we face and the weaknesses we experience that we could do little more than worship him and leave it to others to attempt the actual Christian walk.

There is for example a caricature of Christian witness you may have encountered, that has large groups of people gathering in worship to chant repetitious songs and prayers reminding God or Jesus how great he is - and pleading with him to fix all the current problems. There is probably no harm in this when those present are actually doing their best in becoming involved in dealing with day to day problems for which they are praying. There are always situations of injustice, the need for visiting the sick and the prisoners, feeding the poor, making peace, righting injustice or befriending the mentally ill.

If we use our prayer to focus on such situations as a preparation for involvement, this can only be positive. There is nothing wrong with genuinely praying for the strength to do that which is beyond us and using that prayer to sort out our thinking. But prayer removed from a willingness to do anymore than add our words to those of others approaches hypocrisy.

Using prayer as a substitute for action seems a parody of what Jesus showed mission to be. There may even be a degree of escapism in worship that extols Jesus and presents great lists of problems to lay at his feet in prayer rather than following his lead, rather than struggling with actual problems within the constraints of reality.

Jesus had to cope with some very realistic problems and even he did not bring all the answers by way of complete solutions. If we are indeed trying to follow in his footsteps - and what is more following into a world which has changed beyond recognition - there is every

probability that the problems have become even more complex and challenging. In this case, to simply accept Christian belief and say 'Jesus is Lord' does not mean that everything is done and dusted.

We need to examine the questions for ourselves - and not be afraid of the answers. As disciples of Jesus, we have signed up for a journey (not a destination), and one for which each step needs thought and planning to deal with actual not abstract realities.

So what if Jesus was subject to the limitations of his world and recognized reality - only helping where he could help? That is a positive message for us today, for although our context is different, at least Jesus' way does not make other worldly demands. To follow in his way, we too must help where we can. We should not be surprised that we cannot walk on water, or summon a spirit to banish an incurable disease. What we are called to do is to offer support and friendship to the afflicted - and like Jesus be prepared to tackle what we can of the problems that come our way.

And yes, we are called to faith. Faith that we are genuinely prepared to trust in God and risk following Jesus in the real world -sometimes with fear and trembling, but sharing the faith of Jesus in God, who, as Isaiah reminds us:

is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

HYMN 624:

Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation,
Spirit of life, by whom all things are made,
through the thick darkness covering every nation,
light to our blindness, come now to our aid!
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done

Rulers and peoples, still we stand divided,
and, sharing not our griefs, no joy can share;
by wars and tumults Love is mocked, derided,
his conquering cross no kingdom wills to bear:
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

Envious of heart, blind-eyed, with tongues confounded
nation by nation still goes unforgiven;
in wrath and fear, by jealousies surrounded,
building proud towers which shall not reach to heaven
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

Lust of possession causes desolations;
and meekness has no honour in the earth.
Led by no star, the rulers of the nations
still fail to bring us to the blissful birth:
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

How shall we love you, holy, hidden Being,
unless we love the world which you have made?
O , give us surer love, for better seeing
your Word made flesh and in a manger laid:
Your kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.

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.

Prayers for Others

In his name our troubled hearts speak to you, God, of those many people whose needs are great and whose comforts are few.

We speak to you of our concern for places where there is conflict, violence, and misery: war ravaged countries, domestic cruelty, bullying in school grounds, workplace intimidation, gang warfare on streets, or terrorist attacks.

We speak to you of our concern for all displaced people: in refugee camps, fugitives from oppression, those crowded on unseaworthy boats, those in detention centres, and for all separated families and traumatised children.

We speak to you of our concern for neighbours, workmates, or members of our own families who are 'doing it tough;' the unemployed and the disabled, some fighting terminal illness, others in despair from broken relationships, some grieving a death, many caught up in predicaments for which there seems no obvious answer.

We speak to you of our concern for the church: with its flourishing or weak congregations, some living in comfort and others surviving under persecution, some filled with self doubts and some with over self-confidence, churches where there is conflict and churches where there is compassion and a warm welcome,

We speak to you now loving God of ourselves: Help us, in our own small way, to be more like your compassionate Christ. Shape our thoughts, sift our feelings, supervise our efforts, bless our abilities, that we may get the best out of each day and give the best to those around us. Through the grace of Christ Jesus our 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 200:

The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,

and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
and all things cry 'Glory!' to God all in all.

Benediction:

May we run and not be weary.
May we rise up on the wings of eagles.
May we know without doubt
that the everlasting God goes with us!

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with each of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more. Amen