



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church

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

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2024

## Call to Worship:

Let us share with God our hopes for the world:  
a world in which all people are treated with tolerance and respect;  
a world whose resources we gladly share with each other and with the generations to come;  
a world in which it is possible to live together in  
peace and love;  
a world of freedom, justice and harmony;  
a world of hope, love and peace.

## Prayer/Meditation:

God of the ordinary,  
we praise you.  
You take the drabness of our thoughts,  
and brighten them into vivid imagination.  
You take our everyday lives,  
and transform them into holy, precious moments.  
You take our meagre offerings  
and multiply them into an abundance of delight.  
Extraordinary God,  
you light up our thoughts, our lives, our selves  
with the wonder of your call.

From familiar and comfortable spaces,  
You call us: Go.  
In the dead of night when questions burn,  
You invite us: Come.  
Where there is flesh and fellowship,  
You beckon us: Draw near.

Coming and going.  
Gathering and parting.  
Growing and grieving.  
We are so keenly aware, O God,  
that life does not stand still.  
Life moves us.  
Life changes us.  
And so do you.  
You coax and command,  
you question and reckon,  
you do not leave us unchanged.  
We hold in our hearts and before you

all those who are experiencing  
the stresses and heartaches of life's changes:  
those in mourning,  
those without hope,  
those who are alone.  
those who are bone-weary.

We share the joy and offer thanksgiving  
alongside those who are braving new adventures,  
those who are welcoming new life,  
those who are affirming love,  
those who are striding with others toward justice.

In all of life,  
in all of our travels,  
in all of our doubts,  
and in all of our endeavours;  
as you call us and send us,  
welcome us and keep us;  
above all else, you do not leave us.  
No matter the changes, you remain.  
We praise you, Gracious God. Amen

We praise you loving and eternal God  
for your love of all people  
expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.  
We praise you for his commitment to justice,  
his zeal for true worship of you  
and his willingness to replace all other sacrifices  
with the sacrifice of his own life.  
In his name we offer you our worship

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: Numbers 21:4-9

Hymn 102:

Praise the Lord, his glories show,  
Alleluia!  
saints within his courts below,  
Alleluia!  
angels round his throne above,  
Alleluia!  
all that see and share his love.  
Alleluia!

Earth to heaven, and heaven to earth,  
Alleluia!  
tell his wonders, sing his worth;  
Alleluia!  
age to age and shore to shore,  
Alleluia!  
praise him, praise him evermore!  
Alleluia!

Praise the Lord, his mercies trace;  
Alleluia!  
praise his providence and grace,  
Alleluia!  
all that he for us has done,  
Alleluia!  
all he sends us through his Son.  
Alleluia!

Strings and voices, hands and hearts,  
Alleluia!  
in the concert play your parts;  
Alleluia!  
all that breathe, your Lord adore,  
Alleluia!  
praise him, praise him evermore!  
Alleluia!

Reading: John 3: 14-21

Reflection:

The book of Numbers takes its name from a census described in the first four chapters, taken to determine how many able-bodied men would be available to go to war. The Hebrew name for the book is *Ba-Midbar*, which means 'in the wilderness' and is much more appropriate as 34 of the book's 36 chapters describe the Israelites' wanderings through the desert.

It's not the most edifying book the world; it describes a relationship between the people and their God that is often tense and angry, and in its later chapters there is a series of battles with the tribes they encounter on their travels. Again and again the Israelites come up against the kings and leaders of rival nations, and again and again the story ends with the words 'Israel put him to the sword and took possession of his land'.

In chapter 21 there is an infestation of venomous snakes, and Moses, at God's behest, makes a talisman, a bronze snake on a pole 'and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live'.

Jesus makes reference to the bronze serpent, saying that as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness so too he will be lifted up - we take this to refer to his crucifixion - and that as those who gazed on the bronze serpent would live, so those who believe in him may have eternal life.

Then follows that wonderful poetic verse (John 3:16), perhaps the most well-known verse in the gospel, which the King James version renders as: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*”

This is of course a huge contrast with the Old Testament God of the book of Numbers who leads the people to the slaughter of their enemies and the seizure of their land - yet history teaches us that even this famous verse has not proved to be the final definition of true Christian faith which enables us to live at peace with our neighbours and be at one with creation. In fact this particular verse, John 3: 16, taken in its most superficial meaning may well have been as responsible as an excuse for violence and unkindness perpetrated in the name of Jesus as any other verse of the Bible.

Whosoever believes in him shall not perish. A casual reading with this part of the verse allows us to think..... Aha .....therefore anyone will perish if they don't believe, therefore with that much at stake let us force them to belief.... and of course by belief, we mean our sort of belief!

History teaches for example that this verse has provided an excuse for saying ‘since the Muslims and Jews won't believe in Jesus and are dangerous to salvation because they are not teaching the Christian truth’- very well then, let us make life difficult for them until they are *forced* to believe’. This provided the excuse for the Crusades where the Muslim unbelievers were put to the sword by the thousand. This is also partly why for centuries there were pogroms against Jews right through Europe - massacres, house burnings, removing their legal rights.

Then there were those a few hundred years ago who said the Catholics won't believe in Jesus the same way as we as Protestants do, and churches were defaced and destroyed. And we can't think that all this is now safely locked away in the distant past. I can well remember my parents' suspicion and uneasiness when a Roman Catholic family moved into the house across the back. And even today the curse of sectarianism blights some parts of the United Kingdom.

Yet even although the verse says: whosoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life, it is only at the most superficial level that these words could be seen as a statement of faith. Announcing that you are saved is hardly the same as living as a believer. Jesus elsewhere makes it very clear what it means to believe in him. “In so far as you do it to the least of your neighbours you do it unto me”. Surely this means that to believe in Jesus means adopting and following his ways.

Jesus was accused of eating with prostitutes and tax collectors. So, presumably believing in him means caring about those in society who are different to us. Jesus also taught that those not recognized as having the right religious credentials can be the ones living in accordance with his teachings. If this can be applied to Samaritans - then surely it equally applies to Hindus or Muslims. This time of Lent, traditionally a time of self examination, is a good time to ask ourselves honestly if we can see evidence that we are taking his words seriously by the way we are living.

A superficial reading of John 3: 16 also causes us to overlook how the verse starts. *For God so loved the world* - it doesn't say, the Western world - nor even only the human part of the world.

Believing in Jesus, who for us personifies this love for the world, may then mean we have to genuinely start caring about those of other cultures and other creeds. If the world is more than just the human race - then perhaps belief also means we should be insisting on caring for creation with its precarious ecosystems and millions of interacting life forms.

If we cannot get the basics of Jesus' teaching, with his down to earth message about how we should be interacting with one another and further if we don't have the vital experience of living this life in practice, there is little point to rushing to certainty about the theology of salvation. Berating unbelievers with theological words instead of offering genuine friendship and compassion is hardly demonstrating belief in Jesus' way.

In his poem, "From the Place Where We Are Right," the German-born Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai put it this way:

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the Spring.

The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plough.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined  
house once stood. [\[1\]](#)

And one final thought. God loves the world. So often in Christianity we judge and condemn the world. There are Christian websites by the hundred whose only purpose seems to be to tell us what's wrong with the world. We ourselves find it easier to be critical of the secular society than to love it. We sometimes lay the blame for all the church's woes at the feet of the world. Why are there fewer people in church on Sundays? Because many are enticed by the world to go shopping or engage in leisure activities? Why are there so few children interested in the Christian faith? Because the world of social media has kidnapped them and carried them away to an interesting, entertaining, and rather sinister dangerous place? But how often do we look to ourselves?

In the midst of this Lenten journey, may we allow our doubts and questions to dig into our certainty. May we be broken open by a love that evades even our wildest imagining until, at last, we come to the foot of the cross.

#### HYMN 337

O lift us up, strong Son of God;  
restore our fallen race;  
we who have marred your image shall  
regain it through your grace.

The subtle serpent of our sin  
ensnares our helpless feet;  
the lifted serpent of your health  
can make our souls complete.

And you, who came into the world

to take our human frame,  
did not condemn our fallen state,  
but took away our shame.

Your law is holy, just and good;  
but still we fail to do  
all that your gracious words require  
to keep us close to you.

So lift us up, strong Son of God,  
restore your fallen race;  
we who have lost your image shall  
regain it through your grace.

Prayer:

For all we have heard, and for all we have seen:  
**Thanks be to God**

For all we have received and the hope we have been given:  
**Thanks be to God**

For signs of God's presence here among us:  
**Thanks be to God**

For peace and commitment which the world cannot destroy:  
**Thanks be to God**

For the promise of love, now and forever:  
**Thanks be to God**

God of compassion,  
be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation.  
In their loneliness, be their consolation;  
in their anxiety, be their hope;  
in their darkness, be their light;  
through him who suffered alone on the cross,  
but reigns with you in glory,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lord Jesus,  
To the weary and overburdened,  
You said, 'Come to me, and I will give you rest.'  
Calm our fears and anxieties,  
Sustain your church in faith, hope and love,  
Bring our world through its tumult,  
Grant wisdom to those with heavy responsibilities,  
And health and comfort to those who are sick.

Spirit of healing and hope,  
give skill, sympathy and resilience  
to all who are caring for the sick,  
and your wisdom to those searching for a cure.  
Strengthen them,  
that through their work health and strength may be restored;  
through Jesus Christ 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 prayers, loving God, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 520:

For ourselves no longer living,  
let us live for Christ alone;  
of ourselves more strongly giving,  
go as far as he has gone:  
one with God who chose to be  
one with us to set us free.

If we are to live for others,  
share, as equals, human worth,  
join the round of sisters, brothers,  
that encircles all the earth!  
All the fullness earth affords,  
is the people's, is the Lord's.

Fighting fear and exploitation  
is our daily common call;  
finding selfhood, building nations,  
sharing what we have with all.  
As the birds that soar in flight,  
let us rise towards the light.

Let us rise and join the forces  
that combine to do God's will,  
wisely using earth's resources,  
human energy and skill.  
Let us now, by love released,  
celebrate the future's feast!

Benediction

Let us rejoice: God so loves the world!  
May God our Maker  
send us back into the world  
with creative energies refreshed.

May Christ the Light

illuminate our darkest moments.

And may the Holy Spirit of steadfast love  
guide us until we worship together again.

May the love of God, Creator, Christ and Spirit, enfold, comfort and uphold us and those we  
love, this day and forevermore.