



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 17th March 2024

Call to Worship:

Each day is a gift from God,
each moment is an opportunity to reach out
in service to all creation.
Each day is a reminder of the new covenant:
not written on stone tablets easily broken,
but inscribed on our hearts filled with joy and hope.
Each day we draw closer to God:
who has forgotten more than we ever learn;
who has forgiven us more than we ever acknowledge.

Prayer/Meditation:

Hear and believe the good news: God has called us “my people”!
God has set up a covenant, over and over again,
choosing us even before we can choose,
faithful even when we are faltering.
In the flood, in the wilderness, in exile;
in certainty and doubt, abundance and scarcity;
God’s promise is true to the thousandth generation.
We see the rainbow, we hear our names, we learn the commandments,
we look up for our help, we know in our hearts:
we love because God first loved us,
we follow because God first came to us,
we can be faithful because God is faithful.
Come, let us worship God together.

Jesus said: I am the vine, you are the branches
Lord Jesus, we come to draw on your strength for apart from you we can do nothing. We come
to offer praise and thanks for all the ways in which you sustain us - living water, a word in
season, gifts of bread and wine, the company of disciples.

Jesus said: As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you
Lord Jesus, as by faith and imagination we walk with you in these weeks towards Jerusalem, we
worship you for the love you show us. In this time of worship draw us close that we might see
you better and love You more.

Jesus said: If you heed my commands, you will dwell in my love
Lord Jesus, we have not always heeded your commands. Love of self drives our behaviour we
ignore our neighbours’ needs we will not forgive those who wrong us we will not care for this
good earth.

Jesus said: I have spoken this to you, so that my joy may be in you and your joy complete
Lord Jesus, help us to know your reconciling and forgiving love. As we recall your sacrifice for
us, may we recognise the sufficiency of your grace.

Jesus said: This is my commandment, that you love one another
Lord Jesus, in this holy season, help us to love one another as disciples should. May the
community of the Church be a taste of the Kingdom already begun.

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: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hymn 67:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious,
thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains, high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest,
to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish-but naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory: O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.
And so let thy glory, Almighty, impart,
through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

Reading: John 12:20-33

Reflection:

Sometimes in the Bible there are little throwaway lines that we hardly even notice, but must have a story behind them. Here's one we read earlier from the gospel according to John: 'Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. What were Greeks doing at the Jewish passover? And why did they ask to see Jesus? It would have been interesting to be a fly on the wall while Andrew and Philip were discussing it. They must have been confused about these outsiders who were bold enough to approach Jesus to speak with him. It seems that Philip and Andrew went together to hear Jesus' reaction, wondering what their Jewish teacher and master would say about these Gentiles, who lacked the cultural benefit of a heritage under

the Law.

John doesn't tell us what exactly these Gentiles were doing at the Passover festival in Jerusalem, except that they came with others who were there to worship. All we know is that it was a mixed-up society, like ours is today, with people of all sorts of religious and cultural persuasions passing through, some staying, some vying for dominance, others wanting simply enough space to survive. John doesn't tell us what the Greeks' questions were, but we can guess from Jesus' answer that it might have had something to do with their place in his message of salvation. Was Jesus' message only for the Jews? If so, which Jews? Was it for the Gentiles, too? If so, which Gentiles? They knew the rules of the Jewish faith - maybe they wanted to know the rules of the new Kingdom of which Jesus spoke.

Part of our Lenten journey is about wrestling with rules in the wilderness. About discovering how we should live as Christian people; what we should do and say to serve God's Kingdom in the best way we can; what are the rules of Christian life? If we have to follow rules, whose rules? Our own? The church's? God's? So much controversy in the church recently has been around these issues, and when the debate gets really heated, all sides start quoting chapter and verse to support their own set of rules, their own version of what it means to be Christian. Like those ancient Greeks wanting to see Jesus, we want to know who's really saved, who's got the answers, who's living the right life. And, if we're not fairly unusual, we've each been spending Lent trying to figure out the answer to that question, so we know whose understanding of the Gospel is correct, just so we can get our acts cleaned up in time for Easter.

We receive some comforting words from the ancient prophetic voice of Jeremiah today. At least we know that our controversy over rules is nothing new. Jeremiah spoke at a time when the Babylonian empire had all but destroyed ancient Israel. The Hebrew people were plucked up from their homeland and scattered in foreign countries, surrounded by strange religions. Without their central place of worship, the Temple in Jerusalem, the Hebrews were asking difficult questions about the source of their identity. Like us, they wanted to know what rules they should follow, the standard of behavior that would keep them in contact with their God and hold them together as a people.

Jeremiah's response is as frustrating as it is hopeful. He speaks of a new covenant, one which will be written on the hearts of God's people, one that will bring such intimate knowledge of God that, in fact, all the old rules will no longer be necessary. It's a powerful image, but it is far from easy. This new covenant with God is actually a tough, difficult proposition. This deal is sealed by the carving of the Law into the human heart, the center of human life. There is no external marking to identify God's people. The identifying mark is internal. In this new understanding, belief in God touches and tempers the very heart of human desire, always turning the human creature toward the Creator God, no matter what that person's life circumstance may be. And just as the people will be recognized as God's own by their turning to God, so God is revealed in the way the people live their lives. This is an awesome responsibility for them. It means that the world will come to know God because of what they see in God's people. If *our* behavior is considered a reflection of the kind of God we believe in, what are we saying about that God when we sin, when we use our God-given freedom to choose that which is not God? It's the image of Christianity has struggled for two thousand years trying to reconcile itself with this new covenant. If church history says anything at all, it tells us how much trouble we've had believing that God's law is in our hearts. We are so much more inclined to write canon laws and set up regulations for everything from our liturgies to our church membership details, rather than to take Jeremiah's call seriously.

This is a terrible way to leave us near the end of Lent. Just when we're supposed to have

ourselves prepared for Easter, we are confronted with some sense that our effort to follow rules is all backwards. Today's readings are telling us that all of us are missing the point in our theological and ecclesiastical disagreements, our bitter disputes over what constitutes "right" behavior, our tireless pursuit of perfecting ourselves when every "correction" seems to raise a multitude of new problems.

If we are troubled by the present state of things in the church and in the world, we are exactly where we need to be at the end of Lent. If we are confused and disturbed by our own lack of certainty about things, then that is exactly how we should feel. It is because of our very confusion that we are actually more inclined to stop and listen for the voice of God, the thunder that the bystanders hear in today's Gospel, the thunder that comes rolling into the midst of our unsettled hearts and announces God's presence with us.

And then we are called simply to serve and to follow, the only instruction that Jesus seems to give regarding the Greek visitors. That's all that Jesus asks of each of us; that's all that Christ demands of the church. But we all know what that means. Following means giving up the security of our rules. It involves walking the path to the cross, a place where our confusion and Christ's confusion come together in a terrible moment of pain and suffering, a place where our rules don't work at all anymore and all our systems break down. *It may be a winding and confusing road, with lots of twists and turns. It may lead us over difficult and unfamiliar territory. It might bring us to somewhere we'd rather not be.*

It's a grim message, but one that seems worthy of the last part of Lent. So we must follow, we must listen to the confusing thunder of God's voice in our lives and continue our troubled journey to the cross. It does not promise to be a fun time for any of us.

But Christ's promise never leaves us without hope, for we are told that Christ will rise again and draw us together into the heart of God. It is this hope in Easter that will be our strength through the coming Holy Week. It promises, in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, to write God's law of love within us, in the very depths of our hearts.

HYMN 484:

We come unto our faithful God,
the Rock of our Salvation;
the eternal arms, that sure abode,
we make our habitation;
we seek thee as thy saints have sought;
we bring thee, Lord, the praise they brought,
in every generation.

The fire divine their steps that led
still goeth bright before us;
the heavenly shield around them spread
is still uplifted o'er us;
the grace those sinners that subdued,
the strength those weaklings that renewed,
doth vanquish, doth restore us.

Their joy unto their Lord we bring;
their song to us descendeth;
the Spirit who in them did sing
to us his music lendeth;
his song in them, in us, is one;
we raise it high, we send it on,

the song that never endeth.

Ye saints to come, take up the strain,
the same sweet theme endeavour;
unbroken be the golden chain;
keep on the song for ever;
safe in the same dear dwelling-place,
rich with the same eternal grace,
bless the same boundless Giver.

Prayer:

God, your faithful love surrounds us,
and we give you thanks
for the gift of life, and the gift of new life,
and for the many ways you sustain and nurture us.

We come before you this day,
some of us tired and hungry,
looking for your word to sustain us,
your spirit to comfort us.

Some of us come bruised and sore,
looking for healing,
longing for wholeness.

Some of us come despairing,
wondering what has happened
and where the joy of life has gone.

Some of us come with heavy hearts,
praying for young people harmed by those who should protect,
praying for those who look different and so are suspect,
praying for a world on edge, tense with fear and hate and violence.

We come,
looking for good news in the midst of the world's bad news.
We come,
seeking forgiveness for our wrongs,
seeking to know your presence when we feel so alone,
seeking to know your heart and will for a world with so much need.

Let your grace rain down on us, O God.
May we be surrounded by your love, your peace, your hope.

Open our eyes and our hearts to see you in unexpected places,
guide our hands to show your love.

You are a God of surprises,
a God of peace, a God of hope,

a God of love.

Fill us with your spirit,
that we may widen the circle until all the world knows your grace.

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 663:

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.

Benediction

Let us go now, to serve Christ and follow him.
Letting our old life fall like a grain of wheat into the earth
so that we may bear much fruit
as we allow God' Spirit to reshape your hearts
and live in obedience to the law written within us.

And may God centre us in truth and steady our spirit.
May Christ renew our joy and strengthen our will.
And may the Spirit teach us God's wisdom

and fill us with songs of rejoicing.

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