



The
United
Reformed
Church

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

Sunday 24th March 2024

Call to Worship:

We come to prepare for the holiest of weeks.
**We will journey through praise, with joy on our lips;
we will travel through betrayal and death,
cradling hope deep in our hearts**
Jesus leads us through this week, and we will follow,
for he is the life we long for,
he is the Word who sustains us.
**We wave palm branches in anticipation,
we lay our love before him, to cushion his walk**
Setting aside all power, glory, and might, he comes:
modeling humility and obedience for all of us.
Hosanna! Hosanna!
**Blessed is the One who brings us
the kingdom of God.**

Prayer/Meditation:

Gracious and loving God,
In the journey of life, you are our guide and our companion.
From our beginning to our end, you are there.

You run this race alongside us,
at times encouraging us,
at times comforting us,
at times tending to our wounds,
at time carrying us when we don't think we can take another step.

For six weeks we have been on a Lenten journey,
and you have been walking with us—
with us in our discipline and devotion,
with us in our weakness and failure,
with us in our fear,
with us in our hope.

As we spend this final week with Jesus in Jerusalem,
we are amazed once again by his gentle spirit and fierce determination.
As he confronts those who challenge him,
he confronts our own stubbornness and defiant wills.
As he cares even for those who hate him,
we are challenged to love as he loves.

As he bears witness to the emergence of your kingdom,
our eyes are opened to your presence all around us.
As he moves with resolve toward his dark destiny,
we find ourselves struggling to understand why it has to be this way.

God, the journey is not just about the destination;
it is about each step along the way.
The journey itself is a blessing,
with all of its joys and sorrows.
As we run this race you are shaping us into new people.
As we move with you, we are continually born anew.
Help us to be attentive to each step,
in the darkness and in the light.
Help us to fully experience all that we encounter,
the good and the bad,
for in it all we discover you.

Though the race of life goes on,
our Lenten journey is nearing its conclusion.
Bind us ever closer to Christ,
so that we may turn our hearts and minds
to all that he experienced in the crucible of this holy week,
a week both terrible and wonderful.

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: Mark 11:1-11

Hymn 208

All glory, laud, and honour
to thee, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!
Thou art the King of Israel
thou David's royal Son,
who in the Lord's name comest,
the King and Blessed One.

The company of angels
are praising thee on high;
and mortal flesh and all things
created make reply.
The people of the Hebrews
with palms before thee went;

our praise and prayer and anthems
before thee we present.

To thee before thy passion
they sang their hymns of praise;
to thee, now high exalted,
our melody we raise.
Thou didst accept their praises,
accept the prayers we bring,
who in all good delightest,
thou good and gracious King.

All glory, laud, and honour
to thee, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!

Reading: Mark 15:25-39

Reflection:

How did this happen? How did Jesus' life of peace end in such a violent death?

The familiar formula – that Jesus died for our sins – raises more questions than it answers. First, exactly how is Jesus' death connected with our forgiveness? Why does this terrible thing lead to that wonderful thing? And who is it that wants this sacrifice anyway?

Some are content to say that God does. But surely God cannot *need* such a sacrifice. Consider what the prophets have to say about the offerings and sacrifices made in the temple. In Isaiah, God says, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings... I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats." And in Hosea: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." And on Ash Wednesday we begin Lent by reciting this line from Psalm 51: "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus questioned the authority the temple claimed as the sole arbiter of God's grace. Every time he broke one of the rules by healing on the Sabbath or eating with someone considered unclean, he was saying that God's love embraces everyone. No one controls access to God's grace. God's love is bigger than you think it is.

But if God did not desire Jesus' death in this way, then who did? Why did this happen?

We began this today by celebrating Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples have come from the countryside, where his ministry began, to celebrate Passover in the ancient city. Jesus knew the crowds would be there – he wanted to bring his message to as many people as possible, and to confront the religious authorities in the temple head on.

We read only the beginning and the end of the passion story today. To get the full picture we'd need to read the whole of chapters 11 to 15 of the gospel according to Mark, because Mark gives a precise timeline for the Passover week.

First of all, there is Jesus' so-called triumphal entry: although the crowds shouted Hosanna to greet him, it seems quite obvious that Jesus' procession was anything but triumphant. He chose to ride into town on a young colt, the foal of a donkey. Jesus has no armor but the cloaks of peasants, and he is lauded with palm branches and leaves instead of golden eagles on spears carried in procession by Roman soldiers.

You see, it was Rome that really loved a procession. Rome excelled at using a military parade as a demonstration of its dominance, to keep its subjugated peasants in awe. And Jesus knew that Pilate, the Roman Governor, made a point of riding from his capital city on the Mediterranean coast every Passover, to make sure these crowds of peasants in Jerusalem stayed in line. Picture Pilate on a magnificent war horse and surrounded by a legion of Roman soldiers in red and gold armor, marching in lockstep as they enter the city gates.

Jesus' little street parade, in contrast, with the donkey and the palm fronds, is an anti-imperial protest. He's mocking the empty pomp of the empire, questioning the brutality with which Rome ruled the peasant class and kept Judea impoverished.

After taking on the empire, Jesus goes straight to the temple. The day after that peace demonstration, Jesus takes over the temple courtyard, the heart of the action during Passover week, and stages a teach-in. On Monday, in Mark's version of the story, Jesus overturns the tables of the money-changers. He tells thinly veiled parables about the religious leaders which cast them in a very bad light. By the time Wednesday has come around, Jesus denounces them openly: "Beware of the scribes," he says, "who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces... They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

They devour widows' houses: that is Jesus' accusation against the religious authorities. They think they control access to God's grace by controlling the temple. The only way to get a little of that grace was to pay up to make the right sacrifices: for the right price, the priests would make sacrificial offerings to God on your behalf. The price was the same whether you were a poor widow or a rich merchant.

From the start of his ministry, Jesus' central message has been, "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" And that is a dangerous message, for it challenges both the secular and the religious authorities. If God is King over all, then Caesar is not. And in Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom, God's love is not mediated by priests at the temple but is free and available to all. Is it any wonder that both the Jewish and the Roman leaders wanted Jesus dead?

Nailing him to a cross was supposed to be the final solution. Get rid of the rabble-rouser, silence him, and his message would die with him. Crucifixion was the world's way of saying no to everything Jesus stood for.

The world says no to Jesus – but God says yes. This is the good news that Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost: "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." It's the first attempt at explaining what happened on Good Friday. The world rejects

Jesus' message and tries to silence him in death – but God vindicates Jesus and raises him to life. Love that can never be silenced, never be killed. Love that will restore our lost humanity.

Out of this terrible violence, a door to God's kingdom has been opened. At the very end of the Passion story, at the moment of Jesus' death, Mark tells us that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." This is the veil in the temple that separated the people from the power and love of God – the veil that contained God's presence, and behind which only the high priest was allowed to go.

This veil was torn asunder, and God's love is no longer contained in a temple - or a church. Jesus' redeeming work was to confront those who tried to keep God locked up, and remind us that 'God so loved the world - God loves all the world; Jesus' life and teaching have shown us a new way. The scandal of the cross is that now, God's love can once again go anywhere and reach anyone. Even those who are different from us. Even those who don't deserve it. Even those who don't believe. God's love now permeates the whole universe and continually pulls us from death into life, with each breath we take, from the beginning of time until the end.

HYMN 225

Here hangs a man discarded,
a scarecrow hoisted high,
a nonsense pointing nowhere
to all who hurry by.

Can such a clown of sorrows
still bring a useful word
where faith and love seem phantoms
and every hope absurd?

Can he give help or comfort
to lives by comfort bound,
when drums of dazzling progress
give strangely hollow sound?

Life emptied of all meaning,
drained out in bleak distress,
can share in broken silence
my deepest emptiness;

and love that freely entered
the pit of life's despair
can name our hidden darkness
and suffer with us there.

Lord, if you now are risen
help all who long for light
to hold the hand of promise
and walk into the night.

Prayer:

God of transformation,
we are reminded this day
that Jesus' ride into Jerusalem
was more than a show,
more than a simple provocation,
more than the beginning of a cute celebration.
It was a signal that things are changing,
a potent message
to the powers that be
that the world as we know it
is becoming the world as it should be.

This simple ride reminds us—
and tells the whole world—
that you are indeed coming to make all things new.
You are coming to turn weapons of war
into instruments of peace.

You are coming to release those
who find themselves in all manners of bondage:
chains of injustice;
chains of addiction;
chains of conformity and apathy.

You are coming to provide for the poor:
food for the hungry
and shelter for the homeless.

You are coming to assure the dignity and equality
of all who are marginalized or oppressed.

You are coming to end violence and divisions,
to provide safe communities
and opportunities for education.

You are coming to offer healing and wholeness,
comfort, consolation, and hope.

You are coming to transform all that we know.
You are coming to save us.

But like humble Jesus riding into town on a lowly colt,
you aren't coming in grandeur,
you aren't coming with thunder and lightning,
you aren't making an epic entrance.

You're coming through the mystery of love incarnate,
through your church empowered by your Spirit,
through lives transformed and inspired,
through ordinary people like us,
blessed by you to do extraordinary things.

Come, gracious God
into a world that longs for change,
a world that needs your love,
a world full of your own children,
a world ripe with hope and potential.

We pray to you, Lord of palm-branches and the cross,
for you understand us and in love you have promised
not to push away any who come to you.

So we pray for people who feel pushed away:
pushed away from a living faith in Jesus by pressure from friends and family;
those who feel pushed away by other people in churches
if they do not share the same kinds of ideas, or ways, or clothes;
for people who are pushed out by those who want power,
who love to be noticed, to have control.

We pray for your church that all those who trust in Jesus
will be made able by your Spirit to follow his humility,
to see and imitate his servant life, to welcome and not to condemn.
Help your church to be like Jesus.

We pray to you, Lord of palm-branches and the cross,
for you know the warm glow of being praised and the loneliness of being hated.

We pray for world leaders,
quick to stand in the limelight taking decisions which affect everyone in the world
but slow at times to do the steady, less glamorous work to which they are called.

We pray to you, Lord of palm-branches and the cross,
because you know how quickly life changes to death.

We pray for those who have recently lost those whom they have loved.
In the shock, confusion, pain and sorrow especially of unexpected loss,
we pray for hearts to be open to the comfort of your Spirit,
shown through friendship and community.

We remember those we know who are suffering in these days in these days, and in a few quiet
moments we remember them in our hearts:

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

Hymn
To the sacred city, on a day in spring,

came the king of heaven, life and peace to bring;
riding on a donkey, with no pomp or pride,
this was he whose coming seers had prophesied.

From the Mount of Olives, crowds had lined the road;
shouts of acclamation were on him bestowed;
palms and branches waving, joy was in the air,
as they watched him riding to the temple square.

Thus the gospel writers pictured the event;
this was the Messiah whom the Lord had sent
to redeem his people, to proclaim the day
of the Lord of heaven and his holy way.

In our minds we see him, in our day and time,
subjugating evil with his love sublime;
bringing into flower lost and blighted lives;
giving to us all the hope that love revives.

In our minds we're standing in that noisy throng,
sensing that his kingdom is where we belong;
and our hearts are lifted, as with joy we sing
praises to our Lord and to the servant king.

Benediction

Blessed is the one
who comes to us
by the way of love
poured out with abandon.

Blessed is the one
who walks toward us
by the way of grace
that holds us fast.

Blessed is the one
who calls us to follow
in the way of blessing,
in the path of joy.

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

