



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

Sunday 7th April 2024

Welcome to worship for Sunday 7th April 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 Vimto.

Let us worship God:

Call to Worship:

O God, be gracious and bless us
and let your face shed its light upon us.
So will your ways be known upon earth
and all nations learn your saving help.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Prayer/Meditation:

When nothing is right,
when we are weary and lost,
when clouds dull the sky,
help us to be still.

When our cries are unheeded,
when no effort bears fruit,
when the sun sets,
help us to be still.

When love is over,
when hope is gone,
when darkness covers the land,
help us to be still.

For in being still,
in refusing to panic or despair,
we shall come to know that God is there,
suffering alongside and with us,
waiting to show us stepping-stones through the swirling waters,
and to help us sing a new song.

Lord Jesus Christ,
in this world where hopes are so often dashed
and dreams so often broken,

we remember today the faith in the future you brought to so many,
both through your coming and through your resurrection from the dead.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded,
may hope flower again.

We remember how Mary and Joseph looked forward
to the day of your birth,
how shepherds and magi caught their breath in wonder
as they knelt before you,
how the hearts of Anna and Simeon leapt in anticipation,
and how your disciples
and the crowds that flocked to hear you gave thanks,
convinced that you were the Messiah, the one God had promised,
the long-awaited deliverer come to set them free.

We remember how that vision of the future
was shattered by events to follow -
your pain, humiliation, suffering and death -
hope ebbing away as the lifeblood seeped from your body -
an end to their dreams, an end to everything.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded,
may hope flower again.

We remember how the news spread that the tomb was empty,
the stone rolled away, your body gone,
and how despite it all,
your followers could scarcely bring themselves to hope -
afraid to take the risk of faith
in case they should face the heartache of losing you once more.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded,
may hope flower again.

But we remember finally how you appeared,
in all your risen glory -
in the garden,
in the upstairs room,
on the Emmaus road,
by the Sea of Galilee -
and the dream was born again,
the smoldering embers of faith rekindled.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded,
may hope flower again.

Lord Jesus Christ, a world is waiting,
hurting,

longing,
searching for hope,
crying out for meaning,
hungry for some reason to believe in the future.
Come again in your living power,
and bring new life to all.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded,
may hope flower again.

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: Acts 3:13-15,17-26

Hymn 409:

O God, in whom we live and move,
in whom we draw each breath,
God, filling all the height above,
and all the depths beneath:

our hands may build your hallowed shrine,
no bound your presence owns;
what highest heaven cannot confine,
the lowly heart enthrones.

You are about our path, and where
we seek to tread your ways;
all life is sacrament and prayer,
and every thought is praise.

And when we gather in your name,
to pray with one accord,
around, within us, still the same,
we find your presence, Lord.

In simple faith or solemn rite,
in head and heart and hand,
though you are hidden from our sight,
yet in our midst you stand.

Be with us, Lord; with us abide;
go with us where we go;
and, changeless in life's changing tide,
your presence we shall know.

Reading: John 20:19-31

Reflection:

"On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews,..." For fear of the Jews... Who were the disciples afraid of, really? Exactly who was threatening them, who might be after them?

John is different from the other three gospels, which are so much alike that we call them synoptic, seeing with one eye. John sees with a different eye. John was the last gospel written, and there is less story and more theology.

John is different in another way. All three of the other gospels make it clear that Jesus had the support of the overwhelming majority of the people. It was the religious leaders, the "elders," the "chief priest," the "scribes and Pharisees," who felt threatened by Jesus, who plotted to remove him, and who did so in secret, fearful that there would be a "tumult among the people" if their plans were discovered.

The synoptic gospels take care to make a distinction between the religious leaders, who opposed Jesus, and the people, who largely supported him. John doesn't make this distinction, talking again and again how Jesus was opposed by "the Jews," how "the Jews" plotted against him, "the Jews" took up stones to stone him. Throughout the gospel of John there is a blaming of "the Jews," a general condemnation of an entire group of people with none of the distinctions made by the other gospels. The Gospel of John is anti-Jewish.

This shift between the synoptic gospels and John would be merely of passing interest were it not for the ugly attitudes and tragic events that have arisen from it. Embedded in our Holy Scripture, "the Word of the Lord" as we say when we read it in our public worship, is a consistent condemnation of "the Jews." We learn from John's gospel how "the Jews" plotted against Jesus, "the Jews" sought to destroy Jesus, how the followers of Jesus feared "the Jews," and of course this clear, consistent message has had an effect.

For example, the Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215, reached consensus on a number of issues. They agreed on an official definition of the doctrine of the eucharist and established rules for who could preach in cathedral churches. The council also issued a decree that Jews should be identifiable in public - *we decree and emphatically command that in the center of the breast (of their garments) they shall wear an oval badge, the measure of one finger in width and one half a palm in height* - and that Jews should not hold public office.

All Jews were expelled from England by 1290, from France by 1394, and then from Spain by 1492. They were forced to leave most of their belongings and property behind.

It would be an exaggeration to blame the long, tawdry history of Christian anti-Semitism on the Gospel of John, but it would also be a mistake to think that the repeated antagonistic references to "the Jews" throughout John's have not had any effect. It is a sad irony that the every single year on the first Sunday after Easter we hear, "On the evening of the day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews..." It is a lesson that ought never be read without an explanation, a disclaimer.

And yet the anti-Semitism of this passage yields an inadvertent but profound lesson about our faith. If we return to our original question, which Jews were the disciples hiding from, it is likely that one of the Jews they were afraid of was Jesus.

Think about it. They knew that one of their number had betrayed Jesus while others had denied him, run away, and abandoned him to face his shameful and humiliating death alone. It was the women and Nicodemus who made the initial hasty arrangements for Jesus' body after his death, and it was the women who returned with the amazing news that Jesus was not dead, he had risen, the disciples initially refused to believe them. It is easy to imagine that their response to the good news of the women might have initially been to feel ashamed, anxious, even afraid. They had not shown any hint of loyalty, bravery or love for Jesus when he most needed it.

The friend they had betrayed, denied, abandoned, the one they had left to die alone and then even after death had distanced themselves from was now alive, walking around, and might possibly be coming to see them. This may have sounded more like alarming news than good news.

And so they are hiding away, behind closed doors; fearful, anxious, no doubt concerned about what Jesus may say or do to them, when suddenly he is in their midst, he is standing among them.

It appears he understands their anxiety, their shame and fear, for the first words out of his mouth are, "Peace be with you." Jesus initial reaction is to reassure them. Don't worry, he says, in effect. I'm not angry, upset with you. It's all right. I'm not holding a grudge. It's a critical moment for them, and for us, because of course each of us is all too aware of the ways we have failed God, all of the countless ways we have denied, abandoned, betrayed our faith.

It often feels hard to come before God, to pray to Jesus, because we are painfully aware of how wavering and inconstant our faith is. In a way we are like the disciples, hiding away from God behind locked doors, unwilling or unable to come out from behind the locked doors and walls of our guilt and approach God.

It is easy to pray when we feel good about ourselves, when we feel faithful, compassionate, loving and good. It is much harder to pray when we have blown it and we know it.

God knows it, too. This passage tells us that when we are tempted to remain cut off from God, hiding behind locked doors, God will come to us. Suddenly Jesus is in our midst, in spite of all our efforts to keep him out, and Jesus stands among us, not as our accuser, our prosecutor, but as one who loves and understands us, who assures us, "Peace be with you."

Our brokenness is no barrier to God's love. As Jesus assured his disciples that their monumental instances of bad faith did not diminish his love for them, we are assured of this as well. As Paul writes in Romans, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ. Nothing.

There are times when we cower, unable to pray, anxious over the things we have done and left undone. This story reminds us that we need not fear this Galilean Jew, and that we need to leave the locked room of our anxiety and come out into the world. There is much that Jesus calls us to do. Amen.

Hymn 632:

O day of God, draw near
in beauty and in power,
come with your timeless judgement now
to match our present hour.

Bring to our troubled minds,
uncertain and afraid,
the quiet of a steadfast faith,
calm of a call obeyed.

Bring justice to our land,
that all may dwell secure,
and finely build for days to come
foundations that endure.

Bring to our world of strife
your sovereign word of peace,
that war may haunt the earth no more
and desolation cease.

O Day of God, draw near
as at creation's birth;
let there be light again, and set
your judgement in the earth.

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.

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

Teach us not to hide from our doubt,
but to recognize it as a door to mystery and to deeper faith.

After all, the disciples' fear became a visitation
as they saw you among them, risen and triumphant.

Thomas' doubt became a moment of revelation
as he saw and touched you, and finally believed.

This morning we pray for the many men and women in our society
who have no faith at all.

There are so many who live without hope,
without knowledge of your resurrection,
without your light in their lives.

Grant us the courage to live as witnesses to your resurrection.
Risen Christ, be light in our world.

And grant to all of us, living Lord Christ,
renewed faith, great courage, and your boundless peace.

Renew us in the power of your Spirit
That we may open the doors
And go out into the world
To bring words of peace to the people we meet.

Renew us in the power of your Spirit
That we may have life in your name
And go wherever you send us
In Jesus' name.

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 636:

The Church of Christ, in every age
beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street,
the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for bread to eat,
and never live until they die.

Then let the Servant Church arise,
a caring Church, that longs to be
a partner in Christ's sacrifice,
and clothed in Christ's humanity.

For he alone, whose blood was shed,
can cure the fever in our blood,
and teach us how to share our bread
and feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve,

in full obedience to our Lord;
to care for all, without reserve,
and spread his liberating Word.

Benediction:

May the path
that Christ walks
to bring justice
upon the earth,
to bring light
to those who sit
in darkness,
to bring out those
who live in bondage,
to bring new things
to all creation:

may this path
run through our life.
May we be
the road Christ takes.

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 love, today and for ever more. Amen