

# worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup>  
March 2024  
The Third  
Sunday of Lent  
The Revd  
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## Call to Worship

The heavens tell of your glory, O God;  
**the firmament proclaims your handiwork!**  
In the heavens you have set you have set a tent for the sun;  
**it emerges like a groom running its course with joy.**  
Nothing can hide from the sun's heat;  
**no one can hide from your teachings O God.**  
Lift us, as we worship, into your presence O Most High,  
**that we might learn from you.**

## Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

You are our foundation, O Most High,  
in your guidance we find wisdom for life,  
food for the journey,  
and eyes to truly see our world.

You are our foundation, O Jesus,  
in your teaching we find tools to critique our culture,  
new ways of living,  
and the ability to turn over the tables of corruption.

You are our foundation, Most Holy Spirit,  
in the fire of your love we find inspiration,  
the energy to live against the grain,  
and the power of love which defeats all that is evil.

Yet we often prefer, O Trinity,  
our own foundations to yours,  
our own wisdom - instead of your eternal voice,  
our own ways of living - despite them leading to oblivion.

Give us time, O God, to turn around,  
that as you run to welcome us,  
we may accept your forgiveness,  
and change our lives. Amen.

The Eternal One has poured grace upon us  
since before the ages began;  
rise up, believe, know that in God's love you are made whole.  
Have the courage to forgive yourself  
and the grace to forgive others. Amen.

## Prayer for Illumination

As we hear your Word to us, O God,  
let the words of our mouths speak of your love.  
As we hear your Word to us, O God,  
may the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you.  
As we hear your Word to us, O God,  
let us trust in you, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

## Reading

*Exodus 20:1-17 | St John 2:13-22*

## All Age Activity

You will need two tins. One of something that you don't mind eating cold – custard would do nicely. The other should be a tin of the same size but with dog meat in it. Carefully steam off the dog meat label and pop it on and reglue it to the custard – if that's too much print off "dog meat" on a printer and stick to the can of custard!

Ask the children who'd like a spoonful of tasty dogmeat. Hopefully they'll all say know. Open the can and without letting them see it's custard have a spoonful. Let them react hopefully with lots of "yuks" Explain that sometimes things are spoilt by how they are used; whoever put custard in the dogmeat can spoiled it for the dogs who were expecting a meaty treat but whoever bought the custard expecting to put it on a nice pie would get a nasty shock! In today's reading we're going to hear Jesus getting very angry when he saw how the Temple had been spoiled by people buying and selling things instead of being devoted to prayer – and worse they sold things at a far higher price than they should have so that meant the poor were excluded. No wonder Jesus got angry. Have a listen to the story then tell me what you think of what Jesus did. (have the Gospel reading read and then ask the youngsters what they made of Jesus' action.)

## Sermon Notes

### *Exodus*

Jewish people list 613 commandments in the Law but these first 10 have a special status. They sound like constitutional law. They are the broad precepts which make communal living flourish. They are at start of an important section of the Old Testament starting here and continuing through to Numbers 10 and feature events around Mt Sinai.

Christians may switch off when they hear this reading; generations of having had the Commandments drummed into us – with many churches having them written on their walls – mixed with a feeling that this is all “law” and we’re about “grace” collude to stop us listening. “Torah” translated as “Law” might also mean “teaching” or “direction.” (Drivers don’t feel oppressed by the 307 rules in the Highway Code so we might want to resist the temptation to think of Law as oppressive!) These commandments show how the people is to “do God” to practice their faith in this new community of former slaves. These teachings are vital; those who ignore them wander off into moral oblivion where God’s faithfulness will be of little use.

The teachings are very counter cultural – a good Lenten theme – as they subvert the ideologies of our age. The advertising industry is based on making us covert those things which we haven’t got but our neighbours have! Our culture has confused compassion with the hell of a marital breakdown with a licence to act as we wish in affairs of the heart.

Our culture praises hard work; we’re even told we can better ourselves if we work hard enough but those who tell us this generally are the rich! Taking time off regularly to rest is counter cultural.

### *Psalms 19*

As ever the Psalm reflects the OT reading; teaching given in Exodus is praised in the Psalm. The theme of Commandment as direction in life is celebrated in the Psalm: God’s law is perfect, its precepts are right causing joy and enlightenment. These are a way of life for a community and to be desired more than gold, they are sweeter than honey. The early verses of the Psalm remind us of God’s self revelation in nature itself; a revelation confirmed and enhanced in the Word.

### *St John*

The counter cultural theme is continued in today’s reading from John. The first event in Jesus’ life that John describes is the miracle at Cana; a miracle at a private event. The next event is the prophetic, dramatic cleansing of the Temple which the Synoptic Gospels put in Jesus’ last week. John uses this to frame Jesus’ entire ministry which upends not just the tables but the assumptions and attitudes of the establishment. When (irritating) people ask me “What would Jesus do?” I often reply that overturning traders’ tables,

causing mayhem and driving dishonest folk out is always an option! Whilst Jesus' actions are shocking they are part of a longer tradition of prophets criticising the Temple and how people were manipulated there. John doesn't explain what irked Jesus; the Synoptics hint at profiteering as normal currency – bearing the Emperor's image – was exchanged for Temple coins which had no image on it. This meant that the animals purchased for sacrifice were sold at inflated rates. In John, however, Jesus seems to object to the market being at the Temple at all. Some think Jesus had the prophet Zechariah in mind who, in 14:21 and 14:5 offered the view that when the Lord came there would no longer be traders in the Temple. In this view we see Jesus offering a change in the direction of worship – the later verses about worshipping in spirit and truth might allude to this. Interestingly the authorities (John uses "the Jews" as shorthand here) don't get too angry and, instead, ask for a sign. Maybe they were teasing Jesus, asking him to put his miracles where his mouth was. The sign offered was too mysterious for them to comprehend. The disciples remember and believe, the authorities scorn and deny.

### *Weaving the Threads*

You may wish to explore the theme of God's way being different to the ways of our culture – there is much, of course, that is good, healthy, and wonderful in our culture. Greater secularisation has meant greater freedom for many people after all. Few of us would want to go back to the culture of the 1950s where many of the freedoms we now enjoy were impossible. However, there's also a Biblical perspective about what seems wise to our eyes is not necessarily wise in God's eyes. The Teachings/Commandments really do bite into our culture: we may not trouble ourselves with the teachings about monotheism but we often put other things before God; our culture is very wedded to the family, for instance, which is rather different to Jesus' views on family. We struggle with the "do not kill/murder" teaching as most of us are not pacifists. Whilst most of us in the UK do not support the death penalty we're much more ambivalent about abortion (and rightly so it's a complex issue) but it can leave us wondering about the teaching not to kill. Advertising makes us want to covert things we've not got – and churches use advertising to attract people into church. A preacher will lead us through these dilemmas maybe making a case for comparing and contrasting God's wisdom with that of our culture but maybe also finding a synthesis between them – after all we believe that God's revelation is not limited solely to Scripture. Maybe the task of the preacher is to help us to see God's wisdom, God's teaching in both Word and world.

## Affirmation of Faith

We believe that God's wisdom is written into our world,  
in majestic mountain, flowing river, abundant life  
and in the cultures we create,  
**flawed and partial, and present and lifegiving;  
at once hidden and revealed.**

We believe that God's wisdom is written in the Bible,

in ancient poetry, timeless law, piercing prophecy,  
pastoral letters and glorious Gospel,  
**flawed and partial, and present and lifegiving;  
at once hidden and revealed.**

We believe that God calls us to discern  
where the knowledge of the age is undermined by eternal truth,  
where culture offers a clearer view than Church,  
and where wisdom is revealed:  
**flawed and partial, and present and lifegiving;  
at once hidden and revealed.**

*This affirmation of faith plays with ideas from the Wisdom literature  
where wisdom is present at creation, revealed in Scripture  
and discerned through the Spirit.  
Have a read of Proverbs 8, John 3:8, and Romans 2: 14 - 14*

## Intercessions

We come to you in prayer, O God, glimpsing your love,  
believing you are present with us.  
We listen to the news and are tempted to despair;  
wars and rumours of war fill our minds,  
displaced people struggle to survive and cry to you for justice;  
we are left not knowing how to respond other than to cry to you;  
change our hearts O God,  
that we may pursue ways of peace,  
and hear again your commandment “you shall not kill”.

Lord, in your mercy...**hear our prayer.**

We come to you in prayer, O God, glimpsing your love,  
believing you are present with us.  
We read of unspeakable crimes, of victims not being heard,  
miscarriages of justice, and the rich and powerful evading the law,  
we are left not knowing how to respond other than to cry to you;  
change our hearts O God,  
that we may learn to speak truth to the powerful, insist on justice  
and hear again your commandment “you shall not bear false witness”.

Lord, in your mercy...**hear our prayer.**

We come to you in prayer, O God, glimpsing your love,  
believing you are present with us.  
We live in a culture addicted to work,

we're told to believe that hard work brings riches  
yet those who work the hardest get poorer,  
whilst those with the resources get ever richer;  
change our hearts O God,  
that we may learn to rest,  
reject the pernicious assumptions of our age,  
and hear again your commandment "rest on the sabbath".

Lord, in your mercy...**hear our prayer.**

We come to you in prayer, O God, glimpsing your love,  
believing you are present with us.  
Alongside the worries of our age, O God, we have our own concerns.  
In the silence of our hearts we lift to you those we know,  
love and worry about...

*silence*

and we bring to you our own needs...

*silence*

Change our hearts O God,  
that we might learn to trust in you alone,  
and hear again your commandment to "have no other gods".

Lord, in your mercy...**hear our prayer.**

We come to you in prayer, O God, glimpsing your love,  
believing you are present with us and so we join all our prayers  
with Jesus as we pray as he taught saying, Our Father...

## Offertory

Our culture tells us to acquire and spend, paradoxically also telling us to save for the rainy day and old age. Alongside that our faith tells us to give and not to count the cost. We're left in the middle of those ideas working how best to support causes close to our hearts, to understand our responsibilities as Christians to give so that lives will be changed and so that we are, ourselves, freed from the poison of consumerism. We live with the competing demands of faith and culture, wealth, and wisdom. And, as we muddle through we determine to give some of what we've been given to help others. We may give through the plate, direct to the bank, in little envelopes. We may give what we can, we may plan to give; however, we give we give thanks now for all that God has done for us and for all that can be achieved through our giving.

Eternal God,  
You bless us with all that we have and call us to share as we can  
so that your purposes can be fulfilled in our world, in the Church, and in our own lives.  
Bless these gifts, that we may use them wisely, always seeking to discern your will,  
amongst the myriad voices we hear, knowing you are always present and lifegiving,  
at once hidden and revealed. Amen.

## Holy Communion

We hear again the institution of the Lord's 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.

God is here!  
Lift up your hearts  
Let us give God our thanks and praise!

**God's Spirit is with us!**  
**we lift them up to God!**  
**This is indeed our duty and joy!**

Eternal Majesty,  
before the ages began you formed the heavens and the earth,  
the moon and the stars proclaim your glory,  
and all that was created sings your praise.  
You make humanity in your own image,  
intending us to glorify and enjoy you forever.

Again and again, we turn away from your love,  
despite the guidance of your Law and the warnings of your prophets.  
In the fullness of time,  
you emptied yourself of all but love and dwelt with us.

O Jesus, our Saviour,  
you proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners,  
sight for the blind and liberation for the oppressed,  
but we preferred to turn away from freedom  
choosing the bondage of sin, and nailed you to the Cross.  
Yet you defeated the powers of death and evil  
and revealed a new life for all who follow you.

Before you were given over to the powers of your age,  
you shared in the simplicity of a meal with your friends,  
and, during that meal, you took bread, said the ancient blessing,  
broke the bread and gave it to your friends, saying

Take this all of you and eat it, for this is my body  
which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me.

When Supper was over, you took the cup of wine,  
again prayed the ancient prayer of blessing,  
gave the cup to your friends and said:

Take this all of you and drink from it,  
this is the cup of my blood,  
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant  
so that sins may be forgiven.  
Do this in memory of me.

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith:

**Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

Come, O Holy Spirit,  
on these gifts of bread and wine,  
that they may be, for us, the body and blood of Christ.  
Lift us into your presence that our faith may be renewed,  
our commitment to follow strengthened,  
and our understanding of Church deepened.

Bless us all as we seek to discern your mind,  
hearing you in creation, in the Word and in each other,  
that as we discern the Church may be strengthened in its mission  
of worship and witness, evangelism and service,  
so that the bruised and broken find healing,  
the proud and mighty find humility,  
and the poor and lowly find their dignity.

Through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus,  
in the loving power of the Holy Spirit,  
all honour and glory are Yours, O Most High,  
forever and ever, Amen!

## The Invitation

You that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins and are in love and charity with  
your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and  
walking from henceforth in His holy ways; draw near with reverence, faith, and  
thanksgiving, and take the Supper of the Lord to your comfort.



Come to this sacred Table, not because you must, but because you may: come to testify not that you are righteous, but that you sincerely love our Lord Jesus Christ, and desire to be His true disciples: come, not because you are strong, but because you are weak; not because you have any claim on Heaven's rewards, but because in your frailty and sin you stand in constant need of Heaven's mercy and help: come, not to express an opinion, but to seek a Presence and pray for a Spirit.

*Adapted from John Hunter's Services for Divine Worship*

## Post Communion Prayer

And now that you have received the Supper of the Lord, lift up your minds and hearts above all selfish fears and cares; let this bread and this wine be to you the witnesses and signs of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Consecrate your lives to Christian obedience and service, and pray for strength to do and to bear the will of God. Amen

*Adapted from John Hunter's Services for Divine Worship*

## Blessing

May the One whose wisdom danced at the first light of day,  
the One who overturned religion,  
the One who is found in unexpected places with unexpected people  
give you the grace  
    to dance with the wise,  
    overturn powers that subvert the kingdom,  
    and find grace in unlikely places,  
and the blessing of Almighty God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,   **or**   Eternal Majesty, Embodied Word, Everlasting Fire  
be with you all, now and always,  
Amen.

## Hymn Suggestions

	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Christ is Made the Sure Foundation / Blessed City	559	200	677	73
The Church's One Foundation	566	739	690	640
Jesus Stand Among Us	566		30	381
The Stars Declare His Glory (Ps 19)		10		
Jesus Invites His Saints (try doubling the verses and singing to Diademata)	434			
Christian people raise your song	435			
Come Risen Lord and deign to be our guest (works well to Woodlands)	445			
I Watch the Sunrise			469	
I Come With Joy A Child of God	447	656	588	
For your generous providing		655		
May the God of hope go with us every day		256	411	
Sent by the Lord Am I		250	239	
Moved by the Gospel Let us Move	247			

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*