

Christ Church, 16 July 2023

**Call to worship** (based on Psalm 65)

What mighty praise belongs to You, O God!  
You are the hope of everyone on earth.  
Even those who live at the farthest ends of the earth  
stand in awe of your wonders.  
From where the sun rises to where it sets,  
You inspire shouts of joy.  
What mighty praise belongs to You, O God!

**Hymn** Oh, the life of the world (video )  
Oh the life of the world is a joy and a treasure,  
unfolding in beauty the green-growing tree,  
the changing of seasons in mountain and valley  
the stars and the bright restless sea.

Oh the life of the world is a fountain of goodness  
overflowing in labour and passion and pain,  
in the sound of the city and the silence of wisdom,  
in the birth of a child once again.

Oh the life of the world is the source of our healing.  
It rises in laughter and wells up in song;  
it springs from the care of the poor and the broken  
and refreshes where justice is strong.

So give thanks for the life and give love to the Maker  
and rejoice in the gift of the bright risen Son.  
And walk in the peace and power of the Spirit  
till the days of our living are done.

Kathryn Galloway

**Gifts**

May the offerings brought this day be used as seeds,  
planted faithfully and nurtured lovingly  
so that God's way may be realized anew in this world.  
Grant us the humility we need to plant and then tend your precious garden. Amen

**Opening Prayer**

URC Prayer Handbook p41  
And we join now in the prayer our Lord taught us, saying **Our Father...**

**Hymn** Let us build a house Red folder 54

**Bible readings:**        **Jeremiah 29:4-7**  
                                  **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

All of our readings today, including psalm 65, which we haven't read, but our call to worship, opening hymn and opening prayer were based on, are all about getting things to grow, which is very appropriate given what we will be talking about at church meeting. It's either serendipity or the work of the Holy Spirit – take your pick!

The wider United Reformed Church is in a place of reorientation and review, a bit like we are with our building project. It may feel like all we have been talking about is the details of

what work we are going to do, how much it will cost and how we can afford it. We have gone down rabbit holes, and cul-de-sacs of organ screens, new porches and knocking down walls outside at the front, only to find that those, fairly insignificant ideas had to be ditched for lack of money. We have explored new kitchens and new serveries, which have also fallen foul of not enough money. We have struggled with wanting to do the right thing for the environment, and setting an example as an Eco Church, and we have been floored by unexpected cost increases, but what we may have lost sight of in all these many months, is the mission. What is the point of it all? Apart from the obvious repairs that now need doing urgently, and the recommendations of the Quinquennial to do refurbishment work to make the building fit for the next generations, our goal has always been to make the building more open, appealing, and welcoming to the community that surrounds us. To make our space more multifunctional so it can be used by more people, for more activities, every day of the week, and not only for worship for an hour on a Sunday. And I wonder also, whether we have lost sight of listening for God's voice? What is God telling us to do? What is the Holy Spirit inspiring us to do? Have we already got lost in the minutiae of details and the fear of not finding the money, rather than making the necessary leap of faith and trusting God?

For about the same amount of time, that we have been discussing our future here, the URC has been discussing the denomination's future and how better and more equitably to use our resources, in the Church Life Review. The text we heard from the prophet Jeremiah has ended up being the key biblical text for that Review. The General Secretary, early on, chose it as the basis of reflection in meetings with Synods, and completely coincidentally Revd Fiona Bennett, the most recent Moderator of General Assembly, chose it as the focus for the Review's Bible study and worship.

The letter the prophet Jeremiah writes to the exiles from Jerusalem who find themselves transplanted into Babylon is remarkable. The people of God have been uprooted from everything they know and from so much that formed their very identity, and they find themselves in a context where nothing seems recognisable. There are limits to any analogy, but the Church in Western Europe finds itself in a world that many of us barely recognise. We can plot the graphs of our numerical decline and lament the loss of our place within society. We can decry secularisation and live in secret fear of becoming irrelevant. However, if we hear the words of the prophet to one set of exiles as words to us, we find it is time to move on from lament, and looking back to the glory days, and step out in faith into a brave new world.

The exiles are told to do some remarkably simple things. Things which in their context must have felt difficult. They are told to plant gardens, build houses, form relationships, and seek the good of the place that is now their home – a place one might have expected them to think of as “the enemy”. They are not to look back and lament the wondrous gardens they once had, but to plant a seed, that in time, once more, there will be a garden. Garden planting starts with that simple act of hope which is to plant a seed. It may sprout, it may not. As Jesus tells us, it may fall on the path and be eaten by birds, or may fall on stony ground and be scorched by the sun for lack of roots, for lack of water. It may fall among weeds and be choked to death. Even the seeds that fall into good soil and take root, will need watering and tending and caring. We don't know what will happen when we plant a seed. Nothing may happen. But without planting that seed there is no hope.

I'd like to tell you a story. Last Christmas, I saw a small tin in a shop that said grow your own mini-Christmas tree. It was quite cheap, and sounded fun, so I bought it. I don't have the tin anymore, but here is a picture of it (PIC). I took it home, opened it, put it near the window in my office, watered it and waited. Nothing happened. I waited. Nothing happened. I was pretty patient, but by mid January there was no sign of life whatsoever, so I was going to cut my losses and throw it out. I took it to the kitchen, to remove the soil, so I could recycle the tin. Under the soil, I found a plastic packet with the seeds in. The instructions on the tin had implied that the seeds were already in the soil, not that I had to find a packet inside and take them out. So, I took them out, and planted them in the tin. After that, it didn't take too long for a little green shoot to appear (PIC). And then another one, and another one. One of the seeds never did grow, but 3 of the 4 did. They grew very, very slowly. But I put them in the sun on the kitchen windowsill, I watered them, I watched over them, sometimes I even spoke words of encouragement to them and now, six months later, which feels like a long time to me, they definitely look like trees (show). It is going to take a very long time before any of them are big enough to call Christmas trees, even mini ones; until they are big enough to hang baubles and lights on, but they are growing, and they will become trees. And I will keep nurturing them, until they do become trees.

Just as planting a seed can be the first step on the way to creating a garden, the Church Life Review is finding that local churches, even relatively small ones can make a significant difference to the communities around them. Our gift as a local URC is to serve the local communities in which we find ourselves, and to respond to the call to seek the welfare of the places in which God has set us. We may no longer recognise those places in many ways, given the rapid pace of societal change, but our calling, our duty, as Christians and as church, remains to seek the welfare of the places where God has put us.

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We know the parable of the sower well. We know what happens to the seeds that don't fall into good soil, but do we recognise that we are the seeds? In the second part of the reading from Matthew, Jesus explains his parable. It is not actually about sowing seeds, it is about hearing and discerning the word of God. When someone hears the word of God but does not understand it, evil comes and snatches it away, like the birds eat the seeds on the path. Or like me with my tin – the instructions were not clear, I did not understand that I had to unearth the packet and release the seeds. Then there are those who hear the word, with joy, but it does not take root. This, to my mind is like very evangelical, or pentecostal churches which suck people in by playing on their emotions or making false promises, but then do not teach people what living as a Christian truly involves, they get discouraged and fall by the way-side or get into a pattern of occasional attendance at worship and no Christian service during the week. Then there is the person sown among the thorns – the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke their faith. They get swamped by the kind of life society shows us, keeping up with the Joneses, wanting to be popular on social media, joining in with culture wars and easy criticism.

Not only must we plant seeds, and nurture and water them, we must listen for the word of God and try to follow it. Without planting there is no hope, yet with planting, good soil, care and above all faith, the church will grow and flourish, just like this little tree.

**Hymn** Father, I place into your hands R&S 518

Father, I place into your hands the things I cannot do,  
Father, I place into your hands the things that I've been through.  
Father, I place into your hands the way that I should go,  
For I know I always can trust you.

Father, I place into your hands my friends and family.  
Father, I place into your hands the things that trouble me.  
Father, I place into your hands the person I would be,  
For I know I always can trust you.

Father, we love to see your face, we love to hear your voice.  
Father, we love to sing your praise and in your name rejoice.  
Father, we love to walk with you and in your presence rest,  
For we know we always can trust you.

Jenny Hewer

**Lord's Supper**

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.

You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.

You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations,

and the gathered wisdom of many years.

You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up in difficult times where there was little peace.

He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.

He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.

He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.

For these things, he suffered. For these things, he died.

And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.

You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us, to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.

For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord**

**God of power and might,**

**heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

**Hosanna in the highest.**

**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.**

**Hosanna in the highest.**

This is the mystery of faith:

**Christ has died**

**Christ is risen**

**Christ will come again.**

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine, and upon your people, that Christ may be with us, and we may be ready to live for you and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way 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. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

### **Sharing of bread and wine**

#### **Prayer after communion**

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us. You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service. Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Prayers of intercession**

Gracious God, we pray today with all those living in poverty. We pray especially for those in our own country who are suffering greatly due to the cost-of-living crisis, and all those affected by strikes.

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

We pray for all those with mental health issues and those who care for them, and for all those who have become mentally unwell due to worry and stress about paying bills and having enough to eat. And we pray for those who are neurodivergent, that they may find understanding and support.

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

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice of all kind. We pray for those who have experienced discrimination because of their mental health, or abuse and stigma because they live with dementia; for those who experience prejudice because of their sexuality or the colour of their skin, or because they are poor, or uneducated. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one, created in God's image.

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

We pray for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them, through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising awareness of issues.

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

We pray for doctors, nurses, porters and cleaners, carers and their families, as they continue to care for our health and wellbeing and we pray for the NHS.

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

We pray for world leaders, democratic systems and all those in positions of authority. We pray for journalists who risk their lives to bring us the truth, for activists and those who demonstrate peacefully to make the world a better place, and for aid workers in challenging conditions.

We pray for peace in all places, especially in Ukraine and the Middle East.

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

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn.

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

Holy and gracious God, finally, we pray today for our Church Meeting, that we might discern your will for your church in this place; that we may calmly and with respect discuss how you want us to move forward. Grant us the wisdom to listen for your small voice in the midst of the chaos of the world outside, and to accept your Holy Spirit moving in and amongst us, in Jesus' name we pray.

And I close with the prayer from the end of the Church Life Review Report to General Assembly:

God who gardens, who enjoys the land and declares it to be good,  
who revels in its diversity and delights in its abundance,  
who invites us to share in the task of nurturing and cherishing the gardens of  
our lives and our churches,  
we ask for energy and wisdom as we tend the land.  
Where the garden is overgrown,  
give us insight into what should be cleared away and what should be nurtured;  
Where the garden is tired, fill us with courage to prune back branches  
to allow new growth to emerge;  
Where the garden is barren, encourage us to plant seeds with hope and trust,  
even if we may not see the tree fully mature;  
Where the garden is desolate, may we provide nesting boxes  
and bug hotels to encourage and foster new life;  
Where the garden needs feeding, help us to get the right balance of food and water,  
sunshine and shade

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Where the garden is flourishing may we cherish its life and invite others to sit in its shade.  
God who gardens, as we co-create with you, may we also enjoy the land and declare it to be good,  
revel in its diversity and delight in its abundance. Amen

Now, as we journey into the future, we sing... remembering that while we may be weak, God is mighty.  
God is always by our side so that our anxious fears may subside.

**Hymn** Guide me, O thou great Jehovah - R&S 345

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,  
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.  
Bread of heaven,  
Feed me now and evermore.

Open thou the crystal fountain,  
Whence the healing stream doth flow;  
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar

Lead me all my journey through.  
Strong deliverer,  
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield;

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
Bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death and hell's Destruction,  
Land me safe on Canaan's side.  
Songs of praises,  
I will ever give to Thee;

William Williams

**Blessing**

Living God, the source of all life, prompt us into new beginnings.  
Ever-present God, travelling alongside us, guide us to walk in your way.  
Ever-loving God, surround us with Your care, and help us to detect your presence and purpose.  
And the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us,  
and remain with us always. Amen

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