

Sunday 20th November 2022 Remembrance Sunday

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

The reflection this week is part of a service to celebrate 50 years of the United Reformed Church and the readings are those which would have been used at the Anniversary Service at Methodist central Hall on the 1st October this year.

Introduction

Can you remember what you were doing in 1972. Here is a snapshot - top recording artists included T REX and Slade, the Christmas number one was Ernie the fastest milkman in the west, and the top selling single was the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards version of Amazing Grace. New books included Watership Down, All Creatures Great and Small, Clockwork Orange and the 33rd Poirot Novel Elephants can Remember. The big news story was Watergate, Billie Jean King won Wimbledon, MASH premiered on TV and in England CAT scans were developed. It seems a lifetime ago and yet just yesterday.

On the 2nd of October 1972 I began my first job at Glasgow Royal Infirmary, I was 18 on that very day. Three days later on the 5th October three thousand people gathered in Westminster, London to celebrate a reunion, there was a service in Westminster Abbey which was broadcast live on BB2 and the United Reformed Church came into being. I have to say I was unaware of it at that time.

It is significant that the coming together of the presbyterian and congregational churches in England was seen as a reunion rather than the birth of a new church. It had taken more than one attempt and been nine years in the making but it was born from a profound belief in the one church of Christ. It has been noted that the URC was the first church born in England of union rather than schism which meant a different mindset, schisms have the habit of creating a defensive attitude and there is a lot of broadcasting whereas the URC started life in consultation, a conscious seeking of common ground and therefore there was a lot of listening.

The two denominations did not unite because they were similar, indeed there were many differences, they united because they believed it was the right thing to do. Years later there were still 'consultations' about how to work things out but there was a will to do it. John Bradbury, today's General Secretary notes that in our celebration as we have looked at some of the key documents it is evident that not everything is as those pioneers proposed it should be but fifty years on we are celebrating not just the formation but the life and witness of thousands of churches drawn together as one in the United Reformed Church.

There is and has been a wealth of creative talent in the URC, and today we will celebrate one strand of this as all of our hymns have been written by hymnwriters from the tradition which is today the United Reformed Church. There have been many hymnwriters but those of note in recent years have been Albert Bayley, Basil Bridge, Eric Routley, Alan Gaunt, Brian Wren, Fred Kaan, Caryl Micklem, David Fox and Colin Thompson who between them have 75 hymns in Rejoice and Sing.

Readings Lamentations 1:1-6

 Luke 17:5-10

Reflection

Our readings this morning are those chosen for the anniversary service which had to be postponed, they are the readings for the 2nd October. It has been said that we have lost the art of lamenting, lamenting being different from having a good moan. A lament is a passionate expression of grief, it is about loss. As we read this passage we find it difficult not to see that state of today's church reflected in the words, so it is an interesting reading for a service to celebrate the life of the church. And yet, in our celebration we also recognise the things that did not happen. It

was envisaged that the formation of the URC would be the beginning of a cascade of reunions as more churches united but sadly although it has happened at a local level in LEPs the coming together at other levels never really happened. We celebrated the reunion with the Churches of Christ in 1981, and with the Scottish Congregationalists in 2002, but talks with other denominations although continuing have not led to a uniting. It would be easy for those who dreamed the dream to lament what has not happened but sometimes we have to accept that for everything there is a time, and there is much to celebrate. There have been three publications so far to help chart the life of the URC – Golden Threads, Traditions and Transitions, and That they all may be one, and a fourth publication will celebrate the hymnody of the URC.

When churches unite there is always a sense of loss, the ways things are done change, a building maybe given up, the name will change, there are interesting stories of the struggle to find a name in 1972 within Steve Tomkins' book. However, if we believe in the vision of unity then that loss is partnered with the celebration of possibility. Our reading from Luke reminds us that we only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move mountains. When we reflect on the miracles of Jesus perhaps we too would lament with disciples over our own meagre faith but Jesus knows that within each human is the potential to do miraculous things, we simply need to recognise our connection in God, dream big dreams and believe in them. The karate expert does not imagine his hand going through a block of concrete, that would be painful, instead he imagines his hand on the other side and through a deep desire that becomes the reality. We are called to dream big dreams – we call it the Kingdom – but most importantly we are called to desire that dream with a passion and determination that will make it a reality. It will mean change and change is often uncomfortable, however, change is inevitable in an evolving world.

The disciples were looking for hope, and as our reading from Lamentations reminds us we are also looking for hope. Perhaps our hope comes from the statistics - between 50% and 60% of the UK population describe themselves as Christian – we might wonder what that means but there's an opportunity for evangelism there.

A third of the population say they believe in God which gives more scope for engagement (though one wonders about the third of the population who don't believe in God yet say they are Christian!) 20% of the population say they pray each day and 40% regularly if not daily.

There is a spiritual awareness that offers the possibility of reunion. The church must change, the way we do things is not seen as relevant in today's world but people are looking for something and the church could be the place they find it. The church is not there to be an exclusive members club, it is there to serve the community, to engage with the needs in the community and to work with others to provide a solution – we call it the Kingdom.

John Bradbury, General Secretary of the URC, has written:

“God's call for the Body of Christ to be faithful is one which invites us to face every new time and occasion with renewed vision. To engage in faithful worship, witness, service, and evangelism in the way God calls us to today may not be the same as what was faithful for those who went before us. Ours is a living God, whose Spirit calls us on. In its 50th year, "it is right that we discern once again what it means to be faithful. Jubilee is classically a moment of 're-set'. Are we called in this moment to 're-set' the life of the United Reformed Church better to enable us and those who will follow after us to respond to the call to be faithful?" ('Toward the Future of the URC', 2021)