

5th September 2021 – ‘Meeting the Beloved’

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Last night’, Arooj Aftab

<https://youtu.be/F2N4M52ITkk>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone to our shared worship this morning. Welcome to you however you are feeling right now, whether you come here today in joy or in sorrow, in hope or despair, you are welcome. Good morning to those of you here in the church, to everyone joining us on Zoom or Facebook, and hello also if you are catching up with us on YouTube or in print. However you join us...

‘We gather as companions on a journey, to be reminded of mystery and of holy things. We gather to see each other’s faces. To be reminded of the possibility that even in our essential aloneness we may connect with each other. We gather to weave and reweave community that is animated by the mystery of life. We gather, spirit of holiness, to feel your presence, to worship, to listen, to gain insight and courage, and to celebrate the journey we make as companions.’

Words by Liz Birtles, quoted by Jane Blackall in her opening worship for this year’s Summer School which was held online.

Let us begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. *If you’re at home do please light a candle with me now if you would like to.*

We light this flame today to rekindle the light of divine love in our hearts, and the spirit of child-like curiosity in our minds. May it be so.

Our theme this month is the Web of Existence, which is a big theme – it’s everything, basically. Later in the month we’ll be marking the movement of the planet, and celebrating the diversity – and raising awareness of the vulnerability – of life on earth.

The web of existence is about relationship, it’s about the interdependence and interconnectedness of all life. But at the core of this vast web of existence – and at its periphery – is the Source of it all. The great mystery, the beating heart, the energy, the

consciousness, the soul of the entire Universe. And so I want to start there, with that most intimate of relationships, which is why this morning's service is called 'Meeting the Beloved'.

Let us enter a time of prayer together...

PRAYER

Great Mystery in whom we move and live and have our being.

Reach out to us in this moment, as we reach out to you, as we seek to connect with our deepest selves, with one another, with our struggling world, with You.

In this moment, here and now, may our hearts and minds be open to all that is unfolding, all that is, however we may feel about it. This is how it is right now.

May we hold in our own hearts, in the light of each of our beings, as best we can, those who are suffering. We may not be able to help them directly, but neither will we ignore them or deny them.

Let us reach out especially this morning to those in Afghanistan who are afraid for their futures, for their lives, as well as to those who have left that country and who must find ways to start their lives again.

We offer our prayers to all those whose freedom is curtailed by oppressive laws and regimes wherever they may be. We reach out, too, to those who wield such power. May they find within themselves compassion and forgiveness.

We remember too those affected by Storm Ida, some of whom have lost their lives, others their homes, in terrifying circumstances. We pray for all who are being affected by climate change around the globe.

In the midst of the pain and the joy of life, may we continue to seek, and to offer, love and understanding, light and hope, wherever we go.

In your mystery. Amen

HYMN 35(P) Find a stillness

Find a stillness, hold a stillness,
let a stillness carry me.

Find the silence hold the silence,
let the silence carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Seek the essence, hold the essence,
let the essence carry me.

Let me flower, help me flower,
watch me flower, carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Transylvanian Hymn Melody, harmony Larry Phillips. Words Carl G Seaburg, based on a Transylvanian Unitarian text © Alan Seaburg

In a moment I'm going to share an ancient short story with you. This version comes from a collection called 'Song of the Bird' by Anthony de Mello, the Indian Jesuit Priest. But first some words from him about how to read a wisdom story. He offers three ways:

1. Read the story once. Then move on to another story. This manner of reading will give you only entertainment.
2. Read the story twice. Reflect on it. Apply it to your life. This will give you a taste of theology.
3. Read the story again, after you have reflected on it. Create a silence within you and let the story reveal to you its inner depth and meaning.

This way of reading and reflecting on sacred texts is known as *Lectio Divina*, or Divine Reading. It's a traditional monastic practice intended to promote communion with God, or with the Beloved. So let's try it.

STORY 'Who am I' A tale from Attar of Nishapur, from *The Song of the Bird*, a collection of wisdom stories by Anthony de Mello. I'm going to read it twice and then we'll take some time in silence for reflection.

The lover knocked at the door of his beloved.

"Who knocks?" said the beloved from within.

"It is I," said the lover.

"Go away," answered the beloved. "This house will not hold you and me."

The rejected lover went away into the desert. There he meditated for months on end, pondering the words of the beloved. Finally he returned and knocked at the door again.

"Who knocks?" asked the beloved

This time the lover replied. "It is you."

And the door was immediately opened.

Repeat

Pause for silent reflection on the story - SILENCE

What does this story mean to you? I think we can assume that the lover is us – it's me and it's you. In fact de Mello stresses that every story in his book is meant to be applied to our *own* lives, not other people's. So here you are asked to imagine that it is you is seeking the Beloved. Does it resonate with you? Are you seeking the beloved? God? Spirit? Meaning? Who or what is that, anyway?

For me the Beloved is my preferred name for what others might call God. It is the name often used by Rumi, the Sufi poet, but it's not confined merely to Sufis and is used in other contemplative traditions too, including by some Christians. It is a name that speaks to me for several reasons. First, it has no baggage for me, and no dogma or visual images to confuse me. I don't feel the need to argue for or against the existence of the Beloved. The Beloved is felt, sensed, experienced – not theorized about. The Beloved is also free of gender. The only pronoun I ever use for the Beloved is You, for the Beloved is always approached directly.

It contains the word love, but is not caught up in confusing definitions of that word, either. It has a softness, and a gentleness. And it is clearly about relationship. Not with a being necessarily – I don't imagine the Beloved as a being – the Beloved simply is.

Part of my own spiritual practice is to write a journal every morning and I always write it to the Beloved, pour out my thoughts, my hopes, my concerns, my prayers. I imagine the Beloved as a loving presence, holder of all pain and tears, rejoicer of all joys and successes, and above all as an endlessly patient listener. Do I meet the Beloved in this journal? Not quite. It is more like I am knocking at the door, carrying a lot of my own stuff with me.

So the next part of the practice, after the outpouring, is the silence. Now, in the quietness, there is a softening of the edges of myself and a merging into the One. Only now is there space in which the door can open, and meeting the Beloved finally becomes possible. 'I' gives way to 'You'.

We'll hear the story for a 3rd and final time later...

In a moment we'll turn to a time of meditation. But first let's hear a poem which is also, as I understand it, about meeting the Beloved – or God.

'i thank You God for most this amazing day' is by the 20th century American poet e e cummings. It isn't the easiest poem to read – or to hear – because cummings uses odd syntax. His words are not in the order we'd expect them to be – as you can already tell by the title – and he interrupts the flow, too, by putting some lines in brackets. I recommend you simply allow the overall sense of the poem to wash over you without struggling to understand it.

Let it be an impression.

REFLECTION i thank You God for most this amazing day, by e e cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,

and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and love and wings and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any - lifted from the no
of all nothing - human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

GUIDED MEDITATION (thanks to Jo James from his talk at Summer School)

Make yourself comfortable and take a deep breath to settle and remind yourself you are
alive and in constant connection in 'most this amazing day', whether you are aware of it or
not. And take time to notice what's around you using each of your senses, one at a time...

First notice 5 things you can see

pause

Now notice 4 things you can *hear*, which can be outside or inside

pause

Next notice 3 things you can *touch* – and touch them

pause

Now notice 2 things you can *smell*

pause

and finally notice 1 thing you can *taste*

PAUSE – short silence

INTERLUDE 'Anam Chara (soul friend)', Clíodhna Ní Aodáin

<https://youtu.be/ZJJAOgCVBRQ>

Thank you to the Irish cellist Clíodhna Ní Aodáin for giving me permission to use her music.

You can find her at <https://www.thecelticcello.com/>

In the poem, we heard earlier e e cummings expresses how we can meet God – or the Beloved – through interaction with our senses and our surroundings. Again, this relationship is direct, it is felt, it is experienced, it is intimate. And the poem is filled with gratitude. It is the sensing of spirit everywhere – ‘the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky; [he writes] and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes’. He manages to convey the feeling of intense aliveness that comes from seeing life in its nakedness. As simply spirit, and colour, touch and taste. As infinite, and as ‘yes’. There is a sense of urgency and vibrancy to this being alive.

There is a verse which reads:

‘how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any - lifted from the no
of all nothing - human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?’

It’s awkward but seems to mean ‘How could a mere human being, who can taste and touch and hear and see and breathe, and who was created out of nothing, how could they possibly doubt unimaginable You?’

The phrase ‘lifted from the no of all nothing’ is similar to an idea expressed by the English mystic Julian of Norwich. She argued, in her Divine Revelations, that there is nothing between God and the soul.

In fact she wrote...

‘...when God created man’s body, he took clay from the earth, which is a substance composed of many physical elements. And from all this he made man’s body. But he didn’t take anything at all when he made man’s soul: he just created it. And in this way, created nature was duly united to its Maker, who is essentially uncreated Nature: that is, God. And that is why there neither can nor should be anything at all between God and a man’s soul.’

As Jo James put it in his Summer School talk, ‘What is between my soul and God? Nothing.’ Or as I might put it, ‘What is between my soul and the Beloved? Nothing’.

Do you agree that there is nothing between your soul and God, or the Oneness of the Universe? If so, how might you express this? And how do you experience it? If you feel that something separates you from the whole, what is it? How do you – or how could you – move

more closely towards the sacred? The answer to that question might be the answer to this question: When do you feel most closely connected? Most fully alive?

I'm going to close now by reading the story we began with for the third time, so that you may let it resonate and reveal its meaning for you in your life in this moment. Maybe it is about seeking the divine, or searching for meaning, or finding resolution with someone or something in your life. Only you can know the answer. Here is the story.

The lover knocked at the door of his beloved.

"Who knocks?" said the beloved from within.

"It is I," said the lover.

"Go away," answered the beloved. "This house will not hold you and me."

The rejected lover went away into the desert. There he meditated for months on end, pondering the words of the beloved.

Finally he returned and knocked at the door again.

"Who knocks?" asked the beloved

This time the lover replied. "It is you."

And the door was immediately opened.

Let's sing...

2nd HYMN: 219 (P) You are the song of my heart

You are the song of my heart in the morning;

you are the dawn of truth in my soul;

you are the dew of the rose's adorning;

you are the woven whole.

Yours is the grace to be steadfast in danger;

yours is the peace that none can destroy;

yours is the face of the need-riven stranger;

yours are the wings of joy.

You are the deep to the deep in my calling;
you are a lamp where my feet shall tread;
your way is steep, past the peril of falling;
you are my daily bread.

Yours be the praise of my spirit uplifted;
you are the sea to each flowing stream;
Yours are the days that are gathered and sifted;
you are the deathless dream.

Music by David Dawson, words © Kendal Gibbons

CLOSING WORDS

Beloved friends, as we depart this holy space nourished and renewed, let us breathe into our own divinity. And let it ripple outwards as love, for ourselves, for one another and the earth, for as a body is animated through the relationships among its many parts, so love is made manifest among us and through us.

May it be so. Amen

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC 'Deep River', Chineke! and VOCES8 arranged by Matthew Lynch (the conductor), harmonisation by Harry Burleigh.

<https://youtu.be/e9ggOxkg-uc>