

20th March 2022 – A time for balance

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC 'Spring', Tracy Chapman

<https://youtu.be/2O3mt1gwtA>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone, however you are joining us this morning, online or in person. Today we are marking the spring equinox, which is the first day of spring and one of two moments in the year of balance - when day and night are of more-or-less equal length around the earth.

Let us light our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith, and those of you at home might like to do this with me.

Some words from Andy Pakula

Let there be light

The light of joy, the light of happiness, and the light of contentment

May it illuminate our paths and fill our lives with peace

And let there be dark

For it is from our dark places that we are brought forward

Tried and tested

And impelled toward growth

It is in these places that we realize compassion and learn to love

And there was day and there was night.

And there was joy and there was sorrow.

And it was good.

Let us pray...

Prayer Bruce Southworth

O Source of life and love,
Torn by desires to sit back
and to enjoy the beauty of the world—
to savour the blue skies and gentle days—
and by desires to recast the world and to fight its evils— to save the world,
Torn by all those things that hurt and confuse
and make no sense amid beauty—
yet supported by all those things that heal and hold us— smiles, kisses, mountain vistas
and gentle waves, warm words,
We live in mystery.
We live torn apart at times -- so much glory --
so much pain.
We live in faith --
faith in ourselves and each other --
faith that we can create bonds of the spirit that proclaim we are not alone.
We have health and hope within us --
we can live through the heartache to new life.
So, for the grace of the world and all of the tumble, too,
this day we give thanks.
Amen.

HYMN 267 (G) We sing the roses waiting

The sing of golden mornings,
we sing of sparkling seas,
of fenlands, valleys, mountains,
and stately forest trees.
We sing of flashing sunshine
and life-bestowing rain,
of birds among the branches,
and springtime come again.

We sing the heart courageous,
the youthful, eager mind;

we sing of hopes undaunted,
of friendly ways and kind.
We sing the roses waiting
beneath the deep-piled snow;
we sing, when night is darkest,
The day's returning glow.

Music Alexander Ewing, words from Ralph Waldo Emerson

STORY The master boatman

A disciple of Confucius once met a master boatman who was known for his dexterity of boating. The disciple said, "How marvellous! Can anyone learn how to handle a boat like you do?"

"Certainly," said the master. "But remember! If you want to be a good boatman, don't worry about controlling the boat."

"Don't worry about controlling the boat?" The disciple was taken aback. "But if you don't control the boat, how can you handle it?"

"Well, you don't have to worry about the boat, just make sure that you can swim — and then you can control the boat!" explained the boatman. "You see, if a person can swim underwater, then they know how to handle a boat when they're given one! They can get the knack of handling the boat in no time."

Puzzled at what the boatman said, the disciple decided to ask Confucius for advice.

"Oh yes," said Confucius, "a good swimmer will get the knack of boating in no time, because they forget about the water. And if a person can dive and swim *under* water, they may never have seen a boat before in their lives and yet still know how to handle it. This is because they see the water much like they see dry land. The capsizing of a boat is no more than overturning a cart on land."

“The ten thousand things may all be capsizing and backsliding at the same time right before them, but nothing can get at them nor affect what’s inside them. So where could they go and not be at ease?” added the sage.

This is how the best performers give their best recitals. They have laid the ground for the performance and when it’s time for them to play, they don’t have to worry about putting in their best. They forget all about performing, and are at their best by being effortless. Whereas, if they turn their attention to performing it takes the spark of excellence and ease out of the rendition.

Then they can’t perform because they’re too busy performing!

READING Omid Safi

“The Prophet Muhammad was once asked what was the one essential quality for prayers to be valid. Many in the community thought they knew the right answer. Some thought the Prophet would say proper recitation of Arabic. Others thought the answer would be lovely memorization of Qur’anic chapters. Yet others expected the answer would be perfect ritual observation of prayer. Muhammad’s answer was: Presence in the heart.

What is this presence?

It is not so much presence of God.

God is always present.

It is we humans who are absent from our own heart.

Presence means to have the fullness of who we are with us.

What does it mean to pray with this Presence?

So much of our lives are spent in a fractured state of heart.

We are, too often, scattered....

To pray with the heart, to have presence in the heart, is a remedy.

It is a healing, an un-scattering.

Presence is simply to have our heart be where our feet are.”

2nd HYMN 148 (P) Spirit of life (sitting)

Spirit of Life, come unto me.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;

move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;

Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

SILENCE

We come to a time of silent reflection, which will be followed by music.

INTERLUDE The Four Seasons, Concerto No. 1 in E Major, RV 269, Op. 8, No. 1 "Spring":
II. Largo. Joshua Bell

<https://youtu.be/6-k8Nnetsbc>

ADDRESS

Does it sometimes feel as though everything is ‘capsizing and backsliding at the same time’? Whether that’s in our own lives, or at church, or in the world at large? Maybe even all of them at the same time! Chaos! It is difficult to keep our balance at such times, and particularly challenging to learn the skill of doing so in the middle of all the mayhem. No one learns to sail in a hurricane, for good reason.

For those of us humans who live towards one of the earth’s poles, as we do, the world does its own version of riding the waves. It tilts as it turns, and it tips us into darkness and then into light and back again. Round and round we go. This is the way of things. The changes are gradual – more rolling hills than mountainous drops – and we are more accustomed to riding them than we are to navigating sudden severe changes of weather. But this time of year is a balance point – a time when the entire world has more-or-less equal amounts of day and night, light and dark. And while this planetary state of affairs may not reflect – does not reflect – the current tumultuous state of the world, it does at least remind us of the

possibility of balance and equilibrium, just as it also reminds us that change is as constant as it is inevitable.

I spent two whole days this week at Hilfield Friary in Dorset, which is an Anglican Franciscan community. I was there with three Unitarian ministers with whom I am in a covenant group. The covenant – or agreement – we make is to write a journal to each other every month, and to meet for a time of quietness, deep sharing and dialogue twice each year. I arrived at the Friary quite frazzled and rushed. I didn't really feel I had time to be there – it was the wrong week to be still. Perhaps it always is. But the rhythm of the Friary, with its bells signaling prayer times and meal times, and the rhythm of our own session in the small wooden hut beyond the main grounds, surrounded by fields and trees and birdsong and sheep, drew me back to my centre. To a place of balance.

When the Prophet Muhammed was asked what was the one essential quality for prayer, his answer was 'presence in the heart'. Presence in the heart. What does that mean? Omid Safi says it means 'to have the fullness of who we are with us'. To have the fullness of who we are with us. It means, he suggests, 'to have our heart be where our feet are'. I began to feel that my heart was in the same place that my feet were. And that I was less fractured, and more together. More centred. More present in the heart.

Do you know what I mean by that? Do you sometimes feel as though the various aspects and parts of yourself, the different threads of thought that might have been firing off in all directions, or maybe just going round and round in circles; and the intense flashes of anxiety – or perhaps the dull ache of sadness – that have pervaded you...do you sometimes feel that they have stilled and settled, or lessened and lifted, and that a quiet sense of simply *being* fills you? I'm sure you do. At such times we could say that you 'are present in your heart'. Even though the external circumstances of life may not have changed, sunshine has broken through the clouds of your inner landscape for a while.

I was thinking of this when reading the story of Confucius's disciple and the master boatman, who explained that becoming a master meant forgetting about trying to control the boat. Confusing advice, perhaps. But a boat, after all, merely skims the surface of the water on which it travels. It is easily tossed this way and that by winds and currents. So no, the way to become a master boatman is not to fret about the boat but to be completely at home in the

water. Once you have achieved that, handling the boat will come naturally – there will be no need to stress or over-think it.

And likewise if we desire to become skilled at being human, then perhaps we need fret less about the specifics of whether to do this or that, to go this way or the other, and rather focus on becoming fully at home in the stream of life itself. At home in ourselves, at home in the divine, at peace with all that is. And then we might find the business of being human – of being us – a little easier.

Like the performer who must do all the groundwork – the practise, the learning, the studying – so that once on stage she can forget that she's performing, those of us who are on a spiritual quest – which is all of us here – likewise need to practise. To practise being present in the heart, and keeping our hearts where our feet are. To notice when we are off balance and to return to that which centres us once more. Which might be a couple of days in a Friary, or a mindful walk in the woods, or simply pausing what we are doing to light a candle or offer a prayer.

Balance is not a destination. There is no point at which we can say 'Ah! I've reached it! Nothing will ever knock me off kilter again!' No, it doesn't work like that. The earth keeps turning, time keeps passing, and so do we lose our way once more. But if we have done the groundwork, if we have learned to swim in the water, in other words if we have practiced being present in our hearts, then perhaps we'll be capsized a little less often, and maybe we'll be able to steady ourselves again a little sooner.

Today, after this service, we will have our Annual General Meeting. It will be a moment to take stock and notice where we are, and I hope it will be the beginning of a process of re-steadying our congregation. We will be welcoming a new committee, and looking forward to another year of travelling together – and learning how to handle this particular boat. Let us each do our best to keep our hearts where our feet are, and travel the path ahead with faith and hope in our hearts.

The earth is about to reach its balance point once more. I hope that we can do the same, that we will do the groundwork, that we will learn to swim fearlessly in the water, so that

together we can steer the ship with more grace and ease through whatever periods of calm or storm may lie ahead.

Blessed be us all. May it be so.

3rd HYMN 66 (P) How wonderful this world of thine,
How wonderful this world of thine,
a fragment of a fiery sun,
how lovely and how small,
where all things serve thy great design,
where life's adventure is begun
in God, the life of all.

The smallest seed in secret grows,
and thrusting upward answers soon
the bidding of the light;
the bud unfurls into a rose;
the wings within the whole cocoon
are perfected for flight.

The migrant bird in winter fled,
shall come again with spring, and build
in this same shady tree;
by secret wisdom surely led,
homeward across the clover field
hurries the honey bee.

O thou, whose greater gifts are ours -
a conscious will, a thinking mind,
a heart to worship thee -
O take these strange unfolding powers,
and teach us through thy Word to find
the life more full and free.

Words by Frederick Pratt Green, music by David Dawson

CLOSING WORDS

Look to this day
for it is life
the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all
the realities and truths of existence
the joy of growth
the splendour of action
the glory of power.

For yesterday is but a memory
And tomorrow is only a vision.
But today well lived
makes every yesterday
a memory of happiness
and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day....

Amen

CLOSING MUSIC Somewhere over the rainbow - Israel "IZ" Kamakawiwo'ole

<https://youtu.be/V1bFr2SWP1I>