

## **6<sup>th</sup> March 2022 – Renewing our faith**

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** 'Light of a Clear Blue Morning', The Wailin' Jennys

<https://youtu.be/J-UK7iNJgNo>

*That was...All the music today is written and performed by women in celebration of International Women's Day this Tuesday.*

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome everyone. Welcome to those of you here in the church as well as all of you online today, and especially to anyone joining us for the first time. You are welcome, with your sadness and concerns, as well as your joy and hope. This is a service about navigating our way up and down life's roller coasters, and asks each of us, once again, what is it that we have faith in? Where do we find nourishment and encouragement? What is it that holds us and sustains us, whatever the circumstances? You may like to hold the question 'What is it that I have faith in?' throughout this service.

But I'd like to begin with some words by Rev Gretchen Haley, which may resonate for some of us...

What's going to happen?

Will everything be ok?

What can I do?

In these days we find ourselves too often

Stuck with these questions on repeat

What's going to happen? / Will everything be ok? /What can I do?

We grasp at signs and markers, articles of news and analysis

Facebook memes and forwarded emails

as if the new zodiac,

Capable of forecasting all that life may yet bring our way

As if we could prepare

As if life had ever made any promises of making sense, or turning out the way we'd thought

As if we are not also actors in this still unfolding story

For this hour we gather  
To surrender to the mystery  
To release ourselves from the needing to know  
The yearning to have it all already figured out  
And also the burden of believing we either have all the control, or none  
Here in our song and our silence  
Our stories and our sharing  
We make space for a new breath, a new healing, a new possibility  
To take root  
That is courage  
forged in the fire of our coming together  
and felt in the spirit that comes alive in this act of faith:  
that we believe still, a new world is possible  
That we are creating it, already, here, and now.  
Come let us worship together

Let us mark this moment of beginning our worship by lighting our chalice, as a symbol of our free religious faith, and of hope. *And if you're at home, do please light one with me now.*

Let us pray...

## **PRAYER**

Divine Spirit, God of all love, we offer you our prayers.

We give thanks for this day. For this time together. For this place, friendship, and community.

We pray for peace in our hearts and straightforwardness in our relationships.

We reaffirm our intention to be gentle with ourselves and with each other.

We pray for those whom we love, especially those who may be in pain at this time.

And we pray for all who suffer in the world, whoever and wherever they may be. In particular at this time for Ukraine and all of its people. Those fleeing, those fighting, those waiting underground. Those who are fearful, not knowing whether they will live or die or see their loved ones again. We pray too for the people of Russia who are also suffering, afraid,

confused, isolated. And for everyone who is trying to help provide safe havens, food, shelter, medicines.

In the face of the many troubles of our world may we always retain our capacity for compassion, for joy, and for hope, and make it our mission to bring a little more love and gratitude into each and every day, in whatever way we can.

As we offer these, our heartfelt prayers, we trust that we are all, always, being held in the light of love, and gently guided towards healing and wholeness. Let it be so. Amen

Let us sing now a song which I know many people find moving at the best of times, and perhaps especially at this time. It is a sung prayer.

### **1st hymn 226 (G) Song of Peace**

This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for lands afar and mine;  
this is my home, the country where my heart is,  
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
but other hearts in other lands are beating  
with hopes and dreams and true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,  
And sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine;  
but other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,  
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.

O hear my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for their land and for mine.

*Music by Jean Sibelius, words by Lloyd Stone. Used by permission of The Lorenz Corporation, Dayton, Ohio*

Our story today is well known and appears in slightly different forms in many collection of wisdom tales from around the world. Ann will read for us this morning.

### **STORY The difference between heaven and hell**

Long ago there lived an old woman who had a wish. She wished more than anything to see for herself the difference between heaven and hell. The monks in the temple agreed to grant her request. They put a blindfold around her eyes, and said, "First you shall see hell."

When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was standing at the entrance to a great dining hall. The hall was full of round tables, each piled high with the most delicious foods — meats, vegetables, fruits, breads, and desserts of all kinds! The smells that reached her nose were wonderful.

The old woman noticed that, in hell, there were people seated around those round tables. She saw that their bodies were thin, and their faces were gaunt, and creased with frustration. Each person held a spoon. The spoons must have been three feet long! They were so long that the people in hell could reach the food on those platters, but they could not get the food back to their mouths. As the old woman watched, she heard their hungry desperate cries. "I've seen enough," she cried. "Please let me see heaven."

And so again the blindfold was put around her eyes, and the old woman heard, "Now you shall see heaven." When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was confused. For there she stood again, at the entrance to a great dining hall, filled with round tables piled high with the same lavish feast. And again, she saw that there were people sitting just out of arm's reach of the food with those three-foot long spoons.

But as the old woman looked closer, she noticed that the people in heaven were plump and had rosy, happy faces. As she watched, a joyous sound of laughter filled the air.

And soon the old woman was laughing too, for now she understood the difference between heaven and hell for herself. The people in heaven were using those long spoons to feed each other.

**READING** From Rev Andrew Brown, Unitarian minister in Cambridge

In my experience ... there is nothing simple about community, especially if [one] means by this something like a group of like-minded people offering each other nothing but uncritical and totally unconditional support no matter what the circumstances. Real community is fraught with conflicting desires, aims, expectations, extraordinary and flawed personalities and much, much more besides. Also it's important to realize that community is not just about unconditional support for who you are, it's also about challenging you rigorously to transform who you are so you may become someone better, someone you didn't, couldn't, know might be possible before your involvement with this or that community. Unpopular though it may be to say, true community is about critical, ethical, moral and intellectual challenge and accountability to each other and this means community is never going to be an entirely easy or pleasant, unalloyed experience. Community is something profoundly difficult and complex, something that has to be maintained and worked at over the long-term in a disciplined and loyal fashion and it has to be something with a certain set of shared challenging desires, aims and expectations at its centre.

**2<sup>nd</sup> HYMN 60 (G) Trust in life**

We do not seek a shallow faith,  
a God to keep us free  
from trial and error, harm and death,  
wherever we may be.

For none can live and not grow old,  
nor love and not risk loss:  
though life bring raptures manifold,  
each one must bear some cross.

When future days seem but a mass  
of menace more than hope,  
we pray not for the cup to pass,  
but strength that we may cope.

God grant us faith that when some ill

unwonted comes our way,  
deep in our hearts, thy Spirit will  
give power to win the day.

And if from fear of pain or strife,  
calm peace we cannot win,  
then give us faith to trust thy Life  
invincible within.

*Music by John Bacchus Dykes; words by Sydney Henry Knight.*

## **CANDLES OF JOY AND CONCERN**

We come to a time of reflection. And I would like to offer you the opportunity, both in church and online, to offer your joys and concerns with a candle and a few brief words.

If you wish to speak here in church, please come up to the lecturn.

If you wish to speak online, please indicate by raising your hand physically or by using the 'raise hand' symbol.

*Blended*

**INTERLUDE** Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 7: 2. Romance by Clara Schumann, performed by Isata Kanneh-Mason

[https://youtu.be/3BL\\_6s\\_rtYI](https://youtu.be/3BL_6s_rtYI)

## **ADDRESS**

What do you have faith in?

If I have faith in myself, what does that mean? Is it faith that I always know best? Or that all my dreams will come true eventually with enough determination and hard work? In which case, what happens when I'm wrong? Or they don't?

If I put my faith in humanity, does that mean I believe humans will always do what's right, in the end? If so, what happens to my faith when it seems that maybe we won't?

And if I have faith in God, does it mean I believe God will protect me from harm, as long as I pray hard enough and long enough? And if so, what happens to that faith when my prayers appear to go unanswered?

Faith is not always simple, nor do I think is it constant. It may come and go and shift in shape. And faith can easily be crushed if it is misplaced. In the First World War many people turned away from church because they couldn't make sense of the scale of the loss and the suffering. Couldn't believe the loving God they had put their faith in would allow it.

I love the image of heaven we heard in our story. It's so simple, yet brilliant. The complete transformation that occurs when the people stop trying to feed themselves and realize that their problem will be solved if instead they feed each other, is a real light bulb moment. Of course! That's the way to do it. Why don't we all just do that? Take care of each other first?

Well of course we know why. Because, as Andrew Brown spells out with devastating clarity, we are not that straightforward. 'Real community,' he writes, 'is fraught with conflicting desires, aims, expectations, extraordinary and flawed personalities and much, much more besides.' I think we know this is true.

He adds, 'Community is something profoundly difficult and complex, something that has to be maintained and worked at over the long-term in a disciplined and loyal fashion and it has to be something with a certain set of shared challenging desires, aims and expectations at its centre.'

When I read this I thought again about the lovely image of people feeding each other in heaven, and began to wonder dark thoughts. How long might it be before a few of them began to argue they needed more food than the rest? Perhaps small cliques formed who only looked after each other's needs. Maybe someone never got given any food at all. Might it have occurred to them that their long chopsticks could be used not only to help each other but also to defend or provoke or even attack? In other words, were the two rooms simply snapshots of brief moments in time, and did the people in them actually keep moving between heaven and hell and back again?

I really don't want to seem cynical and ruin the beautiful image, because it is beautiful and because it can be true, and sometimes it actually is. Perhaps you can remember a time when you felt such completely reciprocal care and cooperation yourself. But my point is that heaven, and faith, enlightenment and indeed peace – none of these are usually final or enduring destinations. They are not 'and they all lived happily ever after' scenarios, not in this life anyway. They are much more likely to be achieved temporarily – fleetingly even – and wonderfully – in moments of grace. They may be remembered and aspired to, in the way that we remind ourselves here each week of our direction of travel towards loving our neighbours as ourselves. We come here, I think, partly to remember that beacon of light that always calls to us. Like the sun breaking through the clouds in our mural. We come to reaffirm our intention to follow it, once again.

This feels important to me because for me this grounds faith in reality rather than fantasy. Yes, we can certainly experience heaven on earth by acting like the people who chose to feed each other. But if – or when – we fail that does not mean the vision is wrong, or the belief was false, it simply means that quite *where/how we place our faith* needs to be reexamined.

Anne Lammot, author the well-known book on prayer 'Help, thanks, wow!' writes: 'I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something Father Tom had told me--that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.'

I do have faith in myself, most of the time, that I will do my best and that when things go wrong, however badly, I'll find my way through somehow. That there will be people who will help me, as some of you have recently, and a God who will hold me, even when I lose my way. And that's enough.

I do have faith, too, in the divine nature of the human spirit, that it's always shining somewhere, currently most obviously on our TV screens in the generosity of those offering shelter and safety to refugees from Ukraine, but always in the small acts of kindness of every day life. And in our sublime creativity. I ended up seeing Songlines 3 times, and on Friday I watched the Cuban Dance and it was extraordinary. Stunning and transporting.



I've never met anyone who's entirely selfless. But that's OK – I'm not sure I'd trust them anyway. It's enough to have faith that there will always be someone somewhere – and often many people everywhere – who are shining the light and keeping the faith on behalf of the rest of us when we can't. That's enough.

I still put my faith in the returning seasons, even though they may be shifting, I know nature will always be able to amaze and astound me and bring me home.

Personally I don't have faith in a God who will protect me or others from harm or hurt, but I do have faith that God will always hold us all in loving embrace whatever happens. And that help and guidance are always available if we're willing to ask for it. And in that sense 'ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you' feels true for me, particularly in matters of faith itself.

Just a couple of weeks ago I put out a request for a new spiritual director. My previous one retired just before the pandemic began and I hadn't got round to finding a replacement. I contacted the Diocese in Exeter and explained I was a Unitarian. And last week they got back to me saying they'd found someone who might be suitable. Strangely it turned out to be a retired priest who once came to a service I led in Moretonhampstead and had enjoyed it and we'd had a nice chat afterwards. So I'm hopeful that will work out.

At such troubled times as we are currently in, we simply don't know what will happen, and there's very little we can do about it, other than donate, pray, bear witness, and continue to find beauty and move towards the light in our own ways in our own lives as best we can. Actually that's a lot! And we can certainly have faith in our ability to do that. I think we can have faith, too, that we are more resilient and resourceful than we know. But most importantly that however the story unfolds, we are held, and valued, and loved, always. That we belong, and that we're never alone.

Let that be enough.

**3<sup>rd</sup> HYMN: 151 (G) Be thou my vision**

Be thou my vision, O God of my heart;  
naught be all else to me, save that thou art;  
thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom and thou my true word,  
I ever with thee and thou with me, God;  
thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tower,  
raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor world's empty praise,  
thou my inheritance, now and always;  
thou and thou only, first in my heart,  
sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Sovereign of heaven, my victory won,  
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun.  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

*Irish traditional melody, arr by David Evans; words from 'A Prayer' from 'The Poem Book of the Gael', selected and edited by Eleanor Henrietta Hull.*  
Words © Surtsey Publishing Co.

**CLOSING WORDS Universal Prayer of Peace to take with us into the coming week**

Lead me from death to life,  
from falsehood to truth.

Lead me from despair to hope,  
from fear to trust.

Lead me from hate to love,  
from war to peace.

Let peace fill our heart, our world, our universe.

Peace, peace, peace.

**Amen**

**CLOSING MUSIC** Closing video: 'Look up', Joy Oladokun  
[https://youtu.be/mYZO8v94\\_iw](https://youtu.be/mYZO8v94_iw)