

13th March 2022 – Spirituality of festival

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘March’, from Das Jahr, Fanny Mendelssohn, Sarah Rothenberg

<https://youtu.be/XxrlL5JnHyQ>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone. Welcome to those of you here in church as well as all of you online today, and especially to anyone joining us for the first time. You are welcome here, with whatever sadness or anxiety you are holding, as well as your joys and your hopes.

We’ve just heard ‘March’ from a suite called Das Jahr (The Year) by Fanny Mendelssohn, sister of the more famous Felix. And March is full of festivals. We are currently in Lent of course in the Christian calendar, and next week we’ll be welcoming the beginning of spring as the Equinox approaches. We began the month with St David’s Day, followed by International Women’s Day, and we’ll end it with Mothering Sunday. And this week sees the Jewish festival of Purim, which begins on Wednesday evening, and the Hindu festival of Holi, which is on Friday. We humans find – or make – sense of our lives through storytelling, ritual and festival. And today’s service we’ll be looking a bit more at that.

But let us begin our worship with our own weekly ritual of lighting our chalice, as a symbol of our free religious faith. *And if you’re at home, do please light a candle with me now.*

Today let us reflect on the meaning and the power of this simple flame. What does it mean for you in this moment? Feel free to call out your ideas, or write them in the chat box.

Thank you.

HYMN 158 (P) The flame of truth is kindled

The flame of truth is kindled,
our chalice burning bright;
amongst us moves the Spirit
in whom we take delight.
We worship here in freedom
with conscience unconstrained,
a pilgrim people thankful
for what great souls have gained.

The flame of thought is kindled,
we celebrate the mind;
its search for deepest meaning
that time-bound creeds can't bind.
We celebrate its oneness
with body and with soul,
with universal process,
with God who makes us whole.

The flame of love is kindled,
we open wide our hearts,
that it may burn within us,
fuel us to do our parts.
Community needs building,
a Commonwealth of Earth,
we ask for strength to build it –
a new world come to birth.

Words © Clifford Martin Reed

Let us pray...

Prayer (adapted from Eric Cherry)

Spirit of Life and Love

May you be present with us now.

We ask too that you are present with all who are suffering from acts of violence at this time: in Ukraine, in Afghanistan, in Syria – anywhere where there is conflict in our troubled world. May you lift up the hearts of those who are afraid. And inspire courage among the peacemakers. May you be present with political leaders, guiding them away from violence and towards the peace table. Guide, too, the hands of all those who are caring for the injured, the hungry, the homeless and the grieving. And open our own hearts to compassion. Remind us of our complicity and responsibility. Point us towards generous engagement and fill us with a vision of peace.

May it be so.

Amen.

STORY The story of Holi

The Hindu carnival of Holi is inspired by legends. One of these is the story of Prahlad and Holika, from whom the festival gets its name. Our first reading is that very story, a story which celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

A long time ago, in India, there was a king who had a son called Prahlad.

The king wanted everyone to think of him as God and to worship him. But as Prahlad began to grow up, he began to realise – as children do – that this was not quite true. So he refused to worship his father. He worshipped Vishnu instead, a real God.

The king was very angry. He scolded and punished his son. However, Prahlad still refused to worship him. So the king, who was not a reasonable man, decided that his son must die.

The king tried many different and cruel ways to kill Prahlad...

He was put in a pit full of snakes, he was beaten by soldiers, and he was trampled by elephants, but each time Prahlad prayed to the god Vishnu and miraculously he was saved. The king became more and more angry.

Finally, in desperation, the king asked his sister, Holika, to help him. Now Holika was believed to have magical powers, which made her fireproof – she could stand in flames and remain untouched by them. So Holika took Prahlad to the top of a large bonfire, which was then lit.

Everyone, including the king and Holika herself, expected Prahlad to die and Holika to survive. But instead, as the flames licked around them, it was Holika who died while Prahlad was saved once more by Vishna.

In spite of everything, Prahlad felt sorry for Holika and promised to name a festival after her. And this is why every year, at the time of Holi, Hindus light bonfires to remind them of the time when good triumphed over evil.

READING by Ron Osborn, editor Spectrum magazine

‘In his acclaimed book, *A Secular Age*, the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor devotes a surprising number of pages to the phenomenon of the medieval Carnival and similar festivals of misrule in numerous cultures.

At certain periods in many pre-modern societies, the normal order would be temporarily suspended, reversed, inverted, or undone. Fools would be made king for a day. Boys would be given mitres and anointed bishops. The authorities would be openly cursed and mocked. Young people—especially unmarried males—would be granted licence to engage in sexual and even near-violent transgressions of accepted moral codes.

Yet all of this mockery of good standards, decency and virtue was paradoxically in support of order and morality. The guardians of virtue permitted and even encouraged Carnival (although there were always stern moralizers who tried to suppress the traditions) because they understood that structure needs anti-structure and that society needs escape valves. “The weight of virtue and good order was so heavy, and so much steam built up under this suppression of instinct,” Taylor writes, “that there had to be periodic blow-outs if the whole system were not to fly apart.”

There was a deeper meaning, though, to these occasions of socially sanctioned and ritualized mayhem. In the medieval social imaginary, chaos is dangerous and must be contained, but order constantly threatens to become rigid, repressive, and deadening. Order can therefore only survive by being periodically plunged back into the energies of primal chaos—back into those ungoverned and ungovernable forces that are always present beneath the surface and that supply society with its creativity and dynamism. Without any allowance for temporary disorder, anarchy, and misrule, life would become unbearable and political and religious orders would become totalitarian.’

2nd HYMN 133 (P) Play trumpet, cello, harp and flute

Play trumpet, cello, harp and flute;
play organ, violin and lute.
Write poems and read the written word;
Write plays, tell stories to be heard;
and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Paint pictures dark and painting bright;
Paint with a brush and paint with light.
Dance minuet and highland fling;
dance two by two and in a ring;
and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Speak words of comfort and of peace;
speak gently so that wars may cease.
Sing melodies and measured phrase;
sing songs to set the world ablaze;

and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Words by Andrew McKean Hill, music by Norman Cocker

QUIET REFLECTION

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

INTERLUDE Aaj Khelo Shyam Sang Hori, sung by Parul Mishra for Holi

<https://youtu.be/gJYETzL9uwg>

ADDRESS

It may seem strange to talk about Festival in the middle of Lent, which we think of as a sombre time, one of penitence rather than celebration and dancing. In fact the word 'Carnival' traditionally refers to the season of feasting and celebration that takes place immediately *before* Lent, which ends with Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras. Such Carnival has been celebrated particularly in Catholic countries since medieval times and has always been associated with the wearing of masks and costumes, the overturning of social conventions, with dancing, parades and general debauchery. One of these carnivals is the Carnival of Venice, which is famous for its exquisite and elaborate masks, which began in the 12th century and still continues today.

In the UK today we don't make much of this time, do we? Maybe we toss a few pancakes but that's about as revolutionary as it gets.

The Jewish festival of Purim and the Hindu festival of Holi are joyous celebrations that do involve masks and parades, and the flouting of social conventions.

Purim is based on the events told in the Book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible. In this story, the Jewish heroine Esther persuades her husband the King to prevent a Persian nobleman, called Haman, from massacring the Jews in his kingdom. The festival of Purim is therefore a time of praise and thanksgiving. The Book of Esther is read aloud in the synagogue and the congregation may use rattles, cymbals and pantomime boos to drown out Haman's name whenever it is mentioned (and it's mentioned a lot). It is also a time of feasting, drinking and

in Israel there are street parades in which people of all ages, from babies to grandparents, dress up in colourful costumes.

The Hindu festival of Holi is on Friday, but the celebrations begin on the previous night with a so-called 'Holika bonfire' (in memory of the story we heard earlier) where people gather, sing and dance. Then the next morning is a free-for-all carnival of colours, where people play, chase and cover each other with brightly coloured pigments and coloured water, using water pistols and balloons filled with coloured water just to add to the mayhem. Anyone and everyone is fair game, whether it's a friend or stranger, whether they're rich or poor, man or woman, children or elders. The frolicking and fighting with colour takes place in the streets, in the parks, outside temples and buildings - everywhere. Groups carry drums and musical instruments from place to place, singing and dancing. People visit family, friends and foes to throw colours on each other, to laugh and chat, and then to share special delicacies. Bhang, an intoxicating substance made from cannabis leaves, is often mixed into drinks and sweets. In the evening, once they've sobered up, people dress up and visit friends and family. Like Easter, the festival signifies the victory of good over evil, the arrival of spring, the end of winter, and for many it's a festive day to meet others, play and laugh, forget and forgive, and repair any ruptured relationships. Both Purim and Holi are important outlets – opportunities for exuberance, a chance to release and let go of normal roles and inhibitions – and in that way they share similarities with the carnivals of the medieval times.

Last week I mentioned the wonderful Songlines exhibition of contemporary Australian aboriginal art that recently came to Plymouth. The artists offered a brilliant contemporary reimaging of an ancient aboriginal creation myth called 'The Seven Sisters'. This is a story about 7 mythical women (the sisters) and one male trickster, which explains how the land was formed. For example, as the sisters travelled over the land, at one point the trickster turns them into trees, and you can still see these trees today; also along the way the women make water holes by stirring their spears into the ground, water holes which you can still see on a map; and eventually the sisters fly into the sky to escape the trickster, where they formed a constellation of stars – the same stars we call the Pleiades.

One of the artists described how she felt the paintings they were creating today were coming to them not from the mind or via the ether but rather up and through them from the ground itself. They were coming from the earth. I was very struck by this idea. The original story

had of course been inspired by the landscape... in order to explain how the landscape came to be formed. It was already a cyclical relationship. And now it seemed almost as though the land was now suggesting this new artistic expression, which in turn was revealing – through the artists - new meanings about the relationship between them and the land. It's a process that could – perhaps will – cycle on and on.

I mention this because we humans are meaning makers by nature. And religious festivals, which are based on ancient stories, are part of this extraordinary rich meaning-making work that we do. It is spiritual work. The stories we tell may not come from the land in quite the same way as the aboriginal stories do, but they *have* emerged from the extremely fertile ground of our lived experience. They've been created out of the challenges and conflicts, the births and deaths, the journeys, and the whole range of emotions – anger, jealousy, grief, love – of our ancestors and their relationship with the divine. And these stories continue to reflect us back to ourselves over and over again, each time we tell them and retell them. It's why a parable from the Gospels, or stories such as those told at Purim and Holi, continue to have such relevance and resonance.

After all when will we ever stop need stories about good defeating evil? When will we ever stop needing outlets for our fears and frustrations, or new ways to overcome them? And when will we ever fully understand our relationship with the the divine? Never. Our religious festivals, it seems to me, are so important because they remain alive – not simply because we repeat them year after year, but because we continue to reinterpret them, and therefore understand ourselves better because of them. Our stories continue to breathe up through us ... and we continue to breathe them back – subtly transformed – into the world. And that is very often through the medium of festival.

Of course it's true that some of our festivals may have evolved - in part at least - to keep us in line and maintain the status quo – those medieval bishops knew what they were about and the critics of organized religion would no doubt argue that case. But what we choose to do with these extraordinary riches today is very much up to us. The potential is there for us to let them continue to work their magic on us. To allow the ground – both the ground beneath our feet and the ground of our being – to speak its truth through us and bring new light and fresh understanding to our lives.

So Happy Purim. Happy Holi. And amid these 'wilderness' weeks of Lent – bookended as they are by the 'wilder' celebrations of Mardi Gras and Easter Sunday – may we each find new meaning for ourselves and new hope for the world. The ancient stories and festivals we continue to retell, and relive, have the potential to re-narrate our relationship with life itself. It's not just that we retell *them*, they also retell *us*. If we let them.

May it be so.

3rd HYMN 195 (P) We sing a love that sets all people free

We sing a love that sets all people free,
that blows like wind that burns like scorching flame,
Enfolds the earth, springs up like water clear.
Come, living love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love that seeks another's good,
that longs to serve and not to count the cost,
a love that yielding finds itself made new.
Come, caring love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, unflinching, unafraid
to be itself despite another's wrath,
a love that stands alone and undismayed.
Come, strengthening love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, that wandering will not rest
Until it finds its way, its home, its source,
through joy and sadness pressing on refreshed.
Come, pilgrim love, live in our hearts today.

We sing the Holy Spirit, full of love,
who seeks out scars of ancient bitterness,
brings to our wounds the healing grace of Christ.
Come, radiant love, live in our hearts today.

CLOSING WORDS Celia Cartwright

Let us go in peace -
to live together in harmony,
to see beauty in everything,
to know wonder in each passing moment,
and to walk gently with our God.

Amen

CLOSING MUSIC Budapest Klezmer band I – encapsulating yearning and abandonment in one piece.

<https://youtu.be/ZpqVYvPlv1s>