

## 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 – ‘Committing to something greater than ourselves’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** Calon Lân, Cerys Matthews

<https://youtu.be/MCSRb1R6-Ls>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome everyone. Happy St David’s Day for tomorrow.

Welcome to you all, wherever you come from in the world, but an extra special welcome to all those of you with Welsh connections. Bore da.

And now, as is our custom, I’ll light our chalice, as a symbol of our free and inclusive religious faith. *If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.*

May this flame spark in each one of us both connection and commitment: to ourselves, to each other, to this living tradition of which we are part, to the planet we live on, and to the god of our understanding. Amen.

Our theme to today is ‘Loyalty, or commitment, to something greater than ourselves’. What is this ‘something greater than ourselves’, which defies description, and how might we pray to it?

**PRAYER** by Kadya Molodowsky, originally written in Yiddish, which speaks to the question of who or what we might pray to.

I still don’t know to whom,  
I still don’t know for what, I pray.  
A prayer lies bound in me  
and pleads for a god,  
and pleads for a name.  
I pray in the field,  
in the noise, in the street  
together with the wind

when it runs in front of me.  
A prayer lies bound in me,  
and pleads for a god,  
and pleads for a name.

Mark Hutchinson, minister of the Cotswold Unitarian Group, reflects on this prayer...  
'A prayer lies bound in me' is a beautiful expression of the need I feel we all have in ourselves, where we look for the spirit, the energy, the vitality. By reflecting, or thinking, or praying, not only do we search inside to connect to those life forces, but we also connect to something outside of ourselves. An expression of love and hope that is beyond us. A prayer lies bound in you.

Let's sing...

**First hymn: 146 Speaking truth in love (purple)**

Speaking truth in love, we gather  
to embrace the unity  
of earth's living systems, whirling  
towards God's perfect liberty;  
reason guided, conscience lighted,  
tempered with humility.

Speaking, one unto another,  
that which honours highest worth,  
and which for ourselves and others  
nurtures common life from birth;  
just, sustaining, fair society  
through the length and breadth of earth.

Speaking peace across this planet  
where all living things depend,  
each on each as with our neighbours,  
their diversity transcend.  
Honour prophets, honour Jesus,  
those who welcome God as friend.

**STORY: 'Only the seed'** (source unknown) from 'One hundred wisdom stories from around the world', Margaret Silf.

Once upon a time, a pilgrim set out on a long journey in search of peace, joy and love. The pilgrim walked for many weary miles, and time passed.

Gradually, the young, lively steps became slower and more laboured. The pilgrim's journey passed through landscapes that were not always happy ones. Through war. Through sickness. Through quarrels and rejections and separations. A land where, it seemed, the more the people possessed, the more warlike they became – the more they had to defend, the more they needed to attack each other. Longing for peace, they prepared for war. Longing for love, they surrounded themselves with walls of distrust and barriers of fear. Longing for life, they were walking deeper into death.

But one morning, the pilgrim came to a little cottage at the wayside. Something about this little cottage attracted the pilgrim. It was as though it was lit up from in the inside. Full of curiosity, the pilgrim went in. And inside the cottage was a little shop, and behind the counter stood a shopkeeper. It was hard to judge the age - hard even to say for sure whether it was a man or woman. There was an air of timelessness about the place.

'What would you like?' asked the shopkeeper in a kindly voice.

'What do you stock here?' asked the pilgrim.

'Oh, we have all the things here that you most long for,' replied the shopkeeper. 'Just tell me what you desire.'

The pilgrim hardly knew where to begin. So many desires came rushing to mind at once.

'I want peace – in my own family, in my native land and in the whole world.

'I want to make something good of my life.

'I want every child born on this planet today to have a chance to be educated.

'I want everyone on earth to live in freedom.

'I want this world to be a kingdom of love.'

There was a pause while the pilgrim reviewed this shopping list.

Gently, the shopkeeper broke in. 'I'm sorry,' came the quiet reply, 'I should have explained. We don't supply the fruits here, we only supply the seeds.'

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**READING** The moments of my high resolve, by Howard Thurman, from 'The Inward Journey'

*Howard Washington Thurman (1899-1981) was a Black American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. A prominent religious figure, he played a leading role in many social justice movements in the 20th century and was a key mentor to leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.*

Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.

Despite the dullness and barrenness of the days that pass, if I search with due diligence, I can always find a deposit left by some former radiance. But I had forgotten. At the time it was full-orbed, glorious, and resplendent. I was sure that I would never forget. In the moment of its fullness, I was sure that it would illumine my path for all the rest of my journey. I had forgotten how easy it is to forget.

There was no intent to betray what seemed so sure at the time. My response was whole, clean, authentic. But little by little, there crept into my life the dust and grit of the journey. Details, lower-level demands, all kinds of cross currents -- nothing momentous, nothing overwhelming, nothing flagrant -- just wear and tear. If there had been some direct challenge -- a clear-cut issue -- I would have fought it to the end, and beyond.

In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading Presence of God, my heart whispers: Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in fair weather or in foul, in good times or in tempests, in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar, I may not forget that to which my life is committed.

Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.

**SILENCE followed by music**

'I have decided', Unitarian Universalist singer/songwriter Dave Rowe, based on a quote by Martin Luther King, Jr

<https://youtu.be/V7yPzfVRUWc>

## **ADDRESS**

To what is your life committed? I could ask myself the same question. And probably like you, I would come up with a list, different from yours perhaps, but maybe not so different. It would include commitment to caring for myself, to being a loyal friend, to ministry and this beloved community. To love. To spending time in nature. To turning up when I say I will, writing my spiritual journal each day, keeping my promises, doing my best, being true to myself. To not knowing and to not demanding answers. To engaging fully with life without requiring specific outcomes. To brushing my teeth morning and night, and putting the rubbish out on the right day each week, or trying to.

A list of personal commitments, and commitments to things greater than myself, all of which overlap. Huge things. And tiny things. By the way, St David apparently said in his last sermon before he died in AD 589, 'Be joyful, keep the faith, and do the little things that you have heard and seen me do.' 'Do the little things in life' is still a well-known Welsh saying.

But then I might ask myself, *why* do I commit to these things? What is driving me, steering me, motivating me? My upbringing? Habit? Partly. But I think it's also because, at a deeper level that isn't always conscious, I'm also loyal to something greater than anything on the list. I'm loyal to that sense of the sacred, that primary relationship which goes unseen and – as Howard Thurman attested – is easily forgotten. I could give it a name, which might resonate with some of you or alienate others, but ultimately it is beyond naming. Or I could say I'm trying to honour my 'place in the family of things', to borrow Mary Oliver's words. To find different ways, big and small, to connect with all that is, and to do so with reverence and gratitude for life.

I'm currently reading Janet Morley's anthology 'The Heart's Time' in which she offers a poem a day for Lent and Easter. It's a beautiful collection and her reflections on each poem are always illuminating. Last Monday's poem was 'Homesick' by Carol Ann Duffy,

which includes these words: 'When we rearrange the rooms we end up living in, we are looking for first light, that time before we knew to call it light.'

Those words struck a deep chord in me. Because whatever I have done, whoever I've been loyal to and whatever I've committed to over the years, it feels as though that's what I've been doing: metaphorically rearranging the rooms I've ended up living in, always looking for first light, that time before I knew to call it light.

Howard Thurman describes his moments of insight and high resolve vividly as 'full-orbed, glorious and resplendent'. Which definitely sound like light. 'I was sure I would never forget,' he says. And yet he does forget them. And so do I. And so also, I'm guessing, do you. We have those sublime moments of seeing and understanding, of wonder and awe, of telling ourselves 'this is it'. This is what truly matters. And then we forget. We get on with the humdrum and the variously distracting and intoxicating aspects of our lives, and forget. And even when we do engage fully with exactly the kinds of noble and live-affirming loyalties that inspire us, even then we often lose sight – conscious sight at least – of what truly motivates us; we forget our connection with the pulsating, shimmering mystery that holds us and breathes us and lives us, even though, just below the surface, it remains, ever present.

I think the pilgrim of our story was also searching for 'first light'. He longed for all that we would probably also yearn for...

Peace in his own family, in his native land and in the whole world.

To make something good of his life.

For every child on this planet today to have a chance to be educated.

For everyone on earth to live in freedom.

For this world to be a kingdom of love.

How wonderful! We wants it all. And yet, of course, he couldn't be given those things, even by the kindly mystical shopkeeper, and even though their cottage seemed to the pilgrim to be 'lit up from the inside', a holy place then.

Instead the shopkeeper said 'I'm sorry, we don't supply the fruits here, we only supply the seeds.'

It seems it's up to us to decide how we'll commit to living by our ideals.

Howard Thurman is quoted on the new UK Unitarian website as saying: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

And the Sufi saint Rumi said something similar: "Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray."

They seem to say, whether you commit to a spiritual path, to buying Fairtrade, to the environment, to Black Lives Matter, to kindness and compassion... above all commit to following your heart. For if we feel fully alive in what we're doing, then we won't act out of fear or anger or guilt. We won't do it grudgingly or resentfully or miserably. We will do what we do out of love. Whether it's friendship, or prayer, or putting the bins out. We'll do it grounded in, and guided by, our connection with that ineffable, mysterious 'something greater still'. We'll let the light that we are by led by first light. It will not lead us astray.

May our time together be a prayer of remembering.

*'Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in fair weather or in foul, in good times or in tempests, in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar, I may not forget that to which my life is committed.'*

May it be so.

### **HYMN 42(P) From the light of days remembered**

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear,  
Guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;*

*When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;*

*When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,*

*Then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.*

From the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free,  
Calling pilgrims still to witness to the life of liberty.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;  
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;  
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,  
Then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.*

From the dreams of youthful vision comes a new, prophetic voice,  
Which demands a deeper justice built by our courageous choice.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;  
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;  
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,  
Then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.*

**CLOSING WORDS** by Ant Howe, formerly minister at Kingswood Unitarians, now Ministry Tutor at Unitarian College.

Life is precious and a gift.  
The world is beautiful, and we are privileged to live in it.  
May we know this as truth.  
And what we know as truth, may we exhibit in our lives.

### **CLOSING MUSIC**

In recognition of St David's day tomorrow, our final music video will feature the song 'You will be found' sung by the choir Only Boys Aloud. *Only Boys Aloud is a charity committed to engaging teenage boys across Wales with the power of choral singing and, through this, to promote self-belief, confidence, encourage aspiration, build skills and develop communities. A project led by love.*

You Will Be Found, from the musical 'Dear Evan Hansen', and sung by Welsh Choir Only Boys Aloud [https://youtu.be/q\\_dxoLMGe-M](https://youtu.be/q_dxoLMGe-M)