

28th March 2021 – ‘Let my people go’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Let my people go’, Paul Robeson

<https://youtu.be/gtLcELU1brA>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone. How you are you today? Joyful perhaps? Anxious maybe? Sad? Curious? Whatever you're feeling, here you are. Thank you for showing up; for being here this morning. You are welcome, just as you are.

This weekend is Passover in the Jewish faith; today is Palm Sunday, which begins Holy Week in the Christian tradition; and Hindus are celebrating Holi. Each of these religious festivals is associated with a different sacred story and brings very different feelings with it. The long-awaited freedom from slavery is celebrated with a Seder meal by Jews; the triumphant riding of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey is commemorated with palms by Christians; and the throwing of coloured paint marks Holi for Hindus. All around the world, as well as within the UK, people are honouring these festivals and practising the rituals associated with them, remembering the deep-felt meaning they carry from one generation to another, and the precious and poignant invitation they offer to belong in community.

I'm going to light our flame now, which is our Unitarian ritual each week, as a symbol of our free religious community.

If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.

For holy days on which we recall the old stories, we light the flame.

For Passover, which reminds us of the courage and strength of those seeking freedom, we light the flame.

For Holy Week, which reminds us that love is our greatest challenge, we light the flame.

For Holi, which reminds us that light will always overcome darkness, we light the flame.

For gathering today in this sacred space today; for the opportunity to be together as a community, to remember the past, to dream of the future, but most of all to be fully alive, here and now, in the present; we light the flame.

PRAYER, Richard S Gilbert

We meet on holy ground,
Brought into being as life encounters life,
As personal histories merge into the communal story,
As we take on the pride and pain of our companions,
As separate selves become community.
How desperate is our need for one another:
Our silent beckoning to our neighbours,
Our invitations to share life and death together,
Our welcome into the lives of those we meet,
And their welcome into our own.
May our souls capture this treasured time.
May our spirits celebrate our meeting
In this time and in this space,
For we meet on holy ground.

FIRST HYMN (P) 178 - Together now we join as one

Together now we join as one
our common faith to sing;
to render to this pilgrim world
our heartfelt offering.

We strive to be a fellowship
with mind and conscience free;
to search for truth and saving light
in cosmic mystery.

We worship God – love's source and power;
we celebrate the life
that all earth's children freely share
beyond their sinful strife.

We would, in love serve humankind
with caring, justice, peace;

and with the earth seek harmony
that pride and pillage cease.

We hold in reverence the man
who walked in Galilee, a
who healed the sick and loved the poor –
revealed divinity.

We welcome truth, we welcome light,
all prophecy and song,
whoever they be channeled through
to all they shall belong.

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Both our readings today are poems written as modern-day *responses* to ancient stories.

1st POEM: 'Ready' by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, from UUA source, a response to the Passover story: *"So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders."* —Exodus 12:34

You'll need to travel light.
Take what you can carry: a book, a poem,
a battered tin cup, your child strapped
to your chest, clutching your necklace
in one hot possessive fist.
So the dough isn't ready. So your heart
isn't ready. You haven't said goodbye
to the places where you hid as a child,
to the friends who aren't interested in the journey,
to the graves you've tended.
But if you wait until you feel fully ready
you may never take the leap at all
and Infinity is calling you forth
out of this birth canal
and into the future's wide expanse.

Learn to improvise flat cakes without yeast.

Learn to read new alphabets.

Wear God like a cloak

and stride forth with confidence.

You won't know where you're going

but you have the words of our sages,

the songs of our mothers, the inspiration

wrapped in your kneading bowl. Trust

that what you carry will sustain you

and take the first step out the door.

2nd POEM: 'Palm Sunday', Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons*, Canterbury Press 2012.

The Palm Sunday story tells of Jesus riding 'triumphantly' into Jerusalem on a donkey. How the crowds gather to greet him, how they lay down their coats, and wave palms and cheer. And how he later turns over tables in the temple courts. And of course we know how this story ends. In his poem, entitled 'Palm Sunday' contemporary Christian writer Malcolm Guite describes how he responds when the saviour, or we might say the Divine Spirit, approaches the door of his own heart.

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,

The seething holy city of my heart,

The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?

Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;

They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,

And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find

The challenge, the reversal he is bringing

Changes their tune. I know what lies behind

The surface flourish that so quickly fades;

Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,

The hardness of the heart, its barricades,

And at the core, the dreadful emptiness

Of a perverted temple. Jesus come

Break my resistance and make me your home.

REFLECTION

We now come to a period of silence followed by music. Dona Nobis Pacem, Jess Huetteman, soprano Chelsea Sardoni, mezzo-soprano Morayo Akande, soprano <https://youtu.be/Pig17TnUIQA>

ADDRESS

Our friends in the Plymouth Synagogue, which is only about 100 metres up the road, opened this weekend to celebrate Passover; to gather together and to remember the story of how the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. You may recall that, according to the Torah, Yahweh had already sent Egypt nine plagues - including frogs, locusts, boils and pestilence – before finally sending the 10th, the deadliest of all – the death of the firstborn son. The Israelites were instructed to daub their doors with lambs' blood so the Angel of Death would 'pass over' them and their first-born children would be spared. But when Pharaoh's own first-born son died, they were not so much freed as abruptly exiled; ordered to leave Egypt, which they had to do in great haste, and famously before their bread had time to rise. And so began what turned out to be 40 years in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land.

Israeli writer David Grossman describes their plight: 'They are in the desert, and the desert is empty. What can they cling to? They escaped bondage in Egypt but also abandoned their daily routine, their habits and customs, a familiar place and the social interactions and hierarchies that had become fixed over the course of generations. Suddenly everything is new and strange. Nothing can be taken for granted. What had appeared to be the end of the road, now appears to be its beginning.'

The Exodus is an immense story that shaped and continues to shape the Jewish people, and has resonated and continues to resonate with those who have been oppressed or enslaved in modern times, whether literally or metaphorically. Which is how Paul Robeson came to be singing the spiritual 'Let my people go'. In some way I think we can feel resonances, too, with the lifting of lockdown and the unknown territory that lies ahead. But crucially also in our own personal and spiritual journeys, whenever our lives have been turned upside down in some way, and we have found ourselves having to set off into the unknown, into the desert, without a map.

The story of Palm Sunday is a different kind of symbolic journey. One taken by one man on behalf of us all. The King of the Jews enters Jerusalem on a donkey. Not warlike then, not on a ceremonial horse, as might be expected for a King, but on a lowly animal, a peaceful animal, a carrier of others' burdens, a donkey. This is a King who visibly and deliberately challenges the existing power structures, with all their trappings and their struttings. In their place he offers the power of humility and with it freedom from suffering. A turning of the tables, you might say; as well as a literal turning *over* of the tables only a few verses later, when he discovers the money-changers in the temple courts.

Sometimes it feels extraordinary to me that such ancient stories as these are still being told, thousands of years after they were written. How could they possibly have endured so long? The only explanation I can find is that they still feel relevant. They continue to speak to our lived experience today. They touch our hearts somehow, and stir in them recognition. The recognition that still, today, we become stuck and then freed, get lost and then found, grapple with injustice and oppression. And that still, today we are trying to find our way in the wilderness: personally, in community, as a nation, as a world, often with little idea of the way, or even of the destination, and looking for someone or something to save us.

I believe we all, at some level or another, struggle to be free. Whether free from others who enslave, exploit or oppress us, or free from ourselves and – as Bob Marley described it - our own 'mental slavery'.

I wouldn't wish to make comparisons across people's hugely diverse experience. Each of our stories are unique and particular to us individually, or to our communities, and our troubles and demons are our own to face. Yet the themes are universal, they operate at every level of life, and touch us all.

Certainly I have not had to free myself from literal slavery, or anything remotely like it. Some of you will have had greater struggles than I have in your lives. Yet still, I have had to free myself from what's expected or considered appropriate for girls and women; from the limitations of growing up in small-town conservative suburbia; from shame at my own failings and disappointment with what life did or didn't offer; from a controlling relationship; from anxiety and stress. And when I say I've had to free myself from these things, I mean, of course, that I'm still freeing myself. It's an ongoing process. There are, and always will be, times in the wilderness, just as there are, and always will be, times of miraculous grace and

redemption. Those 'manna from heaven' moments. Such as when a dear friend offered me refuge when I had nowhere else to go; a complete stranger unwittingly opened my eyes to new possibility; or when it felt as though God herself had picked me up and put me down again, the way you might catch a child that's about to wander off track and gently place her back safely on the path. It's the story of humankind and, in one way or another, it's familiar to us all.

Our individual and collective inability - or unwillingness - to free ourselves, and to gift freedom to each other, might be at the heart of all human suffering. What can we do about it? How do we free ourselves from bondage, real or imagined? How do we free each other? How do we free ourselves from what Malcolm Guite describes as 'self-interest, and fearful guardedness, the hardness of the heart, its barricades, and at the core, the dreadful emptiness of a perverted temple'? It takes a leap of faith and a breaking open of the heart. It takes a willingness, to borrow Rabbi Rachel Barenblat's words, 'to travel light, and trust that what we carry will sustain us. To take the first step, even without being fully ready, or knowing where we're going. 'To wear God like a cloak and stride forth with confidence.' And to do it over and over again.

It means believing that it's possible.

At Passover, and in this coming Holy Week, may we begin to believe that it is. Amen.

SECOND HYMN (P) 177 - To you who would as pilgrims go

To you who would as pilgrims go
with eager steps and hearts aglow,
when on the holy city bent
be not deterred from high intent.

For people need triumphant days
with ample reassuring praise,
and palms extol while thorns do not –
And none would choose the martyr's lot.

So easy now to join the throng
with flowering branch and palm and song.
So hard to see on such a day

the beggar's hand beside the way.

How fine to do the pleasant deed,
to serve the current favoured need,
but hope needs those who think and choose –
uphold a cause they well may lose.

For those who would as pilgrims go
both scorn and failure well may know,
and high intent can lead to pain
and gifts must never be for gain.

Words © Janet H. Bowering

CLOSING WORDS It is our journey together, Debra Haffner

We are on a journey.

We didn't plan it.

We didn't have time for the bread to rise.

We may find ourselves in the wilderness, hungry, thirsty,

Doubting that we should have ever come.

But look around:

We are not alone.

It is our journey together:

A journey to our better selves,

A journey to a better world,

A journey to a more promised land

Extinguish chalice.

CLOSING MUSIC 'Wade in the Water', The Spirituals Choir. The Spirituals Choir is a Black History project. Like 'Let my people go' (and those words are included in the lyrics) this song is inspired by the beginning of the Exodus, when the Israelites came to the Red Sea and had to trust that the waters would part for them long enough to walk through. According to one Jewish Midrash, Nashon was the person who went in first, and walked in up to head-deep before the sea parted

https://youtu.be/fxZ4H-gg_lc