

## 14<sup>th</sup> February 2021 – ‘Love...and Lent

led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** Higher Love, James Vincent McMorrow

<https://youtu.be/rwHlq89W6DY>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome everyone. Happy Valentine's Day.

Welcome to you whether you live in a family, or with friends, in a partnership, a marriage, or on your own. Whether you are male or female, straight or gay, transgender, non-binary...however and wherever you define yourself on that wonderful rainbow spectrum of human gender and sexuality. You are welcome here.

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 be a symbol of the spark of love that unites us all in our glorious diversity, now and always. Amen

Our theme to today is Love ...and Lent.

American spiritual philosopher David Spangler writes:

*'When I think of love, I think of something robust and intelligent, vigorous and skillful, grounded and wise. It is not a vague feeling or a diffused emotion. It is embodied in action, in behaviour, in relationship, and in responsibility. Love as a feeling is not enough; what we want is love as the full-bodied expression of a life lived compassionately and intelligently with a sense of its connectedness with a greater whole.'*

Let's sing.

### **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.

## **PRAYER**

Spirit of life and love  
be with us now.

Be with us in our giving and receiving,  
in our travelling and our arriving.

Be with us in our longing and our loving,  
in our losing and our leaving.

Be with us in our listening and our speaking,  
in our singing and our praying.

Source of all that is,  
and was,

and ever will be,

be with us now and always.

Amen.

**STORY/POEM:** Abou Ben Adhem, from 'Doorways to the Soul'

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)  
awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,  
and saw within the moonlight in his room,  
making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,  
an angel writing in a book of gold:  
exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,  
and to the presence in the room he said,  
'What writest thou?' - The vision raised its head,  
and with a look made of all sweet accord,  
answered, 'The names of those who love the lord.'  
'And is mine one?' said Abou. 'Nay, not so,'  
replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,  
but cheerily still; and said, 'I pray thee, then,  
write me as one that loves his fellow-men.'  
The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night  
it came again with a great awakening light,  
and showed the names whom love of God had blessed,  
and lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest!

This morning we have two guests, known to many in this church.

**READING:** 'Any Other Questions?' by Victoria E Safford, will be read by Stephen Crowther, formerly at Hastings but now Pastoral Minister at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel in Hampstead. Stephen has taken several services here.

People ask me sometimes, "Is this a gay church?"

It is a privilege to answer: "Ours is absolutely, gladly, hopefully and humbly, gaily, a gay church, a gay tradition, where everyone, including heterosexual members and friends, is welcome, where everyone is needed, where everyone's experience is cherished as a sacred text, because no one's experience of living or loving can be comprehensive, because each of us holds clues the others need about how to live with dignity and joy as a human person, and none of us knows enough about that yet to be considered whole.

"It is absolutely a gay church, even as ours is a gay world, if you would look around. Gay church, straight church, peoples' church, a human congregation made holy by the holy

hopes and fears and dreams of all who wish to come. Come in, we say. Come out, come in. We're all in this together."

I will not speak of "tolerance," with its courteous clenched teeth and bitter resignation. I will not speak about "acceptance," of "other" people and some "other" kind of "lifestyle." I can only look in laughing wonder at human life in all its incarnations. I can taste only in passing the breath of the spirit of life on my mouth and understand our common longing to breathe in deep, deep gulps of it. I cannot think of being anybody else's "ally," even, because even that implies some degree of separation—some degree of safety for some of us, not all. We are "allied" with no one and with nothing but love—the larger Love transcending all our understanding, within which all the different, differing, gorgeously various, variant, beautifully deviant aspects of ourselves are bound in elegant unity.

I know that on some sad and disappointing days these words describe the church that yet shall be and not the church that is. I know, I know...But I know too that to answer is an act of creation. To answer this question, and some others, is a privilege, a prophetic imperative, a joy, a duty, and a holy sacrament.

**REFLECTION** written and read by Shana Begum. Shana is Ministerial Assistant, also at Rosslyn Hill. She spent a few months in Plymouth a couple of summers ago and in that time became a regular attender here, and also led a service.

What is Valentine's Day?  
Time for matchmaking?  
Or expressing secret love?

What is Valentine's Day?  
Who is Valentine's Day for?  
For him? And her?  
Or everyone in between?

What is Valentine's Day?  
Who is Valentine's Day for?  
Appreciating friends? Admiring family?

What is Valentine's Day?

Who is Valentine's Day for?

Lovers: Hetero, Homo, Other?

Those with?

Those without?

What is Valentine's Day?

Human love? His? Hers? Theirs?

To the hearts of trees?

What is Valentine's Day?

Who is Valentine's Day for?

Appreciation for one another.

Celebrating all kinds of love.

What is Valentine's Day?

Who is Valentine's Day for?

*Please take a minute or two of silence for your own reflection, meditation or prayer. You may like to light a candle for your own joys or concerns. This will be followed by music by*

Philip Croft on piano

<https://soundcloud.com/fingersphil/love-came-down-hann-ave-maria>

## **COMMENTARY**

Last Sunday I went for a walk with my friend Gay. Some of you know her, or have seen her play the piano here. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon and we got talking about LGBT+ (which, as I'm sure you know, stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender – plus other sexual identities). We spoke about the spectrum of difference that those letters and symbols try to encapsulate, and also the tensions that sometimes arise within them. And she told me she'd recently been interviewed by the Plymouth Herald, our local newspaper, about the bookshop she used to run with her partner Prudence. This is LGBT+ history month, which is why the paper was interested in her story at this particular time. And I thought you might like to hear it, too, or be reminded of it.

Gay and Prudence met in Grass Roots bookshop in Manchester in 1979, when Prudence walked through the door as a publishing rep. They soon got together and decided they'd like to set up an alternative bookshop themselves. And so one summer they travelled around the country looking for somewhere suitable for their dream. They decided on Plymouth. Gay says, 'It was quite peculiar, within an hour of being here we thought, "Yes, this is it" and carried on from there.' The city was large enough to support a radical bookshop, and it didn't have one already. So, they set up their shop, which they called 'In Other Words', in 1982 in Mannamead Road, though later it moved to Mutley Plain. The shop soon became much more than just a bookshop, though. It was also a political and a community hub, with a very well-used noticeboard. Gay and Prudence supported CND, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, as well as other causes, and they also sold tickets for demonstrations and local events.

The 80s was quite a dark time for the LGBT community. The recent TV series, *It's A Sin*, which is currently being shown on Channel 4, has highlighted the fears and the prejudice that LGBT+ people faced during this era, especially during the AIDs pandemic. It was also at this time that Margaret Thatcher introduced the infamous 'Section 28', which banned local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality' or 'pretended family relationships'.

Against that backdrop, 'In Other Words' provided a safe space. Gay says 'it was definitely a place where anyone could come, but it did function as a safe place particularly for LGBT+ people. There wasn't really anywhere else. You could be fairly invisible there, if you wanted to be, just looking at the books. You knew no one was going to pick on you or get stroppy.' Alan Butler, who co-runs Pride in Plymouth, and used to run a meeting for LGBT+ refugees here in our church hall, says that Gay and Prudence were 'trailblazers' and that the bookshop 'was quite revolutionary as a public space. It wasn't exclusively a 'gay bookshop' but it was a radical bookshop, so there were different sorts of books and different ideas.'

Unfortunately the shop always struggled financially – and particularly so when online shopping began – and it finally closed in 2007 after 25 years. Also very sadly in 2011, Prudence passed away aged 62 after being diagnosed with cancer. But Gay still keeps the bookshop alive in her heart, and continues to sell books online from her attic, not so much for the money as for the sheer love and satisfaction of doing it, and the pleasure those books give to the people who buy them.

When I read the story – there's much more to it and here's the link

<https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/history/couples-radical-bookshop-mutley-plain-4969763>

– what struck me was the importance of creating a 'safe space', somewhere where everyone was welcome and where you could be yourself without being thought of as 'other'. Somewhere where different sexualities were just 'normal', to be expected, assumed, and welcomed as part of the richness of life. Somewhere you wouldn't feel out of place, or worried about being judged, or have to justify your self.

Times have moved on considerably since the 1980s, of course, thank goodness. There is much more awareness and understanding and people hopefully no longer feel the need to 'be invisible'. But nevertheless Gay finished her interview with these words: "In so many places, including Plymouth, if you're gay in the wrong place at the wrong time it can be dangerous. You can still get beaten up. It's still often really hard for young people to come out I think. You really have to gear yourself up to talk to your parents. It's still tough, social attitudes have changed, but there's still the worry of how people are going to react."

We like to think this is a welcoming church, an inclusive church, a church that doesn't so much 'accept' people as they are (although that's a good start) but actively *welcomes* them as who they are. A church that truly embraces *each one of us* as we are, as Stephen's reading expressed so powerfully with these words: '*Gay church, straight church, peoples' church, a human congregation made holy by the holy hopes and fears and dreams of all who wish to come. Come in, we say. Come out, come in. We're all in this together.*'

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of Lent. Lent may seem to sit somewhat in opposition to the exuberance of diversity we've been talking about. It is a time for simplifying and purifying and giving things up. But crucially Lent is not about being pious, or self-righteous, or miserable – goodness knows we don't need any more of that. Lent is a time, traditionally, for getting closer to god – *your* god, not anyone else's understanding of what that word means, but yours. It's also a time to let go; let go of fear and prejudice, let go of whatever is holding you back, and of any ways you might inadvertently be holding other people back, too.

Abou Ben Adhem discovered in his vivid encounter with the angel that the way to get close to *his* god – who was Allah – was to love his fellow men. When he did that he discovered

that Allah was well pleased with him, indeed he went right to the top of the angel's list, and he was blessed. And that's very much the way we, too, will find peace in our own hearts and souls, and with our god: by fully embracing our fellow travellers in life – all those dear souls who struggle and rejoice, who question and seek answers, who get lost and find themselves, time and again. Which, of course, is all of us.

May it be so.

### **HYMN 188 (G) Let love continue long**

Let love continue long,  
and show to us the way,  
and if that love be strong  
no hurt can have a say;  
and if that love remain but strong,  
no hurt can ever have a say.

If love can not be found,  
though common faith prevail,  
when love does not abound,  
a common faith will fail.  
When human love does not abound,  
a common faith will always fail.

If we in love unite,  
debate can cause no strife:  
for with this love in sight  
disputes enrich our life.  
For with this bond of human love,  
disputes can mean a richer life.

May love continue long,  
and lead us on our way:  
for if that love be strong  
no hurt can have a say.  
For if that love remain but strong  
no hurt can ever have a say.



*Thanks to Stephen, Shana, Myron, Karen.*

*Next week's service will be led by Ann Kader; and this Wednesday at 7.30pm on Zoom is our Heart & Soul gathering on the theme of 'Commitment'. If you'd like to take part – and haven't done so before – then please let me know so I can send you the details.*

**CLOSING WORDS by Sarah York, UUA, Fragments of Holiness**

Loving is more than compromise and trade-off – it is mutual nurturing of growth. Loving is more than trust in each other; it is trust in something that transcends human expectation. Love is the mutual gift of freedom with the mutual gift of commitment. Love is more than being true to ourselves; it is being true to a common reverence for life and a common vision of community. Love is more than loving each other; it is loving Life itself.

**CLOSING MUSIC** Stand by me, Tracy Chapman

<https://youtu.be/8XL6C3vY0jM>