

3rd January 2021 – ‘Six impossible things before breakfast’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘We Three Kings’, Sufjan Stevens

<https://youtu.be/AZcOD3UhYmU>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

‘Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.

Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come.’

Welcome and Happy New Year to you all! I hope you had an enjoyable – if quiet – Christmas. This coming Wednesday is Epiphany, which celebrates the arrival of the Magi at the nativity. And, like the three kings, today we too hope to follow our star towards a brighter future. The theme of this service is ‘Six impossible things before breakfast’.

And so I begin with words by Sharon Wylie...

Let this be the place you consider what you’ve never considered;

Let this be the place you imagine for yourself something new and unthinkable.

May this hour bring dreams of new ways of being in the world.

Come, let us worship together.

I’ll start, as we always do, with by lighting our chalice flame, which is the symbol of our free religious faith. *If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.*

Words by Rev Scott Tayler...

In the soft light of this flame may our lives shimmer anew.

May the turning of the year give birth to a dream.

May the emerging light pull a new story into view.

May what is, give way to what might be.

May we believe again in the world we imagine.

PRAYER by Richard S Gilbert

In the midst of the whirling day,
In the hectic rush to be doing,
In the frantic pace of life,
Pause here for a moment.
Catch your breath;
Relax your body;
Loosen your grip on life.
Consider that our lives are always unfinished business;
Imagine that the picture of our being is never complete;
Allow your life to be a work in progress.
Do not hurry to mold the masterpiece;
Do not rush to finish the picture;
Do not be impatient to complete the drawing.
From beckoning birth to dawning death we are in process,
And always there is more to be done.
Do not let the incompleteness weigh on your spirit;
Do not despair that imperfection marks your every day;
Do not fear that we are still in the making.
Let us instead be grateful that the world is still to be created;
Let us give thanks that we can be more than we are;
Let us celebrate the power of the incomplete;
For life is always unfinished business. Amen.

HYMN: 33 (green) Do you hear?

Do you hear, O my friend, in the place where you stand,
Through the sky, though the land, do you hear, do you hear,
In the heights, on the plain, in the vale, on the main,
In the sun, in the rain, do you hear, do you hear?

Through the roar, through the rush, through the throng, through the crush,
Do you hear in the hush of your soul, of your soul,
Hear the cry fear won't still, hear the heart's call to will,
Hear a sigh's startling trill, in your soul, in your soul?

From the place where you stand, to the outermost strand,
Do you hear, O my friend, do you hear, do you hear,
All the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers –
They are yours, mine, and theirs: do you hear, do you hear?

STORY: from 'Through the Looking Glass', Lewis Carroll

'Only it is so very lonely here!' Alice said in a melancholy voice; and at the thought of her loneliness two large tears came rolling down her cheeks.

'Oh, don't go on like that!' cried the poor Queen, wringing her hands in despair. 'Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you've come today. Consider what o'clock it is. Consider anything, only don't cry!'

Alice could not help laughing at this, even in the midst of her tears.

'Can you keep from crying by considering things?' she asked.

'That's the way it's done,' the Queen said with great decision: 'nobody can do two things at once, you know. Let's consider your age to begin with—how old are you?'

'I'm seven and a half exactly.'

'You needn't say "exactly,"' the Queen remarked: 'I can believe it without that. Now I'll give you something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day.'

'I can't believe that!' said Alice.

'Can't you?' the Queen said in a pitying tone. 'Try again: draw a long breath and shut your eyes.'

Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one can't believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

READING: Arundhati Roy, from ‘The pandemic is a portal’

“Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture.

But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

REFLECTION: Candle lighting

You might like to light a candle for a joy or a concern in your life or in the world, or something you hope to imagine into being this year.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE ‘O Radiant Dawn’, James MacMillan, performed by the Giltspur Singers, conducted Christopher Maxim. https://youtu.be/8bQ_hE6Guy0

COMMENTARY

God knows there are some things I’d love to be able to do this year – ‘normal’ things. Like relaxing with friends, sharing food together, hugging each other, going on holiday. I’d love to be able to play music with other people. I’d be delighted never to have to wear a mask again. And it would be wonderful not to worry about inadvertently passing on a disease that might make someone else seriously ill, even if not myself.

Here at the church we also look forward to returning to more ‘normal’ ways – gathering freely and not sitting 2 meters apart, for example; singing hymns, greeting each other with

a hug, sharing tea and coffee and biscuits – such simple pleasures we never thought twice about before last March.

And of course, when we finally emerge from the pandemic – whenever that may be, and though it isn't imminent it is on the horizon – all those things *will* return, and will provide some sense of going back to normal, in a good way – in a way that will help us flourish and thrive as social beings who love and depend on one another for our wellbeing.

But then again, there are other ways in which 'going back to normal' really doesn't seem desirable at all.

After all, we've had a chance to take stock of what matters in our lives and what doesn't, and we've vowed to prioritise our time differently in future, haven't we? To spend more of it in nature, perhaps, more of it doing the things we love and less of it sitting in meetings or commuting. So let's not just slip back into bad habits. And what's more, in these past months we've experienced and coped with a lot. We've felt at times isolated and separated; we've felt in limbo, lonely, depressed and anxious; some of us have been sick or bereaved.

The plain fact is we are not the same as we were a year ago, and the world isn't either. Too much has happened, and too much time has elapsed for us to simply 'return to normal', and we wouldn't want to. A portal has opened up and it's waiting for us to walk through it.

A year ago I led this equivalent first service of the year in 'café style' – some of you may remember those services, where we used to gather round tables? Crazy times. I began that service with these words: 'Welcome! It's the start of a New Year and a new decade. Who knows what either will bring? None of us.'

Well, I wasn't wrong – it turned out we had *absolutely* no idea what the year would bring. Although even as we were gathering there was already talk of a novel virus in China, so we could have had an inkling... but it seemed so far away and unlikely to affect us.

That January Sunday of 2020 - feels like years ago - I gave each person who was here a blank piece of paper with a small black dot in the middle of it. I asked what was on the

paper and you, reasonably enough, said 'a black dot'. You probably thought I'd gone mad. But then we looked again and began to notice all the white space that surrounded it. All the *possibility*, which we'd barely noticed. And I asked you to dream for the future of the church – not to worry about the practicalities of your ideas, even if what you imagined seemed impossible. And you came up with all sorts of brilliant ideas, and I've kept that list. But then, only two months later, we had to close.

Now I'm asking you to do this exercise again. I can't give you a piece of paper, but I'm sure you can find one, even if it's the back of a Christmas card envelope. You can even put a black dot in the middle of it if you like. And I invite you to dream again about all the potential and possibilities for this community, but this time from where we are *now*, with all that has happened and changed and shifted in us. Because though there will be some return to what used to be – there will *always* be Sunday services, of course – we have this extraordinary opportunity to re-imagine what we are and what we do here, and we must take it. In truth, we have no choice.

However, 'we' – and this is crucial – 'we' are no longer simply the people who walk through the door on a Sunday morning. So this year I am extending this invitation to dream, not only to church members, or those who are able to attend services in person, but to those of you reading this service at home, those of you joining us on Zoom, or watching on Facebook or YouTube, whether you're from Plymouth, Cornwall, Devon, Somerset or Timbuktoo. I'm extending this invitation to *you*, however old or young you are, whatever your background, the colour of your skin, your gender or sexuality, or your particular ability. I'm inviting you if the pandemic led you to dip your toe in the murky water of spirituality and religion for the first time in years – or maybe ever. I'm asking you, however and whenever you have come across this morning's service, to speak up, and tell us your ideas for what would make this community something you'd like to continue to be – or become – a part of. I'm inviting you to be part of the vision.

Because what we *won't* do when this pandemic is over, is forget those who've joined us during these challenging months. We will not shrink back or close in on ourselves. Instead we will do everything we can to keep our doors – real, virtual and metaphorical – open for you and for anyone else who is looking for the precious gift of free spiritual community. So please, become part of the conversation about how this community develops. And never mind if your ideas seem impossible, let us hear them anyway. Although I can't promise to

deliver everything you ask for, I can promise that you will be heard, that your ideas will go into the pot, and that they just might show up in ways you'd never thought of.

You can write, phone, email, text, tweet, message, facebook - whatever works for you – with your 'six impossible things before breakfast', and I urge you to do so. For all the gloom, this is still an exciting moment. Be part of it.

HYMN: 181 Wake now my senses

Wake now, my senses, and hear the earth all;
feel the deep power of being in all;
keep with the web of creation your vow,
giving, receiving as love shows us how.

Wake, now, my reason, reach out to the new;
join with each pilgrim who quests for the true;
honour the beauty and wisdom of time;
suffer thy limit, and praise the sublime.

Wake, now, compassion, give heed to the cry;
voices of suffering fill the wide sky;
take as your neighbour both stranger and friend,
praying and striving their hardship to end.

Wake, now, my conscience, with justice thy guide;
join with all people whose rights are denied;
take not for granted a privileged place;
God's love embraces the whole human race.

Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;
brighten my pathway with radiance here;
mingle my calling with all who would share;
work toward a planet transformed by our care.

CLOSING WORDS by Eric Williams

Blessed is the path on which you travel.

Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.

Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.

Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.

Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.

Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.

May you go forth in peace.

CLOSING MUSIC 'The Rainbow Connection', Willie Nelson

<https://youtu.be/3kih6sGyxCQ>