

Sunday 21st March, 2021 Spring, and a Census – a Time to take Stock?
Led by Sheila Evans. Reader Ann Kader

Opening Music: Spring - 'Danze Pastorale' from Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons'
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAGR_fKm2Ko

Welcome: Welcome whoever you are and however you are feeling. You are especially welcome if you are joining us for the first time. Welcome, wherever you are and however you are joining us: whether 'live' on-line, watching a recording later; or if you are reading a printed copy of this service. Welcome on this first Sunday of Spring for us in the northern hemisphere, for yesterday was the Equinox, a time of balance, when every place on planet Earth enjoys similar hours of daytime and darkness. For us, as we turn towards lengthening days, this is a season of hope, new beginnings, and a time to take stock of all which is important in our lives.

Chalice Lighting: based on words by Rev Cliff Reed, retired Unitarian Minister

We light our chalice to greet the Spring, here again with its promise of life renewing itself, Spring, with its many coloured flowers, its bright songbirds proclaiming their presence to the world – a world so often darkened by human folly, by war and suffering undisturbed. But still, let us give thanks for the spring, and pledge ourselves to be good stewards of this beautiful, blossoming earth, in this season of hope.

Opening Words: *From 'Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World' by John O'Donohue*

"One of the beautiful transitions in nature is the transition from winter to springtime. An old Zen mystic said, when one flower blooms it is spring everywhere ...there is a lovely phrase in Gaelic, 'ag borrhadh', meaning that there is a quivering life about to break forth. The wonderful colours and the new life the earth receives makes spring a time of great exuberance and hope.

Spring is a youthful season. It comes forth in a rush of life and promise, hope and possibility. At the heart of spring there is a great inner longing. It is the time when desire and memory stir towards each other. Consequently, springtime in your soul is a wonderful time to undertake some new adventure, some new project, or to make some

important changes in your life. If you undertake this, when it is springtime in your soul, then the rhythm, the energy and the hidden light of your own clay works with you. You are in the flow of your own growth and potential. Springtime in the soul can be beautiful, hopeful and strengthening. You can make difficult transitions very naturally in an unforced and spontaneous way.”

1st Hymn: from the Green Book No. 264 “in the Springtime of our year”

In the spring time of our year
Silver buds of hope appear.
Will they blossom? Will they grow?
We who plant the seed must know.
Will they blossom? Will they grow?
We who plant the seed must know.

Tender shoots thirst for the sun,
Surging with each day begun.
Banish darkness, hate and fear:
Golden fruit will soon appear.
Banish darkness, hate and fear:
Golden fruit will soon appear.

Welcome, children, welcome here,
Silver buds of our late year.
May our harvest still increase
Joys of fellowship and peace.
May our harvest still increase
Joys of fellowship and peace.

Prayer: The promises of the Springtime, adapted from a prayer by Jeff Bowes

At this time, as winter slowly releases its grip, and we turn once more to lighter and warmer days, whatever the coming months bring, may we be renewed in our hopes and plans for the future.

In every year we have lived, Spring has faithfully followed the gloomiest of winters. ...
From that faithfulness we learn to have hope....

Hope for ourselves -

As the chill of Winter softens with the Spring, so may we feel an easing of difficulties in our own lives, no matter how dispirited we may have become, we can and we do, come to a springtime of light and love and life and growth.

Because we have hope for ourselves, we may have hope for others;

Hope for our family and friends, while we are all required to remain physically distant from neighbours and acquaintances, colleagues and fellow-workers for just a little longer. Some of

us may have found it hard to understand one another during this isolation, and felt 'ice-bound'. May we all feel encouraged by the prospect of better times ahead.

In other lands, where relations between states are icy, the people suffer from conflict and hardship. Our hope for them is that, like the warmth of the love we see and feel in the faithful return of the spring, there will be a thaw in these difficult relationships, to ease the hardship caused to so many.

We know that the damp and mists are signs that the earth is warming once again.

As our land turns again toward the sun, the days lengthen brining fresh growth, may we see that even through tears and sorrows we can turn, in our hearts and minds, toward that which is light and life in all we have. May we too, turn, and be warmed and be refreshed in our resolve to make of this world a better place for all.... *AMEN*

Story: from 'The Wind in the Willows' by Kenneth Graham

"The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home. First with brooms, then with dusters; then on ladders and steps and chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash; till he had dust in his throat and eyes, and splashes of whitewash all over his black fur, and an aching back and weary arms. Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing.

It was small wonder, then, that he suddenly flung down his brush on the floor, said 'Bother!' and 'O blow!' and also 'Hang spring-cleaning!' and bolted out of the house without even waiting to put on his coat. Something up above was calling him imperiously, and he made for the steep little tunnel, which answered in his case to the gravelled carriage-drive owned by animals whose residences are nearer to the sun and air. So he scraped and scratched and scabbled and scrooged and then he scrooged again and scabbled and scratched and scraped, working busily with his little paws and muttering to himself, 'Up we go! Up we go!' till at last, pop! his snout came out into the sunlight, and he found himself rolling in the warm grass of a great meadow.

'This is fine!' he said to himself. 'This is better than whitewashing!' The sunshine struck hot on his fur, soft breezes caressed his heated brow, and after the seclusion of the cellarge he had lived in so long the carol of happy birds fell on his dulled hearing almost like a shout. Jumping off all his four legs at once, in the joy of living and the delight of spring without its cleaning, he pursued his way across the meadow till he reached the hedge on the further side It all seemed too good to be true. Hither and thither through the meadows he rambled busily, along the hedgerows, across the copses, finding everywhere birds building, flowers budding, leaves thrusting—everything happy, and progressive, and occupied."

Reading: 'Stocktaking' Adapted from an article by the late Rev John Storey, a former Minister of our congregation here in Plymouth.

In the great business of living we (and 'we' includes each one of us individually and the greater 'we of all humankind) need our times of stocktaking, and now seems as appropriate, as much as at any other time. This, here and now, is a time for questions, a time for reflection. What use have we made of the lessons of the past? What mistakes have we failed to avoid? What opportunities have we failed to grasp?

Less depressingly, what good have we done? What joys have we known? What love and fellowship have we shared? We each bring our own answers to these questions – our own thanksgiving or regrets.

One thing we all have in common. None of us can turn the clock back. The past is past – gone beyond recall. Gone are all the good times and the bad, the pains and pleasures. Now we look to the future – made wiser perhaps by all that has gone before, especially in these last few weeks. Learning from the past, but not living there. We do well to listen to St. Paul, who advises us to forget the past and:

‘...to reach forth unto those things which are gone before.’

Well, too, to take *seriously* the humorous words of Mark Twain, who in his wise and witty way tells us:

‘We had better be concerned about the future, because that is where we are going to be spending the rest of our lives.’

To live in and for the future - that is the challenge which comes to each of us. For it is in the future that we shall find our hopes and opportunities, our chance to do a little better – to climb a little higher.



Reflection: A time to take a moment or two in quiet reflection:

Consider this season of renewal the gradual lengthening of the days ... the swelling buds on the flowers and trees, soon to unfurl in the warmth of Spring sunshine’...

all hold the promise that though the current difficulties seem endless, they too will pass, and better times lie ahead

Pause in silence and reflect on your concerns at this time, for yourself, for others and for the world. You may like to light a candle as you do. And you are welcome to give thanks for your blessings, too, and offer up your thoughts to the God of your understanding.

After a short silence, you may like to listen to this music, found at the following link, or to any piece of your own music which you find calming.

Reflective music: Spring ‘Largo’ - from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nMWuedh1g0>



ADDRESS – “Spring, a Census – and a time to take stock?”

Have you, like our velvet-coated friend Mole, been working hard springcleaning your home? Maybe you, like Mole, weary and aching from your exertions, have felt the siren call of Spring itself, and rushed outdoors into the fresh air and sunshine? After the long seclusion of the winter lockdown, its irresistible! Kenneth Graham’s opening paragraphs of that much loved book ‘Wind in the Willows’, could have been written last week; he captures so well what many of us have been feeling in these past months. Only his style betrays him; the book was first published in 1908, a decade before the ‘Spanish’ flu pandemic wrecked havoc in the aftermath of the First World War.

And here we are, the descendants of the survivors, a century on, at the start of the second Spring of this 21st Century pandemic, eager to go out into the world again, to enjoy being as happy and busy and occupied as the plants and animals seen by Mole

The more intense light of lengthening Spring days reaches into every nook and cranny, prompting us to clean our homes, as we see them afresh. It is as John Storey says, an appropriate time to take stock, of our lives, as well as our homes.

By coincidence, this Spring the whole population of England and Wales undergoes a simultaneous ‘stocktaking’, on this very day, in the form of the National Census. The Census, in simplest terms, is counting people officially. Many countries today, including the UK, conduct in-depth censuses, to gather information on what services the population needs, such as health and social care, education, transport, and of course, for taxation purposes. The origins of census taking go back thousands of years, predating Chinese, Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilisations. In c 4000BC, the Babylonians held a census to find out how much food was needed for each member of the population. An example of their census records on clay tiles is in the British Museum.

Censuses are reported in the Bible in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Book of Numbers, records two censuses of the Israelites, one near the start of their 40-years in the wilderness and one near the end. In Numbers 1:1–3, not long after the

Exodus from Egypt, God told Moses to count the people by tribe to determine the number of Jewish men over twenty who could serve in the army: *“Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head”*. The total number of people came to 603,550. Many years later, as Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land, a second census was taken to calculate its military force, and to prepare for allocating land in Canaan. In Numbers 26:1–4 we read that this time the total was 601,730. Later censuses, included one conducted by King David, against God’s wishes. The punishment resulted in tens of thousands dying of the plague - a striking parallel with our own times ...

By the time of the birth of Jesus, Israel was under Roman occupation. The Romans conducted censuses every five years, calling upon every man and his family to return to his place of birth to be counted in order to keep track of the population. And so we read of the best known census as reported in Luke 2:1 (New International Version):–

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

So, we travel forward 2,000 years to this spring Sunday and today’s census. This is the 22nd modern Census in the UK. Previous ones were taken on 27th March 2011, and 29th April 2001. A census of the UK population has been taken every 10 years since 1801, except in 1941 during the Second World War. The Government was prompted to take the first modern Census in 1801 for several reasons. With the start of the Industrial Revolution, in the 1740s, came numerous inventions and changes in the way of life. As more people moved to the towns, population increased rapidly. Britain was at war with France for most of the 1790s, and there was a real need to know exactly how many eligible fighting men there were. This also coincided with a time of bad harvests and food shortages. The deciding factor seems to have been the essay entitled "Principle of Population" by Thomas

Malthus in 1798, with real concerns of population growth outstripping supplies of food and other resources, causing 'Britain to be hit by disease, famine and other disasters'. Parliament was so frightened that it passed the Census Act in 1800, which called for a comprehensive survey of the British population (excluding Ireland), to be carried out every ten years.

And so the first full official census in England and Wales was taken on Tuesday 10 March 1801. A veritable army of parish officials in England and Wales, and schoolmasters in Scotland, went door-to-door recording how many houses there were, who lived in them, and occupations. This first official head count revealed Britain's population to be nine million, although there were probably some inaccuracies. The first four Census returns were not preserved in their complete form, although some information survives in local libraries and archives. Complete records from 1841 onwards survive. In 1841 for the first time the head of each household was given a form to fill in on behalf of everyone in the house on a set day, and this forms the basis of what is done today. All information can only be released to the public after 100 years, for the sake of confidentiality. Unfortunately 1931 information, which was destroyed in a fire during the 2nd World War (*not* due to the bombing). Most censuses since 1841 were in Spring, on a Sunday in March or April.

As well as today's official stock-taking, our congregation is taking stock of what we can do to take us forward into the next stage of church life. Foremost in our minds is when can we return to worship in our building? No date has been set, but we hope it won't be too far off, and we will continue to include those currently joining in online. We are looking at various other aspects of church life too, as Kate wrote in a recent issue of TOR. We invite everyone to have a say, either on line or by other means, letters or phone calls. We hope the darkest times are past and look forward with renewed hope to different and better times.

To quote John Storey again,

"None of us can turn the clock back. The past is past 'We had better be concerned about the future, because that is where we are going to be spending the rest of our lives.... To live in and for the future - that is the challenge which comes to each of us. For it is in the future that we shall find our hopes and opportunities, our chance to do a little better – to climb a little higher.'"

So today, when you have completed your official census, take a little time to think what you would like for the future of this congregation and enjoy the rest of this first Sunday of Spring, a day of hope and promise for us all. *May it be so.*

Final Hymn: from Green Book no. 192 'A New Community'

We would be one as now we join in singing
Our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew
To that high cause of greater understanding
Of who we are, and what in us is true.

We would be one in building for tomorrow
A greater world than we have known today;
We would be one in searching for that meaning
Which binds our hearts and points us on our way.

We would be one in living for each other,
With love and justice strive to make all free;
As one, we pledge ourselves to greater service,
To show the world a new community.

Closing Words: by Rev Dr Linda Hart

May the icy fingers of winter release their grip, may you be warmed and enlivened
May spring unfurl her blossoms all around you, may you be opened and renewed.
And may you share the gift of warmth, and openness all through your life,
in the days to come until we meet again *AMEN*

Closing Music: 'Spring is Coming' by Handel, sung by Kathleen Ferrier approximately 4 mins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unfcm-C7L60>

Extinguish Chalice