

## 24<sup>th</sup> January 2021 – ‘What are we building?’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** Dreamer, by Isbells <https://youtu.be/HqOno6pT3jA>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome. Welcome to you, wherever you are joining us from this morning. Whether it's the comfort of your own home, or a care home, or a hospital bed. Maybe you're on a computer, or a tablet, or your phone. Or perhaps you're reading the script at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. However you are joining us today, you are welcome.

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

May this flame light the way for us. May it encourage us to open our eyes and our minds, and to envision what we might be. May it be so. Amen.

Our service today asks a question – What are we building? It's a question about vision and imagination.

First though, this Wednesday, 27th January, is Holocaust Memorial Day, on which we pause to remember the six million Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of other people killed under Nazi Persecution as well as in genocides that followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. And so I'd like to open with these words entitled 'Deal with God', by Bob Janis-Dillon, who has recently become our Unitarian Congregational Connections Leader.

Sometimes I offer to make a deal with God.

"I'll tell you about my resistance to prayer," I say,

"If you'll explain the Holocaust."

God declines to comment, and the lawyers  
make their prepared statements on his behalf.

I kind of hate when he does that.

I love God best, I confess,

when I catch him slumped over the bar,

his tongue soaked in whisky,  
the past and present oceans dribbling uselessly  
onto his shirt collar.  
I can forgive a God like that, and there is every chance  
he might do the same for me.  
There is much that has happened, there is much,  
much to be forgiven,  
but nothing to be said.

**HYMN 62 Here we have gathered**

Here we have gathered, gathered side by side;  
circle of kinship, come and step inside!  
May all who seek here find a kindly word;  
may all who speak here feel they have been heard.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Here we have gathered, called to celebrate  
days of our lifetime, matters small and great;  
we of all ages, women, children men  
infants and sages, sharing what we can.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Life has its battles, sorrows, and regret:  
but in the shadows, let us not forget:  
we who now gather know each other's pain;  
kindness can heal us: as we give, we gain.  
Sing now in friendship this, our hearts' own song.

**PRAYER** adapted from the Christian Aid website  
Spirit of Life and Love,  
who is more than we can ever imagine,  
give us a wider vision of the world;  
give us a broader view of justice;

give us dreams of peace  
that are not defined by boundaries of geography or race or religion,  
or by the limitations of worldly structures and systems.  
Open our eyes and our ears  
that wherever we go,  
we may hear your voice calling us by name;  
calling us to serve,  
calling us to share,  
calling us to praise,  
so that we never give up on the promise of a world transformed,  
where all can enjoy life in all its fullness.  
Amen.

**STORY: What are you doing? Read by Edgar**

During the Middle Ages, a traveller once came upon a place in France where a great deal of building work was going on. He began talking with the stonecutters and asking them about their work.

He approached the first worker and asked, 'What are you doing?' The man, very disgruntled, and obviously unhappy in his hard toil, replied, 'I'm cutting these huge boulders with the simplest of tools and putting them together in the way I've been told to do. I'm sweating in this heat and my back is hurting. What's more, I'm totally bored, and I wish I didn't have to do this hard and meaningless job.'

The traveller moved on quickly to interview a second worker. He asked the same question: 'What are you doing?' The worker replied, 'Well, I have a wife and children at home, so I come here every morning and I work these boulders into regular shapes, as I'm told to do. It gets very repetitive sometimes, but it helps to feed my family, and that's all I want.'

Somewhat encouraged, the traveller went on to a third worker. 'And what are you doing?' he asked. The third worker responded with shining eyes, as he pointed up to the heavens, 'I'm building a cathedral!'

**READING: Turning to One Another** by Margaret Wheatley

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask: "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?" Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don't know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear. Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what's possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don't fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness.

Stay together.

**REFLECTION** by Richard S. Gilbert

We stop. We pause. We pay attention. We centre ourselves.

We free ourselves from the compulsion of projects to finish, work to be done, things to accomplish.

We leave ourselves alone for a time.

We journey deep down into that quiet centre where no voice is heard.

We live for a brief time on an island of peace.

We apprehend the world from a quiet centre.

Here is the centre of the world.

In this instant are centred the whirling orbs, the movement of earth and sky.

In this fragile moment of time is the culmination of all that has been and the promise of all that shall be.

Here in our grasp, in this moment, is the centre of the world.

*Silence followed by...*

**MUSICAL INTERLUDE** Pure Imagination, by Ant Law <https://youtu.be/nooi8SrCASY>

## **COMMENTARY**

The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is 'Light in the Darkness'. It's about hope and vision for a better world, a world in which such atrocities would never – could never – happen again. It's a call to remember and acknowledge the pain, and the loss, the unspeakable suffering and brutality that human beings are capable of inflicting on each other, and also to find ways to heal and forgive, to hope and to move forward. It's a tall order. As Bob Janis-Dillon said 'much has happened. There is much, much to be forgiven.'

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of confronting human cruelty is to acknowledge its potential in *all* humankind, including ourselves. I don't believe that the Nazis, or the Hutu extremists in Rwanda, or the Sudanese government were people fundamentally different from any of us. They are – or were – human beings too. They are, or were, children of God, of the Universe, and if we truly believe what we say we do, then each one was of intrinsic worth. There's no disputing that they did terrible things. They raped, tortured, murdered, they caused immense terror and tragedy. But if we think of them as 'inhuman' – as 'other' than us – then we risk contributing to the very kind of thinking that leads to separation, division and conflict in the first place.

Because there are no 'others'. There is just us – all of us – on this planet together, often struggling, frequently lost, vulnerable and fearful, easily influenced and led astray, and tragically forgetful of who we truly are. We do indeed have innate worth and great capacity for love and peace – that is our core – our essence. And yet, it seems clear, we also have the frustrating tendency not to realize it. And so there comes instead fear and division, and all that follows from that.

What can we do about this dark side of human nature? We can shake our heads in despair. We can say 'never again'. We can pretend it's nothing to do with 'us'. But it is. It is something to do with us.

I started by saying this service was about vision and imagination, and a question – What are we building? What are we each building in our lives? But also what are we building

*here?* If we were a wholly Christian church we would probably say we were building the Kingdom of God, or at least we would see ourselves as contributing to that lofty aim. But that's not what we say here, it's not the language we use, nor is it the theology we necessarily follow. So it's harder for us to say exactly what our vision – or mission – is. We each come here with our own experiences of the divine, our own beliefs, and our own ways of expressing them. We follow our own paths and practices. However, we do agree on some shared values. The first of those is the 'inherent worth and dignity of every person', and the last is 'respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part'. So you see, there's no escape, even in Unitarianism. We simply can't avoid the fact that we're all 'in this together'. We too aim to build, encourage, support, promote, sustain a community – a world – that's built on love not fear, harmony not division. A world in which genocide could not occur, because everyone would understand that we're all part of one God, one love, one universe, one life.

But we can't *make* other people see that. We can't order them to do it, or insist they change their behaviour in ways we think are more appropriate. That sets up another 'us and them' situation where we see ourselves as the righteous and 'them over there' as the problem. 'If only *they'd* be different, think differently, act differently, the world would be a better place!' The trouble is that everyone thinks that.

So it has to start within. It has to start with us, here and now. And here is a place we can practise being the change we'd like to see in the world. Here we can be people who are humble enough to listen, open-minded enough to be curious, warm-hearted enough to forgive, fearless enough to take risks, willing to not know the answers and even to be wrong. It's hard work. But it's great work, and it means we won't pitch ourselves against others, even as we stand up for what we believe. We will always be in dialogue rather than in debate, interested rather than judgmental, seeking to understand rather than blame, always respecting difference rather than stoking division.

In theory, anyway. We'll fail, of course we will, over and over again. But that's fine because we'll also try over and over again, too. Because that is the way of love rather than fear.

In February's edition of 'The Open Road', which comes out next week, you'll see something rather called a 'Draft strategy' for our church – and I use the word 'church' in its broadest sense to mean all of us – all of you. Rather than switch off and skip past it, I

invite you instead to see it as an invitation to help build a cathedral. Not literally a cathedral obviously – we don't even have Unitarian cathedrals! – but a larger vision, a beacon of light, perhaps, that might shine a little more brightly and little more widely, one that might touch the spirits of each one of us here, as well as those who can't currently see any light at all. One that could perhaps lift us out of the daily business of laying 'bricks' – doing things because we think we ought to, or because we always have, or because we've never considered any other options – and to see instead what we might be able to do together that would bring hope and inspiration, healing and forgiveness, to each other and to the world. This 'draft strategy', which sounds rather formal, is intended to begin a conversation not to end one, and to evolve over time not be set in stone, and I hope the process will both engage and enrich us all. As Margaret Wheatley says:

*There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.*

*Ask: "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?" Keep asking.*

*Notice what you care about.*

*Assume that many others share your dreams.*

*Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.*

But for now I'd like to close with the story of three Rwandan musicians who discovered what they care about and had a vision of their own. Adrien Kazigira, Javan Mahoro and Janvier Havugimana, each from one of the country's three main ethnic groups, Tutsi, Hutu and Abatwa, began playing together in 1978, when they were children. As adult farmers they survived their country's genocide in 1994, in which around a million people – mostly Tutsis and moderate Hutus – were killed in 100 days following years of tensions and persecutions. They formed a band called The Good Ones, not only because they wanted to find the best musicians around to work with but also for the larger effort to reunite the country. They set out to show how they could make music together, to be the change they hoped for, and offer light and hope, and a shining example of friendship, love and cooperation. With a guitar and a selection of old shoes and farming implements as percussion instruments, they travelled Rwanda and the world. They sang for loved ones they'd lost in the genocide, as well as for a brighter future for their country and for the world.

So let's sing.

## **HYMN 68 I dream of a church**

I dream of a church that joins in with God's laughing  
as she rocks in her rapture, enjoying her art:  
she's glad of her world, in its risking and growing:  
'tis the child she has borne and holds close to her heart.

I dream of a church that joins in with God's weeping  
as she crouches, weighed down by the sorrow she sees:  
she cried for the hostile, the cold and ho-hoping,  
for she bears in herself our despair and dis-ease.

I dream of a church that joins in with God's dancing  
as she moves like the wind and the wave and the fire:  
a church that can pick up its skirts, pirouetting,  
with the steps that can signal God's deepest desire.

I dream of a church that joins in with God's loving  
as she bends to embrace the unlovely and lost,  
a church that can free, by its sharing and daring,  
the imprisoned and poor, and then shoulder the cost.

God, make us a church that joins in with your living,  
as you cherish and challenge, rein in and release,  
a church that is winsome, impassioned, inspiring;  
lioness of your justice and lamb of your peace.

## **CLOSING WORDS** 'The Opening of Eyes', by David Whyte

That day I saw beneath dark clouds  
the passing light over the water  
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,  
I knew then, as I had before  
life is no passing memory of what has been  
nor the remaining pages in a great book  
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.  
seen for the silence they hold.  
It is the heart after years  
of secret conversing  
speaking out loud in the clear air.  
It is the vision of far off things  
It is Moses in the desert  
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.  
It is the man throwing away his shoes  
as if to enter heaven  
and finding himself astonished,  
opened at last,  
fallen in love with solid ground.

**CLOSING MUSIC** 'Young people are the future', by The Good Ones

<https://youtu.be/A5QPXFB6uuo>