

## 18<sup>th</sup> September 2022: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

### Rev Kate Whyman – Back to church – why now?

1. **PRELUDE** – Home - Phillip Phillips (Boyce Avenue acoustic cover) 3'23"  
<https://youtu.be/E1XpJ2iGj4Y>

### 2. **WELCOME & CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome to this morning's service, whether you are here in person or online.

*Opening words by Andy Pakula*

Come into this circle of community. Come into this sacred space.

Be not tentative. Bring your whole self!

Bring the joy that makes your heart sing.

Bring your kindness and your compassion.

Bring also your sorrow, your pain.

Bring your brokenness and your disappointments.

Spirit of love and mystery; help us to recognize the spark of the divine that resides within each of us.

May we know the joy of wholeness.

May we know the joy of being together.

And as is our custom, let us begin by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do light a candle at home)

(Words by Dawn Buckle)

We open ourselves to worship today.

May the peace of this house bring us calm.

May the joy of this hour make our hearts glad.

May the challenge of this hour awaken our courage.

May the communion of this hour confirm our togetherness.

### 3. **PRAYER** Anne Mason

Spirit of Life, your very presence among us gives us connection.

Help us to sense that beneath our feet is the strength we need to keep us grounded.  
May we know that behind our back is the protection we need to feel safe facing our fears.

Help us to remember that before our eyes lies the beauty we seek to feel astounded.  
Remind us to lift our heads high enough to be aware of the vastness of our sky and of our spirit, and help us to know that within our hearts lies the love we need to complete the circle of connection in our lives.

Spirit of Love, we give thanks for this day. Amen.

#### **4. HYMN 68 (P) 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.

*Traditional melody, arr. David Dawson, words © Kate Compston*

*It's 'Back to Church' Sunday in the CoE, and our theme is 'Back to Church – why now? Kate Snewin will give us a very personal testimony of why she comes back to church.*

## **5. READING Kate Snewin**

On 10<sup>th</sup> September it was World Suicide Prevention day. The theme for this year is 'Creating hope through action'. Having a day dedicated to suicide prevention aims to raise awareness, reduce stigma and focus attention on suicide as a cause of death and of suffering. Suicide is a tricky thing to talk about, how do you start a conversation like that? What do you say if it's you struggling with thoughts of suicide or hopelessness? What do you do if you're worried about someone? It can be worrying and frightening for everyone involved. I have been working with people who experience suicidal thoughts for over 15 years, from people who have fleeting thoughts of not wanting to be here anymore to people who have attempted to end their lives. I have worked with people who have gone on to die by suicide. I am a survivor of suicide. This is an important topic to me and one that I know deserves a conversation. But, how does this connect with the theme of 'Back to Church'? In the past we have had conversations about what church means to us and a strong thread that runs through our responses has been community. What we have here is a community, for me even when I've not been to church in a while, I know the community is there. When someone reaches the point of suicide, generally there is isolation, disconnection, loneliness. Even if we are surrounded by people who love us, we can feel as if we have no roots that connect us to something bigger, no nourishment for our hearts, no hope of future blossoming. We can feel our community would be better off without us, as if we weigh them down with the burden of our pain. We can walk around in a cloud of despair, the darkness of our thoughts obscuring the beauty of the threads that connect us all. Emily Dickinson said Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without words and never stops at all. A perch is what we all need at times, a place to land and hear the wordless tune of hope. When someone can no longer hear that tune, a community of hearts with hope perched safely in their souls is what we need. We hold the hope for each other. We might not know that someone is hearing the call to end their life or that their chirp of hope can no longer be heard. We *can* commit to hold each other in our wonderful web of connection, creating space for hearing the real response to "how are you?", noticing the courage it takes someone to be vulnerable and share

something beyond the surface, reaching in as well as reaching out. There is a path to suicide that is paved by moments of despair, pain, hopelessness, we all have the potential to be part of another path, one of connection where care, community and compassion hold and sustain us. To truly be compassionate, we must turn toward what is difficult with courage, care and wisdom. Any one of us can find ourselves unable to hear the tune of hope, unsure where to go next. When we are at a crossroads, let the light to the path of community shine brightly and guide the way to safety and love.

6. **HYMN: 11 (P) Blessed Spirit of my life**

Blessed Spirit of my life,  
give me strength through stress and strife;  
help me live with dignity;  
let me know serenity.  
Fill me with a vision,  
clear my mind of fear and confusion.  
When my thoughts flow restlessly,  
let peace find a home in me.

Spirit of great mystery,  
hear the still, small voice in me.  
Help me live my wordless creed  
as I comfort those in need.  
Fill me with compassion;  
be the source of my intuition.  
Then when life is done for me,  
let love be my legacy.

*Music and words © Shelley Jackson Denham*

**STORY Lord Sacks, formerly Chief Rabbi**, as told on Thought for the Day BBC R4  
Is there a thought we can take with us in tough times? Here's mine. It's about the Jewish Festival we celebrate in two weeks: sukkot, tabernacles, when for 8 days we leave the comfort of our homes and sit in huts, shacks, tabernacles, with only leaves

for a roof, in memory of our ancestors' journey across the wilderness. I call it the festival of insecurity, because we're exposed to the wind, the rain and the cold.

When Elaine and I were first married, we had the challenge of building our first sukkah. I wasn't sure how we'd do it, because we didn't own a car. I had no way of transporting the materials. Then a friend said, 'I'm going to the timber yard. There's plenty of room in my car. Come with.'

So the next day I went round to him and my heart sank. There on the table were architect's plans for the sukkah he was about to build. It was magnificent, a Taj Mahal among tabernacles, whereas I could hardly wield a hammer. Off we went to the timber yard, and he produced a long itemized list of what he needed, two by fours and suchlike, while I was reduced to asking for a little bit of this and a bit of that, like my mother's recipe for chicken soup.

We took the wood back, spent the day constructing our sheds, and then visited one another to see how we'd done. His was magnificent. Mine looked like a lop-sided cardboard box. Still, it was a sukkah, and days later we celebrated the festival.

On the second day, in the synagogue, my friend looked crestfallen. 'What happened?' I asked. 'Oh', he said, 'the storm last night blew my sukkah down. What about yours?' 'It's still there.' 'Impossible', he said. 'I have to come round to see this.'

And he did. He couldn't work out how it had stayed standing despite the winds. Then he discovered why. To keep it stable, I'd joined one of the uprights to the house with a single nail. He gave me a smile and said, 'Now I know that you can build the most elaborate structure, but if it's freestanding, winds will come and blow it down. But if you're joined at one point to something solid, immovable, you'll stay standing throughout the storm.' Then he added these words: 'The name of that nail is faith.'

## 7. **REFLECTION:** We come to a quiet time of reflection.

*Silence*

## 8. INTERLUDE: 'Return again', Shaina Noll

<https://youtu.be/KkxWD2p9cxs>

## 9. ADDRESS

Why come to church *now*? That is the question. It's a question worth asking and re-asking, because the answer is likely to change as we move from one stage of life to another. When I first went to church as an 8-year-old it was because my next door neighbours offered to take me along with them, and my parents probably didn't quite know how to say no. When I first went to a Unitarian Church, when I was 40, it was because I was actively seeking a spiritual home where I could explore answers to life's big questions. Now I'm 64 I come to church because I'm the minister!

How about you? Have your reasons changed over the years? Can you remember why you first came here? Do you recall what you were looking for then?

And how about now? What is it that brings you here today? (Pause)

Kate spoke powerfully about needing a 'perch', a 'place to land', somewhere it's possible to hear the 'wordless tune of hope'. She was talking not so much about a building, but about a community, a community that holds hope in its hearts for those who have lost theirs. Perhaps today you too need a place to land, where you can be held in a caring, compassionate community. Maybe that's why you're here.

Or maybe today you have come here to be one of the holders of the light and hope, to help create a warm and welcoming space for others who need it right now, even if today you don't. Perhaps that's your motivation this morning.

Lord Sacks's story about building a sukkah reminds me of some of my less successful attempts to pitch a tent. I think they're easier to put up these days, but there used to be a real art to it, to getting the poles straight and the canvas smoothly and tautly stretched over them. Mine never were quite. But the tent pegs and the guy ropes grounded it – literally – and provided the stability to prevent it being blown away in the night. Lord Sacks's sukkah survived the storms because he attached one

of the uprights to something bigger – in his case to his house, with a nail. For all its flimsiness and wobbliness, this sukkah had one big thing going for it – it was securely hitched to something larger than itself.

Is that what church offers you today? The reassurance of something sturdy and secure enough for you to hitch yourself to for a while? And the reminder – and the possibility of a glimpse – of that which is bigger than us all? To which we are all held.

Whatever has been going on in the world or in our personal lives each week, the church is still here. And we are still pointing in the same direction – towards love, towards acceptance, towards patience and kindness, towards truth. We may not perfectly exhibit those qualities all the time, in fact I'm certain that we don't, but we do consistently orientate and re-orientate ourselves towards them. Church offers some continuity and constancy throughout the storms, because it also hitches itself to that something much larger. It has faith. This community has faith and holds faith collectively for those whose faith may have crumbled.

And when each of us comes here we are given the chance to reset, to realign with our values and to remember this simple but easily forgotten truth that we are tethered to something larger. That we are not alone in the storms. Whenever we come here there is a chance for us to find our connection once more, and experience our lighter selves beginning to re-emerge from the shadows. Here we are always valued. Here we always matter.

I've found myself strangely fascinated by the lime-streaming of the lying-in-state. Have you watched it at all? It's quite mesmerising. Such splendour and such solemnity, the silence and the reverence of all those people who have queued for so many hours – you can see they are transported by the moment. It's very moving.

Yes, it's for the Queen and for her particularly astonishing life and immense service. But I think it's also for all of us, and for all our astonishing lives as well. It's as though the coffin on the catafalque, draped in the flag with the crown jewels resting on top, is an exaltation for the glory and the tragedy of life itself. Our souls, yearning for recognition and belonging, can see themselves honoured in its reflection.

We can't offer such pomp and ceremony here, but we do our best, in our own lower key way, to exalt the lives of all who come here. To honour and revere them, to laugh with them and to cry with them, and to say to each and everyone one – yes, you too are worth it. You too are here for a reason. You too are god-given. You too belong.

I don't know why you came to church today. But I'm very glad that you did, thank you. You have added something special and unique simply by your presence – something that no one else could possibly offer because they are not you. You have brought your spirit, your brokenness, your aliveness, your vulnerability and your strength. And we are all the richer for it.

This place shines more brightly because you are here.

Perhaps that's what you came to be reminded of today.

#### **10. 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.

*Music by Alfred Morton Smith © Estate of Doris Wright Smith. Words by June Boyce-Tillman © 1993  
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11. **CLOSING WORDS** Michael Schuler

If you are proud of this church, become its advocate.  
If you are concerned for its future, share its message.  
If its values resonate deep within you, give it a measure of your devotion.  
This church cannot survive without your faith, your confidence, your enthusiasm.  
Its destiny, the larger hope, rests in all our hands.  
Amen

12. **CLOSING VIDEO** 'One Voice', Wailin' Jennys

<https://youtu.be/y-24qGCvo7A>