

Plymouth – Sunday October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022      *“That was then . . . “ – Michael Dadson*

Prelude                      *De noche iremos (Taize chant, arranged for 7 violins)*

Chalice Lighting

By night and by day we travel onward, seeking always the source –  
the source of truth and beauty, of meaning and motivation

*Light*

May the light of this flame focus our attention on the cup in which it sits,  
and may this Chalice represent for us our thirst  
for the waters that flow from that source –  
the thirst which draws us and moves us on through the landscapes of our lives

Welcome & Invitation to stay and slake that more physical thirst afterwards . . .

Opening

We would make this place a temple of the heart's desire;  
Built from the hewn rocks of our individuality  
And from the sure mortar of our shared understandings;  
An unwalled, unbounded temple  
Wherein all people may praise, in tones of joy,  
The Highest Things that give life meaning and worth,  
And draw us ever onward beyond our known selves.

*Let us pause to bring to mind, each one of us, just what are those Highest Things that give life – our lives – worth and meaning . . .*

*Let us acknowledge, each one of us, just how close they have felt to us, and us to them, over recent weeks and days . . .*

*Let us be at peace here, each one of us, in knowing and seeking to live from those things which guide and inspire our living . . .*

*And in that peace, may we open our hearts and minds to those who feel significant to us at this time – those whose joys we celebrate, those whose troubles trouble us, those whose sadness or distress are painfully with us as we gather here . . .*

We would make of this place a centre of meeting  
for the lost and uncertain, for the curious and the questioning,  
that here we may find once again renewed hope  
to face life's joy and sorrows with enterprise and forbearance;  
that we may know also a deep gratitude for all the opportunities of  
growing.

We would make of this place a home in which dwell love, peace, and honour.  
In this deep covenant let us join.

Hymn 1 – Enter, rejoice and come in (P 33)

*Let's consider the challenge of seeking meaning by day and by night; the proposition and challenge of finding joy and depth and purpose in every day . . .*

## Poems

### The Point – Kae Tempest

The days, the days they break to fade.  
What fills them I'll forget.  
Every touch and smell and taste.  
This sun, about to set,

Can never last. It breaks my heart.  
Each joy feels like a threat:  
Although there's beauty everywhere,  
Its shadow is regret.

Still, something in the coming dusk  
Whispers not to fret.  
Don't matter that we'll lose today;  
It's not tomorrow yet.

### Primary Wonder – Denise Levertov

Days pass when I forget the mystery.  
Problems insoluble and problems offering  
Their own ignored solutions  
Jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber  
Along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing  
their coloured clothes; caps and bells.

And then

Once more the quiet mystery  
Is present to me, the throng's clamour  
Recedes: the mystery  
That there is anything, anything at all –  
Let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything –  
Rather than void

[and that, O Lord, Creator, Hallowed One, You still, Hour by hour, sustain it.]

*What I'm interested in today is how the ways in which we find meaning can change over the years, as we move from one thought, one belief, one phase to another. For instance - years ago I shared the theology and spirituality of Levertov's closing line, but I don't any longer.*

*I invite you now to reflect on ways in which your thinking and believing has changed over the years, and we'll be hearing music in the ancient Russian Orthodox tradition – from the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom – but given a modern twist.*

### Interlude

Tyler Rix – We Praise Thee

*(from Rachmaninov's Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)*

Text *Twice-Born - Rabbi Harold Kushner*

The once-born are people who sail through life without experiencing anything that shatters or complicates their faith. They may have financial reverses, problems with their children, and so forth, but they always feel that a kindly God is controlling things. Twice-born souls, on the other hand, are people who lose their faith and then regain it.

But their new faith is very different from the one they lost.

Instead of seeing a world flooded with sunshine as the once-born always do, they see a world where the sun struggles to come out after a storm but always manages to reappear.

Theirs is a less cheerful, less confident, more realistic outlook.

God is no longer the parent who keeps them safe and dry [but] He is the power that enables them to keep going in a stormy and dangerous world.

And like the bone that breaks and heals stronger at the broken place, like the string that is stronger where it broke and was knotted, it is a stronger faith than it was before, because it has learned it can survive the loss of faith.

### Hymn 2 – P 175 – To seek and find our natural mind

#### Thinking Aloud

I've already indicated that I was not always Unitarian – and certainly not from a Unitarian family. (When my father learned that I was hoping to become a Unitarian Minister, he said, and I quote, "Thank God your mother isn't alive to see it".)

Having been christened, I duly got confirmed in my early teens, sang in the choir and served on the altar. I was a keen Christian, and was involved as an occasional but enthusiastic member of the community living and working at Scargill House Conference and Retreat Centre in the Yorkshire Dales.

I fell in love with the Dales then and love them still, though nowadays without the adolescent Christian glow!

A book of poetry which was influential at that time was Prayers of Life by Michel Quoist, and it's germane to this morning's train of thought to share this excerpt from one poem, called 'I Like Youngsters':-

God says, I like youngsters. I want people to be like them.  
I like them because they are still growing, they are still improving.  
They are on the road, there are on their way.  
But with grown-ups there is nothing to expect any more.  
They will no longer grow, no longer improve. They have come to a full stop.  
It is disastrous – grown-ups think they have arrived.

It strikes me as a little ironic now, that a poem aimed at those who profess a traditional Credal Christian faith should be criticised for standing still in their thinking; the regular recital of the Creed surely reinforces the securing sense of "knowing where one stands". But then as soon as I say that I would want, gently of course, to remind Unitarians to keep on thinking, and wondering, and – uncomfortable as it may feel – to keep daring to grow and change.

When having 'that' conversation with people about what Unitarians do and don't believe, I increasingly say that what I found in this tradition and this community was not a place in which to arrive, but a company within which to travel . . . and keep travelling. Perhaps Michel Quoist would approve of us, then?

In exploring my abuse of the poem by Denise Levertov earlier on, and with the text by Rabbi Harold Kushner (so well read for us by . . . ), I hope I've

made it clear that I'm thinking about changing our thoughts, viewpoints, and standpoints, as we travel through life. And I am in favour!

I've remembered a particular form of words that my brother used when considerably younger: he didn't say "I've changed my mind" about whatever it was he wanted or didn't want; he said "I've changed onto my mind."

Re-hearing that now, in the context of these thoughts, I detect a useful subtlety (about which I may or may not tell him!).

When you are listening to the radio, or watching the TV, and you decide you want something different, you retune . . . you change from one station, one channel, on to another.

So you've moved away from one thing to another, but the thing you were enjoying before has not been deleted or destroyed; it continues to play even though you are not there any more. But it has been there, and you have engaged with it; it has affected you, and it remains with you as a memory – an echo of something with which you have engaged.

What I want to suggest is that when we decide to change our views or beliefs . . . or simply find that they have changed and we need to accommodate that change . . . our previous position doesn't just evaporate as if it had never been there. What we thought before, which shaped who we were before, still remains there in echo, and in the effect it has already had on us.

I would say that it is important, for the sake of our own wholeness, that we be aware of the full mixture of colours and textures that have been on our palette over the years, and the full depth of the layers of involvement and identity that have been ours through the stages of living, not least because they are all part of who we are today; like it or not all of who we have been and have done is summed up in who we have become.

But I would also urge this accepting, nay embracing, of all our earlier shades of being and believing, for the sake of our quality collaboration in blessed community. Bringing all that we are, shades and shapes and echoes and all, means we each bring so much more to the table of community, in terms of empathy and understanding.

Let me illustrate that notion:-

I have spoken of the strong Christian faith I held in my earlier years, which was active and deep enough to prompt me to undertake a degree in Theology and then go on into Anglican priesthood.

It was a deliberate choice – deliberate though not entirely easy or comfortable – to move away from that faith, that viewpoint; a significant change of mind indeed! I wouldn't, couldn't, go back, but I have felt twinges of nostalgia at Christmas times, and during the mourning and the ceremonial following the Queen's death I was moved by the power and dignity of the various liturgies, and was reminded what a sense of solidity such a faith can give.

Which helps me to begin to guess at how amazing it might feel to be Muslim, when during times of prayer – and especially during the annual pilgrimage to Makkah – to know that at one and the same time around the world, millions of Muslims are praying together, all facing towards the same one spot on the surface of the Earth. Solidity, unity, solidarity.

Another article of faith for me in my younger days was that Manchester City were the best team in the land. It was another deliberate choice when I decided to move away from

supporting City – indeed following football so keenly at all. (Do you want to talk about Exeter Chiefs?) But although it isn't for me these days, I do know how that enveloping fervour does feel – being enwrapped and caught up in something stimulating and passionate, with a thrilling and comforting sense of belonging with others.

Again, in earlier days I was a very keen reader of science fiction, and then works of fantasy – those thick books that come in trilogies and talk of torcs and orcs, spells and curses, runes, thanes and banes and suchlike. I enjoyed the films too. But gradually the keen enjoyment faded and I am far less compelled by them nowadays . . . to Julie's regret. But the fact that I have been enthralled by them means that I can see and appreciate when somebody else does feel that way – especially someone who happens to be my wife!

These are just three screenshots from *The Days of Michael* – glimpses of interests and involvements which have all touched me, shaped me, contributed colour and texture to the way that I see life today. There are of course hundreds, thousands, of other such aspects in my past experience, with yet more continually coming along – all leaving their imprint and echo on the person I have become and am constantly becoming. And each of those imprints and echoes offers the possibility of recognising something in others, of making a connection

All of those experience bring a range of colour to the palette of my life-portrait; all those influences bring depth to the layers of my understanding. If I welcome all them, and bring them all into my encounter with others, with you – each one of you – then how much better a chance I have of having some understanding of the varied journey upon which you are engaged. I might be able to empathise with something in you because of a chord it strikes from my past, whether it is current for me or not. I'm not Christian now, or a City fan, or a sci-fi enthusiast, but if you are any of those things then I can have a slight sense of how it feels to you, where you are coming from.

Let's not set about judging and sifting, deleting or denying things past which have mattered to us, but let's have them all present – at least in echo – in the ever-broadening ever-deepening persona that we take into our living. If I draw upon the whole panoply of colours and shades, the shapes and layers of my living, any and all of them can help me to make meaningful and empathic connections with other human beings – the kind of connections that might militate against the increasing separation and isolation of our society, the kind of human connections that are the very life-blood of the truly blessed community which I think we are aspiring to establish here and now among us.

### The Layers *Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006)*

I have walked through many lives, some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.  
When I look behind,  
as I am compelled to look before I can gather strength to proceed on my journey,  
I see the milestones dwindling toward the horizon  
and the slow fires trailing from the abandoned camp-sites,  
over which scavenger angels wheel on heavy wings.  
Oh, I have made myself a tribe out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!  
How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?  
In a rising wind the manic dust of my friends – those who fell along the way –

bitterly stings my face.  
Yet I turn, I turn, exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road precious to me.  
In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice directed me:  
"Live in the layers, not on the litter."  
Though I lack the art to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations is already written.  
I am not done with my changes.

Hymn 3 – P 193 – We laugh, we cry

Announcements

Closing Words

By day and by night we travel onward, seeking always the source –  
the source of truth and beauty, of meaning and motivation

*Extinguish*

Though devoid of flame now, may this Chalice cup continue to represent for us our thirst  
for truth and beauty, meaning and motivation –  
the thirst which will call us and move us onward through the landscapes of our lives.

Postlude

Joni Mitchell – The Circle Game