

29th October – A thinner veil

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. INTRO MUSIC 'Samhain', Lisa Theil

<https://youtu.be/m4GdLVhcO48?si=oFILQklvqUdJ0S6C>

2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT

Welcome to you all. Well done for remembering the hour. You are welcome here, just as you are today, with your joys and your sorrows, your gifts and your foibles, your hopes and your fears. Welcome.

This is the time of Samhain (Sow-win), All Souls, Halloween, and in Mexico 'The Day of the Dead' – it's a coming together of festivals from pagan and Christian traditions that each recognise – in their own way – a feeling of the thinning of the veil between life and death.

The Celtic festival of Samhain (Sow-winn) begins on the evening of 31st October, the same day as Halloween, and marks the Celtic New Year. This is seen as a time for looking forward as well as for looking back, and in particular for remembering and celebrating the lives of those we have loved and lost. For we who live in the Northern Hemisphere the lengthening darkness and increasing cold heralds preparation for winter and the general feeling of drawing inwards. The season has a heightened sense of a shadowy, twilight zone – of liminality – and the possibility of transition from one form to another, one state to another. It's a reminder that life is continuously passing from stage to stage: even today, as we have put the clocks back, and we have passed once more from the relative lightness of Summer Time into newly darker evenings. There is an awareness of life forever passing, but also carrying us along with it.

So now, as is our custom, let us begin this time of words, music and contemplation by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

LIGHT CHALICE

As we kindle this flame, we honour and remember
Those who have passed into the mystery.
Their brightness lives on in our vision;
their courage lives on in our commitments;
and their love continues to bless the world through us.

We recognise the passing from stage to stage in our lives in our first hymn.

3. **1st HYMN 96 (P) Lord of our growing years**

Lord of our growing years,
With us from infancy,
Laughter and quick dried tears,
Freshness and energy:
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of the strongest years,
Stretching our youthful powers,
Lovers and pioneers
When all the world seems ours;
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of our middle years,
Giver of steadfastness,
Courage that perseveres
When there is small success:
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of our older years,
Steep though the road may be,
Rid us of foolish fears,
Bring us serenity;
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

Lord of our closing years,
Always your promise stands;
Hold us, when death appears,
Safely within your hands.
Your grace surrounds us all our days,
For all your gifts we bring our praise.

[David Mowbray]

4. PRAYER By Rev Laura Dobson, for Samhain

Spirit of Life, we praise and thank you for the element of Air: Great Wind, who blew our forebears here from over the sea, bring us your inspiration, that we may know our breath is the same air breathed by our ancestors.

We praise and thank you for the element of Fire: Great Sun, who has sustained all life on Earth since it began, bring us your cleansing warmth, that we may heal the wounds of the past.

We praise and thank you for the element of Water: Great Ocean, who nurtured the first life on Earth and nourishes us all still, bring us your flowing love, that we may show compassion to each other and to all beings.

We praise and thank you for the element of Earth: Great Cradle, Shelter and Tomb, who births us all, nourishes us and receives us again, keep us grounded and help us to respect and care for you, as we become ancestors for those who will follow us.
Amen and Blessed Be.

A prayer for all we have lost

For those we miss.

For things long gone.

For those we last held in our arms,
in our hands and in our hearts —
we pray.

We pray for memories to stay strong
memories of words and warmth,
of actions and stillness.

We pray for Love shared and lived,
to remain with us who live and with they who have died,
and for that to become enough.

Amen.

And I would like to mention those whose funerals I have taken since last All Souls Day.

Penny Shrimpton

Simon English

Clifford Mills

5. **STORY** from *'Doorways to the Soul'*

King Solomon was wise and powerful with riches beyond compare, and yet he was not content. "I am too often depressed by life," he told his wise men. "If things go my way, I do not trust that it will last. And if they do not, I fear my woes will never end. But I have dreamt that there is a ring that contains the knowledge that will bring me peace of mind. Please go and find me this ring."

The king's advisers each went their own way, asking in each place for this marvellous, powerful ring that would bring their king peace of mind. They went to the finest jewellers and goldsmiths in Jerusalem and described the magic qualities of the ring, but no one had heard of it. They travelled to Damascus, Babylon, and Tyre and spoke to traders and merchants who had travelled the seas, but no one had heard of such a ring. They travelled to Egypt and many other places, but still they met with no success. Many times the king asked them if they had found the ring, and they had to reply, "Not yet, your highness." Solomon's hope was fading.

A year passed and the advisers still had not found the ring. They had given up, all save one, the youngest. Unable to sleep, he walked through the city streets all night. In the morning he found himself on a street with the very poorest houses. He saw an old man setting out his simple jewellery and trinkets for sale. In one last attempt he described the ring to this man.

The old man was quiet for a while, and then he smiled. He went inside his simple dwelling and returned with a plain gold ring. With a sharp tool he engraved something on it and laid it in the adviser's hand. As the wiseman read what was written on the ring his heart filled with joy. "This is the ring!" he exclaimed. He gave the old man all the money he had and hurried back to the palace.

When King Solomon gathered his advisers he asked them, 'Have you found me the ring of my dream yet, the one that will bring me peace of mind?' he asked. "We have your highness," spoke the youngest. He came forward and placed the ring on King Solomon's hand.

The king looked at the ring and read the Hebrew words engraved there: Gam Zeh Ya'avor— "This too shall pass." As he read, the king's sorrows turned to joy, and his joys to sorrow, and then both gave way to peace.

The king was reminded in that moment that all his riches and glory were impermanent, and all his sorrows would pass away as the seasons and the years.

6. **2nd HYMN** 292 (G) Undying echoes

The lives which touch our own each day
are influenced unconsciously
by views we hold, the things we say,
our simple acts of charity.

On earth we still receive the light
of stars burnt out in aeons past,
the lives of those who served the right
shine with a lustre that will last.

This life of ours can never end,
its influence still perseveres;
for by our deeds we ever send
undying echoes down the years.

Words by John Andrew Storey

7. **READING.** Frederick Buechner, from 'Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith'

Eternity is not endless time or the opposite of time. It is the essence of time.

If you spin a pinwheel fast enough, then all its colours blend into a single colour – white – which is the essence of all the colours of the spectrum combined.

If you spin time fast enough, then time-past, time-present, and time-to-come all blend into a single timelessness or eternity, which is the essence of all times combined.

As human beings we know time as a passing of unrepeatable events in the course of which everything passes away, including ourselves. As human beings, we also know occasions when we stand outside the passing of events and glimpse their meaning.

Sometimes an event occurs in our lives (a birth, a death, a marriage – some event of unusual beauty, pain, joy) through which we catch a glimpse of what our lives are all about and maybe even what life itself is all about, and this glimpse of what ‘it’s all about’ involves not just the present but the past and future too.

Inhabitants of time that we are, we stand on such occasions with one foot in eternity. God, as Isaiah says, ‘inhabiteth eternity’ but stands with one foot in time.

8. REFLECTION/SILENCE

I have recently finished reading a book called ‘The Mothership’. It’s by my good friend Linda with whom I walk each year. She’s a writer – not just in her spare time, it’s her work and her life. This particular book is still in manuscript stage and she asked me to read it for comments. I was a bit nervous about doing that, it can be awkward giving feedback to a friend, but I needn’t have worried. It’s a really beautiful memoir that traces her links with the ancestors on her mother’s side who were ship owners and sailors, particularly in the Braunton area of north Devon. Perhaps not surprisingly many of the men in the family died at sea leaving their wives widowed on shore. There is an infamous sandbar in the estuary of the Taw and Torridge Rivers that has taken many lives. So, the poem ‘Crossing the Bar’ by Alfred Lord Tennyson, has become particularly meaningful for Linda, as I know it is to some of you. Linda read it at her mother’s funeral a couple of years ago, and in her book she mentions a particular recording of the poem being sung acapella by ‘The Spooky Men’s Chorale’. It seemed a really appropriate piece of music to play – and it’s hauntingly beautiful, I think.

I’ll start by reading the poem, which uses the metaphor of crossing a sandbar out to sea for the journey of passing from life to death. During the silence and the music

that follows you are welcome to sit quietly or to light a candle for someone or something you have lost, or that has passed, if you would like to.

Sunset and evening star,
 And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
 When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
 Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
 Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
 And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
 When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
 The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
 When I have crost the bar.

9. SILENCE

10. INTERLUDE 'Crossing the bar', The Spooky Men's Chorale

<https://youtu.be/w1Q0VH6iFQc?si=RjMdX1SgJkDZ2gd1>

11. 3rd Hymn 298 (G) Living and dying (piano only)

Sing of living, sing of dying, let them both be joined in one,
parts of an eternal process like the ever-circling sun.
From the freshness of each infant giving hope in what is new,
to the wisdom of the aged deepened by a longer view.

Open to a deeper loving, open to the gift of care,
searching for a higher justice, helping others in despair.
Through the tender bonds of living in a more inclusive way
we are opened more to suffering from the losses of each day.

When a special life has ended, if our lives were interlaced,
we are carried into darkness by that presence unreplaced.
Standing at the edge of meaning struggling to be free from pain
wondering if our hearts will ever dare to fill with love again.

Even when our grief o'erwhelms us and our aching hearts seem lost,
life is dancing all around us, even while it counts the cost.
Slowly in our inner darkness, love may light the saddened will,
giving us a way to see that life has meaning for us still.

Words by Thomas Jarl Mikelson

12. ADDRESS

According to the prophet Isaiah, God inhabits eternity yet stands with one foot in time. We inhabit time, yet *on occasion*, says Frederick Buechner, we find ourselves standing with one foot in eternity. When the conditions are right, and usually by grace rather than design.

I understand this idea of 'standing with one foot in eternity' as experiencing a moment of connection with the divine, however we understand it. When there is no distance between us and all that is, when we know ourselves to be at one with the universe, with the God of our understanding.

Buechner reminds us, too, that if you spin a wheel with all the colours of the rainbow fast enough, it appears white. There is no longer any distinction between what once appeared to be discrete and separate hues, just oneness. And so, at this so-called 'thin' time, something similar can occur with life and death if we're open to the idea. In such moments as these we may see, hear, feel, sense things we wouldn't normally. At such times we may 'cross the bar', or cross time, in such a way as we become aware of the presence of people and things past, present and future.

This may sound esoteric, but in its way it's everyday. I recently mentioned having a similar experience in Orkney when I knelt down in a neolithic dwelling and used the saddle quern which had lain there for 5000 years. In that moment I felt there was no time between me and the women – it probably was the women – who used it all that time ago. We became as one.

And last week I was talking to someone from one of our hiring groups who – without any prompting from me or any mention of Halloween or Samhain/Sowwin – told me how special he felt our small hall is. How he experiences it as a thinner place – he used that word 'thin' – somewhere, he said, where people can feel closer to their higher power. A place where so many stories have been shared, and heard, and where healing has taken place across the years...all of which is held within that simple, humble room.

I must admit I have tended to think of this space – the church – as being the 'sacred' part of the building, but his words reminded me that so many groups meet in our hall, and each have their own spiritual underpinning: the recovery groups, the Red Cross and so on, as well as our own creative events – arts/crafts afternoons, creative writing, and more. All of these gatherings help people feel a sense of belonging, of community, of connection, of touching the eternal.

And so although this time of year is particularly about a sense of the thinning of the veil between life and death, I also understand it as being a time when we are reminded to be open to the possibility that we might glimpse eternity every day and many ways, and in all its mystery.

Isn't this, in part anyway, why we come to church? Of course, we come to meet and make friends, build community, share conversation and food and drink together, all of which have the potential to be sacred in their own right. But also we yearn for those glimpses of the eternal. We come to feel ourselves touched by grace, a time when worldly concerns might fall away, and light, love, clarity may enter in, even for just a moment. When we may feel the presence of spirit, of God, of the divine within us and around us.

At this time of year we remember our mortality, yes, but also our timelessness. We acknowledge and accept, as gratefully as we can, the inevitable and continuous passing of each moment and every life on earth. We feel the poignancy of loss, of course, but also practise the inner knowledge that death is simply part of life.

We remind ourselves that while God may stand in eternity with one foot in the world, we can stand in the world with at least a toe or a finger nail in eternity. And know that, ultimately, we are all – the living and the dead – forever held in the light and love of the eternal now.

13. 4th HYMN Give thanks for life

Give thanks for life, the measure of our days,
mortal, we pass through beauty that decays,
yet sing to God our hope, our love, our praise:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for those whose lives shone with a light
caught from the Christ-flame, gleaming through the night,
who touched the truth, who burned for what is right:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for all, our living and our dead,
thanks for the love by which our life is fed,

a love not changed by time or death or dread:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for hope that like a seed of grain

lying in darkness, does its life retain

to rise in glory, growing green again:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Music Ralph Vaughan Williams, words Shirley Erena Murray © 1987 Hope Publishing Company

14. CLOSING WORDS

For those who came before us, we offer gratitude and thanks.

May their memories be a blessing.

May we feel surrounded by their love.

As we go forth from this time and place,

let us be inspired by their courage, their wisdom, and their dreams.

Let us honour them by doing the work

of living boldly, loving mightily,

and creating heaven on earth.

May these brave and lovely spirits live again in our tender thoughts, and prove that death and distance are powerless to sever the bonds that connect truly loving hearts.

Blessing for Samhain

May the ancestors deliver blessings on you and yours

May the new year bear great fruits for you.

May your granted wishes be as many as the seeds in a pomegranate.

May the slide into darkness bring you light.

May the memories of what has been keep you strong for what is to be.

May this Samhain cleanse your heart, your soul, and your mind!

15. CLOSING MUSIC Ojo Azules, Incantation (3'25")

<https://youtu.be/aaaWXRkNVm0?si=jtx6wXxGuZV4Rr3k>