

**7<sup>th</sup> January – PLYMOUTH**

**led by Rev Kate Whyman**

**1. INTRO MUSIC** 'When winter comes', Chris de Burgh

[https://youtu.be/t\\_Qz3fUfeEQ?si=EHcWf6sG-33qlbQm](https://youtu.be/t_Qz3fUfeEQ?si=EHcWf6sG-33qlbQm)

**2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Happy New Year! And welcome to each one of you here in the church and joining us online. You are welcome just as you find yourself on this first Sunday of 2024, with all your hopes and expectations, your excitement and joy, as well as any sadness or anxiety you may be feeling, or poignant memories or disappointments you may be carrying at this time. We welcome the whole of ourselves here today.

We come here to share time together. We come with open minds and warm hearts. We come to build community, to reconnect with ourselves and the divine, to open ourselves to the spirit of love, and to enter in - with heart and with soul - to the ultimate mystery of life.

*Joseph Campbell, author of 'The Power of Myth' wrote: 'If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track, which has been there all the while waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living.'*

May we each follow our bliss in 2024.

Let's begin by lighting our chalice candle, as a symbol of our free religious faith.  
(Do light a candle with me if you are at home.)

**LIGHT CHALICE**

May this first flame of the year burn with the light of new hope and the warmth of community re-gathered. May it be our guiding light throughout this day and the days to come.

As this is a joyful time, let's sing...

**3. FIRST HYMN:** 33 (P) Enter, rejoice and come in

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Today will be a joyful day;

enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your ears to the song.

Open your ears to the song.

Today will be a joyful day;

enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your hearts everyone.

Open your hearts everyone.

Today will be a joyful day;

enter, rejoice, and come in.

Don't be afraid of some change.

Don't be afraid of some change.

Today will be a joyful day;

enter, rejoice, and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Today will be a joyful day;

enter, rejoice and come in.

*Words and music by Louise Ruspini*

#### 4. PRAYER Let us pray.

Source of all being. Compassionate witness. We come here to rest awhile in awareness of your presence as we gather ourselves to go forward to the year ahead.

Be our guiding light and give us the strength we need to meet each joy and each challenge that unfolds before us.

Shine on each one of us as we strive to know you more dearly and ourselves more clearly, and help us move towards that place of stillness where we can be one with you, and from where we can manifest your will, which is our will, to be our highest selves.

Let it be so.

#### **A New Year Prayer** by *Harry Lismar Short* – Unitarian minister and Principal of MCO from 1965 (slightly adapted)

O God, here at the beginning of a new year we are waiting,  
ready to step forward into the unknown future.

The past is past; we cannot alter it now, that book is closed.

It gave us many things to be glad about, and we are grateful.

It gave us other things which gave us cause for sorrow and repentance;  
and we are truly sorry.

But only the future is free.

Humbly we accept the gift of unused minutes and hours, days and years,  
praying that we may use them rightly.

We think of the circumstances in which we shall use them.

There are our private lives,  
that inner world in which each of us lives alone,

the world of thoughts and impulses and emotion,  
which is the hidden source of our inward actions.  
So often it is a realm of idleness and shortcomings.

We pray for inward renewal,  
which will bring our tarnished souls nearer to the ideals we claim to follow.  
We pray for strength,  
which will lift us out of our self-indulgence.  
We pray for a true charity and compassion.

But the inward reveals itself in the outward.  
The springs of action within our souls  
have their effect in the outer world of conduct and relationships.  
We hold before our mind's eye the little world of everyday in which we live;  
our daily work, our homes, our loved companions, our responsibilities.  
May there be strength, and gentleness and creative newness here.

We think of the wider world of which we are a part;  
our neighbourhood, our own native land, the family of humankind.  
Sometimes we think we can do little here.  
What is one person amid a boundless creation?  
Yet out of our lives flows something into the wider world,  
some gift of good or ill.

We shall pass through this world but once.  
If there is any good we can do,  
or any kindness we can show, to man or woman or child or beast,  
let us do it now; let us not neglect or defer it;  
for we shall not pass this way again.

May the same spirit that was in Jesus be in us.

Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace to all people.

5. **STORY** An unexplained parable featuring Lao Tzu, author of the Tao Te Ching, the foundational text of Taoism

Since it was the beginning of the year I went to Lao Tzu's place to ask him what I should do with the rest of my life.

"How should I know?" he asked, not looking up from the figure he was carving from a stick.

"Because I heard that when Young Zhi came all the way from the ZigZag Mountains he asked you the same question. Your answer caused his life to turn around."

"You are not Young Zhi," the master replied.

"No," I said, "but at least you could give me a blessing for the beginning of the year."

"How should I do that?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"There you have it," he said, blowing a chip off his carving.

A story that reminds us, I think, to find our own way, to enter the flow of our own life.

6. **READING** 'Cleaning the kitchen', by Jeanne Desy in *How we are called*.

The Japanese master Nan-in once hosted a renowned professor who wanted to discuss the basic concepts of Zen. The professor freely shared his ideas while Nan-in prepared tea.

Then Nan-in began serving. He poured his visitor's cup full and kept pouring, so that tea overflowed onto the table. Still, he kept pouring.

The professor, stunned, burst out, "but it is full. No more will go in!"

'You are full,' Nan-in said. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?'

American Zen Buddhist Bernie Glassman says, in [the book] 'Instructions to the Cook', 'We always begin by cleaning. Even if the kitchen looks clean, we still have to clean it again each time we want to start a new meal'.

We are told to clean the kitchen before cooking, while cooking, and after cooking.

These are in fact regulations for Zen monasteries that date back a thousand years, and they are meant literally. Cleanliness is prized in the Zen monastery. It is part of the aesthetic of simplicity, part of being attentive to what is before us.

But it is also a metaphor for cleaning the mind. Before we do anything, we meditate or otherwise centre ourselves, often first thing in the morning. We meditate while we cook the meal of our life; that is, we maintain awareness. At the end of the day we reflect upon our actions, making sure we have cleaned up any messes we have made, making every effort to maintain simplicity and harmony in all our relationships. We do what we can to stay open and in touch.

Actually cleaning the real and tangible kitchen is also a form of mediation, the kind of task that is sometimes easier to concentrate on than sitting meditation. Nothing to it. Simply mop the floor. Nothing else. No planning the next meal just now, no evaluating the last meal, no wishing for ingredients we don't have or rehearsing grievances or worrying, no opinions or speculations. Just empty the teacup, wash the floor.

No hurry, no need to get anywhere. There is nothing to attain, just this moment of watching the mop, enjoying the warmth and security of home, the reflections of your face in the soapsuds. Just washing. All joy is contained in this moment. If you are not perfectly happy now, when will you be?

## **7. 2nd HYMN – 27 (P) Dark of winter, soft and still**

Dark of winter, soft and still,  
your quiet calm surrounds me.  
Let my thoughts go where they will,  
ease my mind profoundly.  
And then my soul will sing a song,  
a blessed song of love eternal.  
Gentle darkness, soft and still,  
bring your quiet to me.

Darkness, soothe my weary eyes,  
that I may see more clearly.  
When my heart with sorrow cries,  
comfort and caress me.  
And then my soul may hear a voice,  
a still, small voice of love eternal.  
Darkness, when my fears arise,  
let your peace flow through me.

*Music and words © Shelley Jackson Denham*

## **8. Quiet Reflection**

Let us come together in a time of reflection.

We begin by relaxing our bodies and our breathing, and letting go of the thoughts that preoccupy us, thinking not of what happened earlier, or of what might happen later, but simply being here now in mind, body and spirit.

PAUSE

Let the silence enter in, and feel the spirit of holy peace and wisdom moving through us to heal, to enlighten and to strengthen us.

With every fresh intake of breath, let the spirit enter in to enrich us.

With every exhalation of breath, let tiredness and negativity be dispersed.

PAUSE

Blessed be that divine presence which gives us life in a beautiful world and a wondrous universe.

May our brief lives be such as to add to that beauty and wonder, thereby glorifying the Divine Unity that creates, sustains and transforms all being eternally.

So may it be.

Amen.

**SILENCE [CANDLES/TREE FOR CULLOMPTON]**

**9. INTERLUDE:**

'Glow', from World of Colour Winter Dreams, Eric Whitacre Virtual Choir

<https://youtu.be/oBBJQ-RoM5g?si=sl-jAKf5iwjVlj1>

**10. ADDRESS**

Experience has taught me no longer to write New Year's resolutions. But I do like to reflect on the year just passed and make a short list of general intentions. They are



not hard and fast – I don't resolve to give up anything, or learn French, any more, that ship has definitely sailed. But I like to have some sort of sense of where I think I might be going and what I might try to achieve, even if things don't turn out quite how I imagined them, which of course they usually don't. I try to map out, just roughly, some way-markers for my journey each year.

And I notice I feel a strong urge to 'sort things out'. To tidy up, and clear out. To de-clutter. There is always plenty of that to be done in my house. I'm not a hoarder, but I am a piler, in such a thing exists. I make piles of pieces of paper, notes, documents, letters and so on – things I feel are important enough to keep but not important to act on NOW. New Year is a prompt for me to finally sort through them and actually do something with them. So, I resonated with the 'Cleaning the kitchen' reading we heard earlier. It's about creating order, certainly, but more importantly I think it's about making space for the new, for the unexpected and for the serendipitous – and not just in my house, but in my mind and in my heart. It's about making space for the divine spirit in our lives.

Yesterday was Epiphany in the Christian calendar, which celebrates the journey of three wise men from the East as they followed the star to Bethlehem. The word 'epiphany' comes from the Greek meaning 'manifestation' or 'striking appearance'. So perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Epiphany marks the moment that these men finally arrived, not just to the place, but at the realisation that this baby in the manger, according to the story, was a manifestation of God. It was a moment of divine insight, a sudden comprehension. A light-bulb moment, if you like.

It feels likely that the long journey they had taken, with all its trials and tribulations along the way, had given them time and space to let go of their ordinary lives and had opened them up to the possibility of miracles. Freeing up space in *our* hearts, and clearing out the debris from our minds – whether by walking, journaling, or praying or meditating, or becoming absorbed in painting, perhaps, this can help us too to be ready for such moments of revelation when they arise in our lives.

When we are full, as the Zen master says, how can we possibly receive?  
First, we must empty our cup.

It seems a very long time ago that I attended the Ministerial Old Students' Association Conference in Oxford in June 2012. I was there by accident really, as a 'plus 1' to a friend who was speaking at the event. But quite suddenly – in the middle of lunch on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day – I realised that I wanted to train as a Unitarian minister myself. I found myself announcing it to the people around me and set about starting the process of making that happen.

I say suddenly as though the thought came from nowhere. Of course, it didn't, I had been a Unitarian for around 12 years by then, I'd taken services, I was on the committee, and I had wondered about ministry before. All of which was no doubt leading me to this moment.

I began this service with a quotation from Joseph Campbell, the American mythologist and author of 'The Power of Myth', which in fact I shared here on this Sunday in 2015 – my first New Year service with you all.

*If you follow your bliss,' he wrote, 'you put yourself on a kind of track, which has been there all the while waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living.'*

That's just how it felt. I was putting myself on a track which had been waiting for me all along.

At this time of year we are each invited, once again, to review where we are in our journey through life. At this time we are called once more to follow our star, our bliss, and to put ourselves on the track that has been waiting for us.

No one can tell us what that track is, how to find it, or where it will lead us. And there are no certainties or guarantees even when we do. But if we can clear our minds of their clutter, and open our hearts to the light of possibility, then we just might find that the way ahead emerges and we find ourselves simply saying 'Yes, this is life I ought to be living now'.

The life that we discern through prayerful inquiry, and mindful living, is the life that is waiting for us. This is the life that gives meaning to our experience and grounds us in unity with the divine. We recognise it when we find it.

How will we ready ourselves? I suggest by attending to the joy in, and the truth of, each moment as it comes; by constantly listening and paying attention – always by paying attention – to the subtle signs and the small inner voice that guides us along the way. We find it by making the journey ourselves, by trusting the process. We find it by having faith in the god of our understanding, and in the teaching of Julian of Norwich that all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

Blessed be.

#### **11. 3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn 186 (P) We are travellers on a journey**

We are travellers on a journey  
which brought us from the sun,  
when primal star exploded  
and earth in orbit spun;  
but now as human dwellers  
upon earth-planet's crust,  
we strive for living systems  
whose ways are kind and just.

We are travellers on a journey  
which grows from human seed,  
and through our birth and childhood  
goes where life's path may lead;  
but now we are delving deeper  
in quest of greater worth  
and reaching unknown regions  
and planets of new birth.

We are travellers on a journey  
through realms of inner space  
where joy and peace are planets  
that circle stars of grace;  
and when we find the stillness  
which comes at journey's end,  
there'll be complete refreshment,  
a resting place my friend.

*Music Henry Hugh Bancroft, words © Andrew M. Hill*

## **12. CLOSING WORDS**

I close with a prayer for the New Year by **Carla Grosch-Miller**

Be gentle with me, God.  
Open the way before me.  
Provide refreshment:  
Clear water, fresh breeze.

Still my anxious, striving mind.  
Bind my aching, yearning heart.  
Focus my straining, hoping energies.  
Accomplish within me what You can.

Give to me  
perseverance in work,  
direction in darkness,  
the strength to stand  
and the wisdom to walk  
with grace,  
that I may feel

the weight  
and value  
of each step.

And words by Elizabeth Tarbox:

‘This year ... I’m aiming for the continued willingness to keep the doors of my feelings open, to participate in life as well as to observe it, to contribute more to the solutions and less to the problems, and to wish everyone, with all my heart, a happy and healthy new year.’

So be it.

#### **14. POSTLUDE**

Haydn Concerto in Eb major for trumpet, Alison Balsom  
[https://youtu.be/5drYSu\\_xORw?si=fDhGfTHbmiBY\\_HPn](https://youtu.be/5drYSu_xORw?si=fDhGfTHbmiBY_HPn)

#### **15. Postscript**

Finally, there is a postscript to this service.

I have been, as I mentioned, reflecting on my own life going into 2024 and where I am in my own journey. I’m now in my 10<sup>th</sup> year of ministry with you, having come here in October 2014 – and what a journey it’s been! But I will be the grand old age of 66 this year. So, I have made the decision to retire at the end of this year, while I’m still young enough (I hope) to have another stage on life’s journey. This has not been an easy decision to make, but it feels like the right one, and I wanted to give you plenty of notice so that there is time for thought, and discussion, and making plans for the future. It will be a busy year, I’m sure, with lots to reflect on and plenty to do.

I hope it will be a year in which we can each find our way, and begin to find the way also of our church and our beloved community.

I will be travelling up to Cullompton today though I'll be here until 12.30pm.

But I'll be around this week, and also taking next week's service, so if you want to talk to me, then there will be opportunities. There will also be a congregational meeting on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> February, after the congregational service led by Gav, which will be a chance for all of us to share our thoughts on where we are as a congregation at the moment, and the kinds of decisions that might need to be considered.

And now I invite Sheila to give the notices.

## **NOTICES**