

4th February 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman – First stirrings

1. **PRELUDE** – Candlemas Eve, Kate Rusby (5'16")

<https://youtu.be/8KOj5omJujw?si=dl6cLbXI34magjTB>

2. **OPENING WORDS**

Welcome to this morning's service, whether you are here in person or online. However you find yourself this February morning, you are welcome here, just as you are.

Today we are celebrating the first stirrings of spring, and the February festivals of Imbolc, St Brigid and Candlemas.

The opening words are from *Terasa Cooley*

'In this time of anticipated spring'

In this time of anticipated spring let us allow ourselves to extend the anticipation—to value the time of budding before blooming, of seeding before sprouting.

This is a time of revelation: the revealing of that which is eternal, which we see every year, but still need to be reminded to see it in a new way.

There is also the revelation of that which is new. Every spring we encounter something never before seen. It is that very newness which embodies hope and potential for the wholeness which is yet to be.

Let us allow spring to unfold slowly that we may appreciate the true mystery of rebirth and renewal.

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

We light this flame to mark the beginning of our precious hour of together. Let it symbolise, too, the beginning of life stirring within and around us; the gentle reawakening of consciousness; and the flickering of renewed light. May we be alert to each subtle nuance of promise and possibility.

3. 1st Hymn 181 (P) Wake, now, my senses

Wake now my senses, and hear the earth call;
feel the deep power of being in all;
keep with the web of creation your vow,
giving, receiving as love shows us how.

Wake, now, my reason, reach out to the new;
join with each pilgrim who quests for the true;
honour the beauty and wisdom of time;
suffer thy limit, and praise the sublime.

Wake, now, compassion, give heed to the cry;
voices of suffering, fill the wide sky;
take as your neighbour both stranger and friend,
praying and striving their hardship to end.

Wake, now, my conscience, with justice thy guide;
join with all people whose rights are denied;
take not for granted a privileged place;
God's love embraces the whole human race.

Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;
brighten my pathway with radiance here;
mingle my calling with all who would share;
work toward a planet transformed by our care.

Music © Barry Brown, words © Tom Mikelson

PRAYER

Anglican prayer for Candlemas.

Lord give us the eyes of faith,
to see your presence in the world.
Where fear closes our eyes, help us.
Where tears blind us, heal us.
Where busyness keeps us from noticing, slow us.
Where pride gets in the way, release us.
Set us free to see your love at work in the world.
Amen

Let us pause to bring in to our minds eye all those suffering who are known to us.

And those unknown, wherever they may be in the world, we remember those who are unwell in body or in mind, those who are bereaved and grieving, those living in war zones, or suffering in oppressive systems or regimes. We ask that all living souls find solace, freedom and wellbeing.

Saint Brigid of Kildare or Saint Brigid of Ireland is the patroness saint of Ireland, and one of its three national saints along with Patrick and Columba. According to medieval Irish legends, she was an abbess who founded the important abbey of Kildare, as well as several other convents of nuns. It's not clear entirely whether or not she was a real person, and may have been based on the Celtic goddess Brigid – the two have become merged over time.

There are many miracle stories associated with her – this is one of them.

4. **STORY The legend of Brigid's cloak**

One day Brigid approached the King to ask for land on which to build her monastery. The place she selected was ideal. It was near a lake where water was available; in a forest where there was firewood; and near a fertile plain on which to grow crops.

The King, however, refused her request. But Brigid was not put off by his refusal. Instead, she and the sisters prayed that the King's heart would soften. Then she made her request again but this time she asked a little differently. Brigid was known for wearing a white cloak, and she said to the King: *"just give me as much land as my cloak will cover."*

Seeing how small her cloak was, the King laughed and agreed to grant this request. Delighted, Brigid laid her cloak on the ground and instructed four of the sisters to help her. Each one took hold of a corner of the cloak and began to walk in opposite directions - north, south, east and west. As soon they did this, the cloak began to grow and soon it had spread across many acres until all the land looked as though it was covered in snow. Brigid now had sufficient land on which to build her monastery.

The King and his entire household were dismayed and amazed. But they realised that this woman was truly blessed by God and the King converted to Christianity and became a patron of Brigid's monastery, assisting her with money, food and gifts.

5. From *Sacred Earth Celebrations*, by Glennie Kindred

The days are beginning to lengthen. It is still cold but buds are forthcoming on the trees. Sap is beginning to rise and the bulbs are pushing through the Earth. Everywhere there are signs of the Earth stirring. Our acceptance of winter is giving way to an urge to move forwards into springtime energy. Now is the time to prepare inwardly for the changes that will come. Plant your ideas and leave them to germinate. Bring your vision and inner understandings out through poetry, song and art.

We are trying in our own way to live the dreams and visions of a new age, but we are still bound by our old conditioning and life patterns. We each carry the seeds of a new vision, of a new way of being. Each time these visions re-emerge after the incubation period of winter, they are stronger and we are surer.

6. **2nd HYMN: 147 (P)** Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree

Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,
water of life, flowing in me,
keeping me stable, nourishing me,
O fill me with living energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of love, softly draw near,
open my heart, lessen my fear,
sing of compassion, help me to hear,
O fill me with loving energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of life, you are my song,
sing in my soul, all my life long,
gladden and guide me, keep me from wrong,
O fill me with sacred energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Arr David Dawson, words © Lyanne Mitchell

7. **REFLECTION:** We come to a quiet time of reflection and candle lighting

What is changing in your life at the moment? What is new, or emerging?

You are invited to light a candle for anything changing or emerging in your life at the moment.

8. **INTERLUDE: Nunc Dimittis**

https://youtu.be/21SqxlKfDik?si=xYMLtW_GVoOiHx9-

9. **ADDRESS**

“It is a denial of the divinity within us to doubt our potential and our possibilities.”

James E. Faust, American religious leader and lawyer.

February begins with a trio of festivals that celebrate the miracles of potential and possibility. The pagan festival of Imbolc on 1st February is situated at the midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox and so it is the turning point from winter towards spring. The word imbolc is Gaelic and means ‘in the belly of the mother’. It’s associated with the first time the ewes are milked and imbolc also marks the first stirrings of the seeds that will eventually grow into the harvest. (As Joan at Plymouth always reminds me, ‘it’s time to start chitting the potatoes’.)

St Brigid’s Day was also on the 1st. The story we heard earlier told how she apparently tricked the local King into giving her enough land to build a monastery. “Just give me as much as my cloak will cover,” she pleaded – before proceeding, with the help of her sisters, to stretch the tiny cloak north, south, east and west until it miraculously covered many acres!

And February 2nd was Candlemas in the Christian calendar, a time that looks both

back to Christmas and forward to Easter. It particularly marks the moment when the infant Jesus was presented for the first time at the temple 40 days after his birth, as was the custom then, according to the Jewish purity laws. According to the gospels, two elderly prophets, Simeon and Anna, had been waiting and watching for this baby's arrival and they were ready and alert enough to recognise him immediately as the messiah.

And so at this time of year, early February, we have all these traditions in the background, these echoes of beliefs and cultures from the past that continue to resonate in the present. And we are reminded that, like seeds lying dormant in the earth, and like St Brigid and her magical cloak, and like Anna and Simeon in the temple, we already contain all that we need in order to become all that we can be. All our possibilities lie ready and waiting for the chance to be made manifest in our lives. What is asked of us, then, at this time is that we trust the process, and that we remain alert to each opportunity that arises, and each sign that presents itself.

The Christian festival of Lent, which this year begins on Valentine's Day, might seem to be in somewhat contradictory spirit – a traditionally solemn festival that appears to be more about giving things up than about growth and fulfilment. But, of course, the real meaning of this Lenten fasting is not denial for its own sake, but can be understood as a calling to each of us to simplify our lives and to remove unnecessary distractions in order to go deeper into the wisdom of our souls. And so Lent can, in fact, offer the perfect conditions in which to connect more closely with the divine spirit within and to unleash our own hidden potential into the world.

I wonder what might be stirring anew for you at this time. What is growing in your gardens and in your nearby parks? Have you noticed the snowdrops? Have you spotted green shoots coming up from the ground? Both real and metaphorical?

I actually remembered to plant some daffodil and tulip bulbs in the autumn, and I was excited to see that they are already pushing up through the soil, actually looking quite sturdy and healthy. Rhubarb is already reappearing on my allotment, and the broad beans and onions, and garlic I planted in the autumn are also coming through. And it is magical, don't you think, to literally just put a bulb or a seed in the ground, and then see its shoots appear a few weeks or months later?! It sounds ordinary because

we're used to it, but an important part of this incipient season, this season of first stirrings, is to remind us to keep our eyes open, and to notice the miracle of new life as it emerges out of the darkness, not just take it for granted as though it were background noise. (The Buddhists refer to this as cultivating 'beginner's mind'. We look at things as though for the first time, and find ourselves astonished!)

At this time it is as though God and the Universe are saying, come out now, you've been hibernating for long enough, it's time to take a peek outside and see what's going on.

And how about in your personal life? What's new? What's bubbling under the surface, waiting for its moment?

Last weekend I was in deepest Cornwall, at beautiful Mullion Cove. I was on a cello course for the weekend. I've never been surrounded by quite so many cellists! Being held on the last weekend in January, just before Imbolc, the course was perfectly timed for new inspiration and revelation. I found myself closely watching the excellent tutors to see how they moved their bodies, and how they breathed, as they played. And not just the tutors, but all the other participants too. We were able to learn from each other just by listening, watching, paying attention, noticing that the way we had always done something was not necessarily the only – nor the best – way to do it. And every now and then there was a eureka moment – oh, I see, that's how you do it!

If you're familiar with a cello at all you'll know that it has 4 strings, and as you play higher and higher pitch your hand has to move further and further up (down) the finger board into less and less familiar territory until it feels as though you're in outer space. And if you have to make a big leap in pitch then that means making a big leap with the hand and hoping you land in the right place – it's scary up there! But for the first time in my life I began to feel I could get there and reach those notes. The change was really just one of perspective. I simply lost my fear of it. That's the kind of very subtle change that can make an enormous difference. And this is the season of subtle changes. All the exuberance and blossoming will come later, we hope, through spring and summer. But we're not there yet, we're here in this first turning, this first stirring, and the differences – like the lengthening of the days – may be small – tiny even – but they are significant.

Even if you think there's nothing going on for you, and life feels much the same as ever, then try tuning in to the changes in nature all around you. If you can do that you're more likely to open to changes in yourself too. You might just find you catch the mood of God.

Of course, like fresh new shoots stirring in a seed, any tentative beginnings we make need the right conditions and some careful tending to flourish; and like St Brigid and her cloak we may need a little help from our friends. And part of the purpose of a religious community is to provide exactly the kind of supportive environment and gentle encouragement that will help each one of us become more fully alive and truly ourselves.

We are meant to shine. And we're meant to help other people shine too.

Remember...

"It is a denial of the divinity within us to doubt our potential and our possibilities."

Blessed be.

10. **3rd HYMN 42 (P)** In the light of days remembered

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear,
guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear.
when the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

From the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free,
calling pilgrims still to witness to the life of liberty.
when the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,

then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

From the dreams of youthful vision comes a new, prophetic voice,
which demands a deeper justice built by our courageous choice.
when the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

Music Jason Shelton, words Jason Shelton and Mary Katherine Morn, music and words © 2001

11. CLOSING WORDS

Prayers for beginnings – Carla Grosch-Miller

At every beginning,
bless our dreaming
and our doing.

The week/month lies before us,
full of the mundane and the miraculous,
the known and the unknown.

Be the breath we take before each step.
Be the source from which we draw strength.
Be the end toward which we direct our hope.

Open our eyes to all that is around us.
Open our ears to the song the soul yearns to sing.
Open our hearts to the love that lives through us.
Open our hands to the task the moment requires.

Let us do this one thing,
the thing before us,

as if all creation
and our very life
depend on it,

as if You are bent over,
watching and listening
and willing us
to do it well.

Amen.

12. **CLOSING VIDEO** 'Bridget Cruise', Turlough O'Carolan, Jouni Kenttämies, celtic harp
<https://youtu.be/6a21YzCWpAo?si=cx6fjjHXg-Efv85E>

13. NOTICES