

## **20<sup>th</sup> October 2024: Plymouth Unitarians**

### **What do you believe?**

1. **PRELUDE** 'Wade in the water', Eva Cassidy  
<https://youtu.be/9-hKDYQ6F54?feature=shared>

### **2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome to this Sunday service. You are welcome whoever you are. Whether you are a member of this congregation, a regular attender, or a visitor. Whether you come in hope or despair, in peace or anxiety, in sadness or in joy, you are welcome.

Let us begin this time of celebration, contemplation and community by lighting our chalice, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith.

Our theme this morning is 'What do you believe?' It is inspired by sessions held earlier in the year for newish attenders of the church. I invited them to respond to the question 'What do you believe?' and you will hear three contributions this morning.

But first let us light our chalice candle, the symbol of our free religious faith, and I invite those of you joining us online today to light a candle of your own with me.

May this flame be the light that guides us, inspires us, and holds us. May it remind us to bring the light of love and understanding, as best we can, to each other and to all living things.

Our first hymn acknowledges and celebrates some of the many ways we may think about God. Other names are also available!

**First Hymn: 14 (P) Bring many names**

Bring many names, beautiful and good;  
celebrate in parable and story,  
holiness in glory, living love God:  
Hail and Hosanna, bring many names!

Strong mother God, working night and day,  
planning all the wonders of creation,  
setting each equation, genius at play:  
Hail and Hosanna, strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,  
feeling all the strains of human living,  
caring and forgiving, till we're reconciled:  
Hail and Hosanna, warm father God!

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,  
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,  
glad of good surprises, wiser than despair:  
Hail and Hosanna, old, aching God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,  
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,  
crying out for justice, giving all you have:  
Hail and Hosanna, young, growing God!

Great, living God, never fully known,  
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,  
closer yet than breathing, everlasting home:  
Hail and Hosanna, great, living God!

*Music Carlton Young, words Brian Wren © 1989 Stainer & Bell Ltd*

3. **PRAYER** We come now to a time of prayer.

This prayer is inspired by Bengali poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore

Let us pray not to have our doubts vanish

But that we have courage to follow our doubts where they take us in pursuit of truth.

Let us pray not that we never again experience the loss of a loved one

But that we have the strength to both honour the memory and bring comfort to others

Let us pray not that our faith is unchallenged

But that our anger is clothed in love and directed at injustice and oppression

Let us pray not that we don't face cruelty or violence

But that we don't allow the experience to turn us into a victims or become motivated by bitterness

Let us pray not for wealth and comfort

But that we have the commitment to work ceaselessly for those who are poor and powerless

Let us pray not to have infinite knowledge and wisdom

But for the humility to recognise the limitations of what we know, and to value the wisdom in others

Let us pray not for eternal life

But to live this life well and to help others do the same.

Belief from a Unitarian perspective comes from heart as well as mind. It is something that is felt, but also something we bring reason to as well. It is not something that we have to agree on, in fact we welcome diversity of belief, finding it freeing as well as encouraging to be trusted to find our own way.

**4. READING** Thomas Moore, former monk and psychotherapist, author of 'Care of the Soul'

Belief is a word of love, not thought. It comes from a Germanic root meaning to hold dear. Belief is an endearment. We are drawn to a certain way of imagining experience by its beauty. We become familiar with it and then feel loyal to it. People may try to show us how our belief is wrong or deluded, but we may be profoundly attached to it.'

'As important as it is to believe, it is even more important not to believe. Pure belief is too thick. There is no room for movement and no motive for reflection. When belief is rigid, it is infinitely more dangerous than unbelief. And belief becomes thick and rigid so frequently that it [can be] difficult for a thoughtful person to want to believe or admit to being a believer.'

I'm very grateful to our three contributors today, who have been willing to share their beliefs, which is a brave and vulnerable thing to do. They are quite different from each other, and may be quite different from what you yourself believe. The purpose of this morning's service is not to seek agreement but rather understanding, and to value each other's faith, doubts and perspectives.

**5. 1st CONTRIBUTION** My beliefs and values, by Margaret Oliver.

To me 'God' could be called: 'The Great White Spirit', and I prefer to refer to this energy as the 'Father-Mother God' (in other words a balance of the masculine & feminine, not just a 'Father God'.)

I try to live my life with compassion, with the Buddhist expression 'Metta', that is, 'loving kindness'.

I endeavour to accept other people as they are, and to accept myself as I am; in other words, to be tolerant and to learn tolerance (though sometimes this is hard to achieve!).

I aspire to work and live towards a more spiritual and peaceful pathway in life, accepting the challenges, tests and trials along the way (which is not easy!). My original Yoga Teacher once responded to my (temporary) 'poor me' attitude; 'Well, we're not here for an easy ride, Margaret'!!

I hope and aim to be of service, to help other people in life, to care for our planet and all plants and creatures living on it.

I am aware of a universal law of cause and effect. I try to face my fears and to let go of fear; there's the well-known phrase: 'The only fear is fear itself' (which requires a lot of effort to achieve). To learn to trust in the essential goodness of life feels important.

I believe in an 'afterlife' in spirit, and in reincarnation; and that it is important to live this current life's journey as best I can.

To me fundamentally, we are spirit.

## 6. **SECOND HYMN: 148 (P) Spirit of Life (sing twice)**

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;  
move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;  
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

*Words and music © Carolyn McDade, arr David Dawson*

## 7. **2nd CONTRIBUTION** Stephen Pointer

8. **3<sup>rd</sup> CONTRIBUTION** Margaret Buxton (read by Ann)

9. **REFLECTION**

Let us now take some time in SILENCE for our own prayers and reflections.

10. **INTERLUDE** 'Into my arms', Nick Cave

<https://youtu.be/UzPHdHQANfw?feature=shared>

11. **ADDRESS**

I remember my college tutor, Arthur Stewart, once told us a story about a member of his congregation who had recently lost her husband, and had sat on a bench in her local park to think and reflect on the man she had been married to for so many years. She became aware that sitting alongside her, on the same bench, was another older woman, someone whom she didn't know or recognize. For some reason, and somewhat to her surprise, the widow found herself talking to this stranger about her deceased husband and her feelings of loneliness. "I can tell you this", said the unknown woman, "he's watching over you now."

The widow found this oddly comforting, thanked her companion, and got up to leave. When she had walked just a few yards away from the bench she stopped and looked back to wave goodbye once more – but there was no one there. Neither was there anyone anywhere around, even though there was plenty of open space around the bench. "I became convinced" she reported to my tutor, "that I had been in the presence of an angel."

My tutor was puzzled, not by the story itself, but by his own emotional response to it. He found it deeply moving. And yet, as he pointed out, he did not believe in angels. Rationally, then, the story made no sense to him. In which case, why did he find it so affecting?

When we talk about 'belief' we may find there is sometimes a disconnect between the rational and the emotional, between the mind and the heart, between logic and the imagination. I know I do. And perhaps this is not surprising because beliefs are not facts – in that they cannot be proved. Instead, they are statements that describe our way of understanding, and of orientating ourselves towards life and death and the great mystery of it all. Or at least as far as it's possible, in words, to describe these things.

Philosopher Charles Taylor, author of 'A Secular Age', writes that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is entirely possible to understand the scientific, social, technological world we now live in in its own terms, without any reference to the supernatural or the transcendent. In other words, it has become possible not to believe in God – or spirits or angels - and still make sense of the world, something that would have been unthinkable in, say the 1500s.

However, he also argues that in fact there is not so much a decline of religious faith in the West but rather a multiplying of different religious positions of belief and unbelief, all of which are quite fragile. Many of us, he says, feel torn between the seemingly rational dismissal of God on the one hand and the feeling of the inadequacy of materialism and secularism on the other, which often sit alongside our own emotional intimations of the transcendent.

Or, like my tutor, to not believe in angels, and yet to be moved by a story about an angel. How can we make sense of this?

I think it helps if remember that we are not *only* logical thinkers, but also imaginative and soulful beings. Some of us will certainly vere more in one direction than the other, and that's fine. Some of us may – like my tutor and me – may find we're holding apparent paradoxes, and that's fine too. Humans have more than one way of engaging with reality and making sense of it, and that's part of our rich diversity.

We have heard three ways in which members of our congregation have tried to make sense of things for themselves. In their lives they have each grappled with their experiences, their sense of the transcendent, their personal beliefs, and no doubt

continue to do so. You may have found some of their thoughts resonate with you, and others didn't. Which is fine, and as it should be. We are each here to work those things out for ourselves, and then to live by them as best we can, while supporting others to do the same.

Sometimes people suggest that Unitarianism allows to you believe whatever you like, but I think that's misleading. There needs to be *some* coherence to our beliefs – they to not be completely *irrational* – and they need to be compatible with a willingness to accept and support others who believe differently. And if our beliefs lead us towards being selfish, unkind, or judgemental of others, then I would say we need to look at them again.

But if they are based on love and compassion for oneself and others, if they call you to contribute to the world in ways that help you and others to flourish and grow, then they are welcome here.

A Unitarian faith is one that can be quite personal in its specifics, in its details, and it's a faith that will remain open to new insight and inspiration. But it will always be universal in its outcomes. In other words, while we may agree to disagree on our beliefs, and while try to keep our hearts and minds open to new revelation, we will always all agree (I hope) that we are here to practise loving our neighbour as we love ourselves, to let go and let love. And that our church is and always will be somewhere we can do this, together.

May it be so.

## 12. 3rd HYMN 195 (G) We limit not the truth of God

We limit not the truth of God  
to our poor reach of mind,  
by notions of our day and sect,  
crude, partial and confined.



No, let a new and better hope  
within our hearts be stirred:  
the Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

Who dares to bind to partial sense  
the oracles of heaven,  
for all the nations, tongues and climes,  
and all the ages given?  
That universe, how much unknown!  
That ocean unexplored!  
The Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

Darkling our noble forbears went  
the first steps of the way;  
'twas but the dawning, yet to grow  
into the perfect day.  
And grow it shall; our glorious sun  
more fervid rays afford;  
the Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

The valleys past, ascending still,  
our souls would higher climb,  
and look down from supernal heights  
on all the bygone time.  
Upward we press; the air is clear,  
and the sphere-music heard:  
the Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

*Music Mainz Gesangbuch, words from George Rawson*

In the end, while we may hold our beliefs dearly, there will always be much we will never know. And so our closing music is 'Let the mystery be', by Iris Dement.

**13. CLOSING WORDS** – Michael Schuler

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.

Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held can strangle the mind and its natural wisdom.

Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on—nothing abides.

Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust.

For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.

Indeed, this is the small corner where we connect—and reconnect—with each other

**14. CLOSING MUSIC** 'Let the mystery be', Iris Dement

<https://youtu.be/nlaoR5m4L80?feature=shared>