

The Word and the Spirit: Plymouth July 26:

Welcome everyone, and thank you for making me feel welcome.

Chalice Lighting

The flame rises from the chalice as prayer proceeds from the heart.

The flame spends itself in giving light

But the heart is never spent in prayer.

May our hearts be inflamed with love for all that is.

Amen

Our first hymn also celebrates the chalice flame – the flame of truth, thought and love. May we be literally ‘enlightened’ as we sing it; it’s not just a bringer of light to dispel darkness, but a symbol of how we may ‘see the light’ when we worship and dispel the darkness of ignorance.

1st Hymn [purple book]: 158 ‘The flame of truth is kindled’

Isn’t ‘chalice’ a lovely word? It could be the name of a dainty little girl. I imagine we all have words that we particularly enjoy saying out loud. One of mine is ‘quench’ – it sounds so ‘juicy’, which itself is another good word. What are some of yours?.....

I love words – I love their etymology... where they come from, and how the meanings change over the centuries. I delight in humour that uses words cleverly and I love a pun...even though I’ll groan with everyone else when I hear one

This service is firstly about one particular word that sounds good in the mouth. I relish it every time I have to start to compose a service. The word is ‘inspiration’ - ‘the arrival of some idea, purpose etc, into the mind’. I consciously invite inspiration to strike, and take a great deal of delight in anticipating a sudden ‘light bulb moment’ that can be shaped into a whole service.

Well... it might surprise you to know that the word inspiration has only really had that meaning for not much more than a hundred years!

Of course, the word inspiration itself is a lot older – as you might know, it comes from the Latin *inspiratus* - the past participle of *inspirare*, “to breathe into” and in English has meant “the drawing of air into the lungs” since the middle of the 16th century. In the medical world it still does have that literal meaning.

Yet, the fascinating bit is that its oldest meaning was, well...supernatural. It dates from early in the 14th century – around the time when Chaucer wrote his Canterbury Tales, when the first Oxford and Cambridge colleges were being founded, and before the Black Death killed one third of the population of England. That was when ‘inspiration’ began to mean a divine influence upon a person, from a divine entity. It was then and still is, ‘the breath of God’, the communication of sacred revelation that is breathed into us.

Mainstream Christians consider the Bible to be ‘Divinely inspired’ – ‘the word of God writ large’.

In Paul’s second letter to Timothy he states ‘All Scripture is God-breathed’ – which in the King James version reads as ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God’.

And as usual, The New Testament has its roots in the Old. In this case, **the** most elemental part of the most fundamental book: Genesis 2:7

‘And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’ A very economical way of enlivening a clay model.

Inspiration. One word that over 6 centuries has adapted to three meanings...and the ‘spiritual’ one came first, by two hundred years.

What hymn could more perfectly follow that than Breathe on me Breath of God? We ask for the breath of God to fill us with new life; to make us pure of heart.

2nd Hymn [green]: 46 Breathe on me Breath of God

Before our prayers, let us just take a minute to consider our own breathing,

- Sit as straight as possible, feet firmly on the floor.
- Quietly breathe in through your nose, expand the lungs and feel the air flood in, right to the pit of the stomach.
- Breathe out through your mouth, empty yourself entirely.
- Think how vital these two actions are. Inspiration, expiration, life or death, an internal transport system that conveys oxygen to every place it is needed, especially the brain. And mostly we do it without thinking.

Now let us pray:

Firstly a prayer for receiving, by Adam Slate

Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love,

Spirit of Hope, Spirit of Justice,

God known by many different names:

You have given us a day unique from any other.

You have connected us, all of us, with each other, and with the world, in ways that are largely a mystery to us.

You have given us little instruction other than to be present in our own lives, to feel wonder at the creations of the universe, and to love one another.

You have put gifts and challenges in our paths, joys and sorrows, strengths and frailties, some of which we have already encountered, and others we have yet to discover.

On this unique day, may we receive exactly what it is that we need.

Amen.

Prayer of giving, by Rev. Tony McNeile

May the soul sing the song of life to the God in our hearts, in pleasant exploration.

Let us not dally with the mystery of God but simply look around us as we travel the meandering road...

See God in everything.

Let us be pleased with our souls, whether sailing on the seas or on the hills, or waking in the night with thoughts, silent thoughts of time and space and death, like waters flowing.

Bear us through the regions infinite, whose air we breathe.
Let us feel God wherever the heart is stirred by beauty or by the loving kindness from our brother or sister.

Let us give of god actively to them.
Let the soul be open to the love of brotherhood and sisterhood.
When we travel forward look at the horizon and beyond the horizon into the universal soul and let us rejoice in life and the echo that returns..

Amen

There will be short periods of silent contemplation between the verses of the next prayer, which I think is one of Unitarian Andrew Hill's best: he begins...

'Jan Struther wrote:
Hard words will break no bones:
But more than bones are broken
By the inescapable stones
Of fond words left unspoken.

So let us in the quiet of our minds speak fond words:
for those to whom we are close and who are close to us;
for those whose presence is now a memory;
for fond friends and helpful neighbours;

silence

And let us in the quiet of our minds speak fond words for those we too often forget:
for those who are struggling with poverty, with tyranny, or with disasters
for those who seek work, a home, or better health
for those who are discriminated against because of who they are.

silence

And let us in the quiet of our minds try speaking fond words for those
for whom we find it difficult to speak fond words:
for those whom we never see but on whom we depend
for those who irritate us because they are only doing their job
for those with whom we are out of sorts

silence

And let us in the quiet of our minds just hope that someone else is
speaking fond words:
for those whom we love to hate
for those whom we cannot love and who are unlovely to us
for those whom we have forgotten

silence

Hard words will break no bones:
But more than bones are broken
By the inescapable stones
Of fond words left unspoken.
Amen

Meditational Music

Words, fond or otherwise:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. You may recognise that as the beginning of the Gospel of St John.

To me, it always seemed to be a good, weighty quotation, full of deep meaning even if that meaning isn't immediately obvious. A quotation to mull over and for Unitarians to decide for ourselves what it means to each of us: to mould to our own needs. I've used it before, interpreting it in my own way.

The other day I looked it up, and I have to say I was a bit taken aback by the generally accepted meaning.

Now, this is not a trick question and I'm not trying to put anyone on the spot, I'm asking because I genuinely want to know if I am the only one who didn't know it. And if I am it's probably time to go straight to the last hymn!!

So, I ask you...who can give the accepted one-word definition of 'The Word' as it appears in that verse in the Gospel of St John?

That's right: the Word stands for Jesus: and for Jesus who was WITH God, and Jesus who WAS God

How many didn't realize, or had forgotten, that?

Ok so it's just me then.

It's not very Unitarian, is it? We're not big on the Trinity, and that's two-thirds of it – the Father and son in one. It only needs us to invoke the Holy Spirit... dangerous territory.....

Let us now sing:

3rd Hymn [purple] 1: 'A core of silence'

So, we've explored 'inspiration', and words...even THE Word, now let us consider spirit, although perhaps we've already touched on it. Adam Slate addressed his prayer to 'Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Spirit of Hope, Spirit of Justice.'

The word 'spirit' comes from the Latin spiritus - "breath", so is closely related to inspiration.

Spirit has many different meanings. We use it to refer to consciousness or personality. A spirited person can be full of energy, enthusiasm, and determination, vivacity, life. They can be animated, sparkling, vigorous, dynamic, dashing, passionate, or fiery.

And "spirit" can also have the sense of "ghost", or demon or devil – a life form that has no substance.

And if you like a drink, do you know why we call some beverages 'spirits'? When you heat a fermented alcoholic drink, the vapour that initially comes off it is actually the alcohol, which is eventually cooled down to become the whisky or brandy or whatever. So you can say that this is the 'spirit' of the wine being separated from the 'body' of the wine.

If you look up quotations about the spirit, lots of them under that heading are about the soul. I find it interesting that spirit and soul are often used to mean the same thing - both are the opposite of the solid, tangible flesh of body and, in some religions, both are believed to survive bodily death.

[call up readers]

There is an Arabian story that when God commanded the soul to enter the body of clay He had made, the first body of man, the soul refused to enter it.

Reading

The soul said 'I am free to move about in any sphere I like and I have the limitless strength and power I derive from Thee; I do not want to enter into this body of clay. To me it looks like a prison'. Then God asked the angels to play on their harps; and the soul, on hearing this music began to dance and went into ecstasy. It entered the body unknowingly and was caught in this prison. Therefore no soul comes on earth without a feeling for music. And if the body it occupies becomes dense and no longer responds to music, the soul (or spirit) is dead.

Of course, in the Bible, Spirit with a capital "S" specifically denotes the Holy Spirit. So how do we accommodate the Holy Spirit in Unitarianism?

As ever, Cliff Reed offers an explanation:

Reading

"Unitarians do not see any differentiation between the Holy Spirit and God, and use the words more or less interchangeably. We conceive of the Spirit as the active divine presence in individuals and communities, as the divine breath that gives us life, as that ineffable factor that binds us together.

The Spirit for many Unitarians is the divine mystery moving among us and within us as we work and worship. Indeed, for many, God as loving, creative Spirit is the primary concept of the divine”.

So, although you rarely hear the words ‘Father, son and Holy Ghost’ together in a Unitarian service, on the whole we may be comfortable with the Holy Spirit **as** God.

And what about Jesus as the Word? He was a man **of** words: he spoke and people listened, they fed, clothed and supported him. They followed him, believed in him. We recognise that Jesus had a message unique in his time and in the Jewish religion, and centuries on we try to follow his teachings, his words.

My interpretation of ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ has always been more ‘Old Testament’. The word is probably the biggest thing that separates us from other animals, and has done since the beginning of mankind. (Ok, walking upright was a factor. Oh, and opposable thumbs helped as well, but just think how much faster our brains must have developed when we had quick and easy ways to share what we had discovered or learnt – from ‘I dropped my deer meat in the fire and now it tastes delicious!’ to ‘I’ve just had a brilliant idea, I think I’ll call it the wheel’.)

As for ‘the word was with God’; some might choose to believe it was in God’s gift to give us language. Remember, in Genesis after God had breathed life into the clay form that became Adam, the first thing he asked him to do was to name ‘every beast of the field and bird of the air’. So, according to the Bible, man had language from the start. And it looks like God thought that he’d made a fatal error in giving it to him (and to her)...just move on a few chapters: Genesis 11:1-9 - English Standard Version

[call up reader]

Reading

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for

stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.” So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

And what about ‘the Word was God’? Words have god-like qualities, and through words we express our concept of God, and our reverence. OK, not exclusively - there are physical ways; some may worship through the medium of dance, or by kneeling or even prostration...but that doesn’t diminish the power of words.

However, if, like me as a lapsed atheist, your concept of God is less Biblical and more about the forces of nature, the spark of life that runs through everything – even the grinding, shifting tectonic plates - perhaps it’s the inspiration and the spirit that are even more important than words; is there something comforting about the breath of God as a concept? When we have trouble breathing, a cold, say, we feel dull, lacking in enthusiasm, literally ‘dispirited’. We find nothing to inspire us, not even our favourite things; like in the Arabian story, we have lost the music and, whilst the spirit or soul may not actually be dead, it is comatose until we return to health.

And what do you find more inspiring, taking deep gulps of air on a hill-top, or a city street? The crisp, frosty air of a winter’s morning, or the fug of an overheated work place?

Think of environments that make you calm or content, happy or refreshed, and they will mostly be places where you can breathe freely. They may be familiar places, or new ones that surprise you

with the sight of something so special that it ‘takes your breath away’. Something so different you involuntarily take a sharp intake of breath. They are probably places that make you think, and feel inspired. They may be the places that make you want to pick up a paintbrush or a musical instrument, burst into song... or perhaps start to compose a service.

But when you ask for inspiration, it’s not enough just to sit back and wait for the oxygen of genius to reach the brain. Before the light-bulb moment the receiver needs to be on high alert at all times, to pick out the one, possibly tiny or obscure hint of what can become a workable idea, and then the work on it begins.

Do you act on God’s inspiration? When I invite God (or the Universe) to provide a subject for a service, I know it’s up to me, perhaps to my own spirit, or soul that dwells within me, to recognise what’s offered. This time I’ve been inspired to end with a reading – I know it’s familiar to some of you, but none the worse for that. It’s from an unknown author:

The man whispered, "God, speak to me
And...a meadowlark sang.
But, the man did not hear

So the man yelled "God, speak to me!"
And...thunder rolled across the sky.
But, the man did not listen.

The man looked around and said,
"God let me see you"
And...a star shone brightly.
But, the man did not notice.

And, the man shouted,
"God, show me a miracle!"
And...a life was born.
But, the man did not know.

So, the man cried out in despair,
"Touch me God, and let me know you are here!"

Whereupon, God reached down and touched the man.
But, the man brushed the BUTTERFLY away and walked on.

4th Hymn [green]: 37: I sent my soul some truth to win

Benediction

Spirit of love, of unity, of the past, and of the future – God within us
and beyond us, may our worship so bless us that we will be inspired
to leave this gathering determined to bless others. Amen.