

ORDER OF SERVICE - 7th February 2010

WELCOME

CHALICE from a hymn by Dr Fred Kaan 1929 to 2009, Congregationalist Minister

Put peace into each other's hands
And like a treasure hold it.
Protect it like a candle flame,
With tenderness enfold it.

INTROIT

CALL TO WORSHIP CMC

Gather round,
With eager heart and soul and mind
Join in the exploration
Share in the wonder
Be here now
Together

HYMN ***GREEN*** ***172*** ***Now open wide your hearts***

PRAYER CMC

O God, Spirit of Wisdom and Holiness
May we be here now
Conscious of your presence,
however we perceive your presence to be.
Here, in this sacred place, made holy by our love,
We bring our weary souls, our grieving spirit, our pain and sorrow
May the balm of your Grace pour over us and bring us peace.
Here in this sacred place, made holy by our loving,
We bring our sparkling spirits filled with joy and wonder
May the Beauty of your Grace remain with us and bring us peace.
Here, within this sacred space, may we gather strength

The better to love in a world that needs love
The better to cast light into darkness,
O God, Spirit of Wisdom and Holiness
Be with us now and in each moment of our days
That, conscious of your presence,
We may live to the full potential of the life within us.
AMEN

READING - from *The Epic of Unitarianism, compiled by David B Parke (Pub Skinner House Books 1985)* Ralph Waldo Emerson - from the Divinity School Address 1838
In which Emerson argues against the Institution of Christianity, and proposes that it has lost its way. Sadly I have only time to offer you a flavour – a few passages which look at dogma, pertinent to today's service theme.

"Jesus Christ belongs to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man.....

....Historic Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love. That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey Thyself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen. There is no longer a necessary reason for my being. Already the long shadows of untimely oblivion creep over me, and I shall de cease forever.

The time is coming when all men will see that the gift of God to the soul is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural goodness, a

goodness like thine and mine, and that so invites thine and mine to be and to grow..."

Emerson goes on to say that the second defect in orthodox (Trinitarian) Christianity, is the failure of that body to fully use the mind of Christ, which is directly attributable to the first failure, which as we have heard is to fail to understand that of God working in each of us, the spirit, the soul, active within each of us. He speaks of the individual seeking to understand, not through received wisdom of that which is no more, but through his, and of course I would add, her, own study and experience; and that with this all my teach, not simply those who pass on teachings of a long dead prophet. He ends his address with this...

I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also.....I look for the new Teacher that shall follow so far those shining laws that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy."

HYMN RED 55 Wisdom Divine, bright shining

READING & MEDITATION - In trying to find a way of imparting what was information from meditation in this short dip into Rabbi Rami Shapiro's "The Divine Feminine" (Pub: SLP 2005), I realised that there really was no way, so I offer them as a selection words of wisdom, some by Rabbi Shapiro, others from the ancient books of the Talmud.(translation and annotation by Rabbi Rami Shapiro)I will only tell you that the Rabbi speaks of wisdom as it is often understood, as a feminine voice, also called Sophia in Greek and Chockma in Hebrew. He says of these, "I what I share with you here are some of the most powerful teachings found in the Jewish Wisdom literature of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles. [he says] This is how they sound to me....It is my suggestion that you close your eyes and relax, letting the words do what they will.

"Wisdom is the first of God's creations, the Way that precedes the wayfarer, the Word that precedes the speaker. Wisdom is the Hebrew Mother, Chochmah, who becomes the Greek Son, Logos, in the Gospel according to John....."

Wisdom is outside of time, embracing past and future in the timeless present. To follow Her is to taste eternity in this moment..... (pg 2)

In Proverbs (8:22 – 26) it is written

God is my Source,

And I am His first creation.

Before time – I am.

Before beginnings – I am.

There were as yet no oceans when I was born,

So springs deep and overflowing.

I am older than mountains.

Elder to the hills, the valleys, and the fields.

Before ever the first lumps of clay emerged – I am.

Here is Chochma as Tao, from the Tao Te Ching, 25:

Something mysteriously formed,

Born before heaven and earth,

In the silence and the void....

It is the mother of ten thousand things.

I do not know its name;

I call it Tao.

Only Wisdom, born before time, can outlast the ravages of time. No thing is permanent, yet She is not a thing, but the Way of things. Wisdom endures not because She is Eternal, but because She is timeless.

Wisdom is the Way of right action, the path of just deeds. Right action is action that honours self and other, that uplifts the fallen, and defends the powerless. Just

*deeds are those that heal rather than harm, that serve the whole as well as the part.
When you look at your doings in the world, are you walking with wisdom?*

Proverbs 8: 17-21

I love those who love me, and show Myself to all who seek Me.

I am true abundance, enduring prosperity.

My fruit surpasses the finest gold.

My produce is superior to the choicest silver.

I walk the way of righteousness, the path of justice.

I bless My lovers with wealth and fill their treasuries with timeless things.

You cannot define Wisdom, you can only imitate Her.

From The Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-23

What is Wisdom?

She is intelligent, holy, unique, subtle,

Flowing, transparent, and pure;

She is distinct, invulnerable, good,

Keen irresistible, and gracious;

She is humane, faithful, sure, calm,

All powerful, all seeing, and

Available to all who are intelligent, pure, and altogether simple.

When you have found Wisdom, all Ways lead to Her.

Proverbs 2:9-13

When Wisdom is embraced

Righteousness, justice, and fairness are known;

All paths are illumined

*And you need fear no detour.
When Wisdom enters your heart
And knowledge your soul,
You will perceive the order of the universe
And never despair.
You will be rescued from your own dark inclinations,
And not even the cleverest lies will deceive you.*

Proverbs 3:19-22

*Focus on Wisdom,
And do not be distracted.
Watch the patterns of creation
And you will awaken to grace and tranquility.*

AMEN"

HYMN RED 84 Immortal Love forever full

ADDRESS

Recently, and I must say, very sadly, it has come to our notice that at least one person within the Christians Together in Kendal, Ctik, group finds the advertisement we place each month in the Westmorland Gazette offensive, because, if I understand this rightly, the way we have used the word "dogma" makes it sound "threatening" . It got me to thinking about what dogma; I think if memory serves me we have invited people to "experience spirituality without dogma"; and on the notice outside chapel we sometimes declare our Unitarian faith to be "not bound by dogma", none of which sounds threatening to me but then I am not one who is willingly and joyfully bound by dogma!

I decided to look up the word dogma in my ever faithful Oxford Reference Book where I learned that the etymological root of the word lies in the Greek meaning "opinion" and found this definition:

"Dogma: A) principle, tenet, or system of these, esp., as laid down by the authority of a Church -

B) such principles collectively.

It also means an arrogant declaration of opinion."

All of which leads me to ponder; Unitarianism is not based in dogma, or is it? I am aware that we have come to consider the word "dogma" to mean those church rules and regulations to which a confession of faith is demanded, that it to say those things pertaining to that faith which one "must believe" in order to be a member of that particular religious body. The received "dogma" of the Christian church is set out in 39 articles of faith and in general is about believing in the trinity, in the virgin birth, in the reality of miracles, at least those performed by Jesus, and of course in the actual bodily resurrection of the crucified unto death, Jesus and his later rise, physical, into heaven, and so on. And of course other faiths have other dogma. Do we? I ask this question carefully, having looked at the definition, and it must be said that we do have principles and tenets that underlie the various directions we each take on our spiritual and physical journey through life.

It could be argued that there is Unitarian Dogma, not simply the personal rational and received wisdom we have each discovered on our spiritual journey and by which we live, but we are bound by the understanding of those three words Freedom, Reason and Tolerance; by which we have collectively come to understand as the tolerant respect for the right of all to find their own path to faith, our belief in the right of every individual to have freedom of faith, and in the reason gained not by simply believing what we are told is right or wrong but by going out and finding out what is right or wrong for ourselves. If only to satisfy the Charity Commission we came to a consensus agreement on certain principles that form the basis for our communal faith, those things that we have in common, that make some of us a part of the Unitarian movement. Let me remind you of the words we arrived at in the final years of the 20th century to describe what we are about: that

"We, the constituent congregations, affiliated societies and individual members, uniting in a spirit of mutual sympathy, co-operation, tolerance and respect; and recognising the worth and dignity of all people and their freedom to believe as their

consciences dictate; and believing that truth is best served where the mind and conscience are free; acknowledge that the Object of the Assembly is: To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition. To this end, the Assembly may: Encourage and unite in fellowship bodies which uphold the religious liberty of their members, unconstrained by the imposition of creeds; [and] Affirm the liberal religious heritage and learn from the spiritual, cultural and intellectual insights of all humanity."

In the broadest terms these do constitute "dogma", I think it would be fair to say that we have set ourselves certain tenets and principles here that bind us. I suggest that we would not tolerate intolerance in our midst, we would find it against our principles, and would seek to find ways to either reason successfully with that intolerance or as a last resort ask those who were intolerance to leave. What we do not have is a set of rules that says 'this you must do if you wish to be a Unitarian'. Though, and again sadly, there are those within the movement who believe it is wrong that so many who call themselves Unitarian would not also call themselves "liberal Christian", which is where our roots lie, but not the entirety of the tree! There have been occasional gentle mutterings in this congregation during my time here about the continued existence of the sign in the lobby that declares us to be Unitarian and Free Christian, when long before I arrived it was agreed that this Chapel would call itself simply "Unitarian" as it says outside the gate. As one who would not easily be ranked with the hard-line Liberal Christian wing of Unitarianism, I am actually happy to see it remain, at least while it does actually describe the wide degree of belief and opinion in this small but decidedly deliberate community. It is in some ways a description of the dogma present here. It describes the belief in a divine power, but does not stipulate what that must be, but it does indicate that some of the roots that hold us are resting in the Christian teachings.

Before anyone finds their hackles rising let me make one thing clear – there is a chasm of difference between dogma and dogmatic, and I believe this is what we

need to be aware of and address if and when we are faced by the misunderstanding or contrary opinions of others. Our responses must be gentle, respectful, tolerant, and yet committed to the very freedoms our faith offers.

One of the problems we face when those whose religious life is bound by dogma is that such persons will believe often without question that they are right and we are wrong. We on the other hand, I hope, know only that our faith has been arrived at through our own discovery, our own path to wisdom, our own reasoning and our own experience; and I trust we will be open to new avenues of discovery. Which may seem to put us at something of a disadvantage in an argument about what is right and what is not in terms of belief. So we need to be prepared, we need to carry with us calm words, tolerance and respect and the knowledge that some minds are closed. We need to hold about us the wisdom of love's strength, and perhaps remember the little verse, I have no idea who wrote it, "they drew a circle that shut me out, rebel, heretic, a thing to flout; but love and I had the wit to win, we drew a circle that drew them in."

One of those arguments might be to say that being bound by dogma is a choice, we do not condemn those who take that path, we respect those who do, and ask only respect in return for our simple decision to choose not to. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that if we accept the wider meaning of "dogma" then we have to admit that there is dogma within our faith, but it does not bind us, rather it frees us to walk with wisdom in our hearts and arrive at a cool understanding of those things of the spirit, of creation and the nature of divinity. Emerson said, "The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preference but those of spontaneous love...That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, 'Obey thyself' That which shows God to me fortifies me....." AMEN

HYMN GREEN 162 The star of truth but dimly sh

OFFERTORY

NOTICES

BENEDICTION CCM

May the love we share,

Be like a river

Starting as a trickle

Ending as an ocean.

AMEN

HYMN _____ ***GREEN*** ***302*** _____ ***As each day ends***