

The Liberal Christian Herald



The Unitarian Christian Association seeks to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition.

Christmas Edition

Issue 103 December 2021



Front Cover Image Hyde Chapel in the snow by Andrew Parker

Congregations in membership of the Unitarian Christian Association

(Inside and back cover)



Flowery Field Church, Hyde



Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead



Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds



Nazareth Unitarian Chapel, Padiham



Hyde Chapel, Gee-Cross



Effra Road Chapel, Brixton

Christmas Message from Jean Bradley

Chairperson of the UCA Officer Group

I would like to share with you what Christmas, and the build up towards Christmas in particular, means to me, both spiritually and practically. As we get closer to that special date, I feel that I have another opportunity to be truly inspired by the Nativity story. Although I feel the need to support various charities throughout the year, sometimes a complacency comes into play. Perhaps many of us feel bogged down by so many appeals: perhaps we turn a 'blind eye' to some charities, for we feel we can only do so much. Yet when it is time to read the story of the holy birth again, it inspires me to consider others that are in need at a far deeper level. The Nativity story moves me more and more every year. My heart goes out, first, to Mary who knows that she will have to give birth to her child in a strange town far away from home. After great effort she and Joseph are kindly offered a stable in which to shelter as there is no room left for any visitors to Bethlehem. Mary is without any female family members to support her as would normally be the case. How frightening it must have been for her! Then, after the holy child is born, Joseph has a dream.

(See Luke chapter 2 verse 13 English Standard version.)

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

Then the couple have to travel to another country and make a home for themselves for fear of harm coming to the child. When I think of our world today, and compare it with this story, there is very little change. Most of us are aware of the dreadful plight of so many people who are homeless, as well as those who have had to leave their homes to seek safety and peace. In my mind's eye, I can picture those living in our world today, having the same fears, the same concerns about where to go: asking themselves, will there be shelter and food? The birth of Jesus helps me to remember the good we can do to help others not as fortunate as ourselves. And surely that is God's will?

Proverbs 3:27

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.

I think we all have our personal Christmas traditions. Certain meals are prepared in the same way each year, or there can be specific times for unwrapping gifts or a gathering of the family together. My tradition may seem strange, but it is an important part of my spiritual year. I call it 'sweeping out the stable'. I want to be prepared for the holy birth, so I tidy through our home, making sure that everywhere is neat and clean. I want to spiritually welcome the holy babe the best way I can; I want to welcome him into my home and into my heart for another year. Although, logically speaking, I know that the child is not literally coming to our home, I prepare the house for his coming, the coming of my teacher and my guide.

As I think of the humble stable in the nativity story, it reminds me of the joy of simplicity. My husband and I live quite a simple life: we are fortunate in that we don't crave expensive holidays, or clothes or all the other things that the media tells us we must have. although like most people we do enjoy those extra Christmas treats and exchange gifts.

Matthew 2. verse 11

then, opening their treasures, they presented. unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

I try to keep to a simple Christmas. I even try to make some gifts myself instead of simply buying things. I also have been making my own Christmas cards for a few years now and although they are far from being works of art, (I should really write 'Jean aged 5' inside each one as they are quite basic!) Amazingly, they are well received and I often see them in pride of place in our friends' homes, not because of my artistic ability but because I have taken the effort to make them myself. The simplicity of making and giving is so wonderful. I think of Christina Rossetti's poem, In the Bleak Midwinter, when she says:

What can I give him?

Poor as I am

If I were a shepherd

I would give a lamb

If I were a wise man

I would do my part

But what I can I give him

Give him my heart

Each card or present I make, is, in my own way, giving a gift to the Christ Child just as tidying our home is a way of welcoming in another chance to draw closer to God and to the teachings of Jesus. For myself, I feel that my simple traditions gently and quietly offer love.

I truly believe that the birth of Jesus, (regardless of whether it is the correct date or not,) should be celebrated as one of the most special days in our liberal Christian spiritual life. If we consider the birthdates of our family members, particularly our parents or children, those dates are precious to us, for those important family members have given us so much joy at different points in our lives and we are grateful.

And so it is with the person of Jesus, he showed us a way to live in peace, a way to love and a way to be nearer to God.

Luke chapter 2 verses 8-12 (Young's Literal Translation)

And there were shepherds in the same region, lodging in the field, and keeping the night-watches over their flock,

and lo, a messenger of the Lord stood over them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they feared a great fear.

And the messenger said to them, `Fear not, for lo, I bring you good news of great joy, that shall be to all the people --

because there was born to you to-day a Saviour -- who is Christ the Lord -- in the city of David, and this is to you the sign:

This child was born with a divine potential to change our lives and yet, here we are over two thousand years later, still needing to find peace in this world, still doing harm to each other.

I believe that we all have the potential to change, if only we choose to do so. If we want change, then, surely, we must make changes ourselves. And what better lesson can we have to promote that change than to read the story of the nativity? For in the story, we have innocence, fear, wonder, knowledge, kindness, generosity, and courage: all normal human characteristics that we can all relate to. Yet with God's blessing a marvellous potential in the shape of a new-born baby came to us all, a potential that we, too, may share, so that we can be part of God's will through Jesus Christ to be part of peace

and love for all in our world.

I hope you enjoy your Christmas traditions, and that your home will be filled with love. May peace be with you in your home, and among your family, friends and neighbours. God bless.

John Chapter 14 verses 18 - 21 New Revised Standard Version

"I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.

"10 Reasons to use the Free Christian Forum on the new UCA website, unitarianchristian.org.uk" Francis Elliot- Wright

It's a great way to connect with other UCA members. Helping us get to know each other better will encourage us all to feel like we're not so much of a minority within Unitarianism.

It's just us! You have to be a UCA member to take part so there's no need to worry about what others might think of our conversation.

It will support UCA members who don't have a Christian congregation, or any UCA friends nearby.

It will help us all to know what other UCA members are thinking and how they feel. That means we can better develop ideas, policies and activities together.

It's a great place to share news about what's going on in your church, or in your personal life.

It's not live like a zoom meeting, so you can catch up on a conversation and add your own comment any time.

It's not on Facebook that means we can *all* be part of the conversation, whether we have a Facebook account or not. All you need is access to the internet and an email address.

You can join in conversations by the following categories - Chit Chat, Faith, UCA/Unitarianism, Politics, UCA Worship. That means you could talk about politics, or avoid discussions about politics completely if you prefer!

It's really easy to learn how to do - and if you get stuck there are people who will give you help over the phone, zoom or email to show you how to do it.

Continued on page 6 ...

This edition has been produced by Paul Hubbard and Cathy Fozard. Future contributions of articles to be sent to Jeff Gould , jeffreylanegould1959@talktalk.net

By faith we live?

Jim Corrigan (a recently preached sermon)

I want to begin by asking why we do what we do ... specifically, why have we gathered in this church today? ... what's the point? ... why do we bother?

Well, my theme in this sermon is: 'By faith we live' – with a question mark – so, Do we live by faith? Should we? This is what I'd like us to consider today. This service title is based on the passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews (11: 1-12), the first reading, with its opening sentences, where its author tells us:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed by faith our ancestors received approval ... by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

So, the author asserts, what we see has come from things we cannot see – 'what is seen was made from things that are not visible'.

But can we believe that? ... how can we know anything about what we cannot see? Yet our author suggests we need to believe in that which is unseen – specifically, he tells us, faith in a Creator God, the God who brought the 'worlds into being' – we need faith in that source from which all that we see springs.

'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. So we need faith to live, he suggests. And then author looks back at the great Jewish ancestors of the Hebrew Bible, and selects a quality they shared – and that is faith he tells us, whether in Abel or Enoch, Noah or Abraham. Now of course we can view these stories from the Hebrew Bible, of Noah building his Ark after being warned by God of a great flood, and Abraham trusting in God's promise and regaining the power of procreation at a great age – we can see these as mythic stories, and I suggest they are basically that. But let's remember that myth, mythos, can convey greater truth than mere fact can ... and these extraordinary stories from the Hebrew Bible, like the myths of Ancient Greece ... can convey to us great truths about ourselves: about the human condition, our strengths, weaknesses and fatal flaws, and perhaps about our relationship with the Divine, about that which is Unseen.

Yes, the author of Hebrews tells us all these great mythic figures had faith, believing in the promises given by God. They could not see God, nor could they foresee the future ... but they trusted anyway, and because of this, their legacy was great ... the descendants of Abraham and Sarah numbered 'as many as the stars of heaven, the grains of sand by the sea'.

So, the assertion here is: faith is crucial to our lives, and to what we bequeath to the future. By Faith we must live. But is this true for us today? ... Isn't this an old-fashioned view nowadays? Perhaps so ...

Shall we consider this question further, by turning to the second reading – from the 13th century Sufi mystic and poet, Jelaluddin Rumi. What Rumi writes, seems to echo the passage from Hebrews: 'Everything you see', says Rumi, 'has its roots in the unseen world'. Let me read the poem again:

Everything you see has its roots in the unseen world. // The forms may change, yet the essence remains the same. // Every wonderful sight will vanish; every sweet word will fade, // But do not be disheartened, // The source they come from is eternal, growing, // Branching out, giving new life and new joy. // Why do you weep? // The source is within you // And this whole world is springing up from it.

Rumi seems to saying something very similar to the author of Hebrews – that all we can see, has its roots in the unseen world ... and while the forms may change, their essence remains the same. Every wonderful sight, he tells us, will vanish, every sweet word will fade. So the forms will pass, but, our mystic tells us: don't be disheartened ... Why not? The source they come from is eternal, growing ... yes, the source is ever-lasting, but it's not static, it's growing, changing, evolving ... branching out, giving new life and joy ... so why do you weep over your and others' mortality? ... Look, Rumi tells us: 'The source is within you'. And: 'this whole world is springing up from it'.

So Rumi's message seems similar to Hebrews: that an unseen source lies behind all we can see, and that includes ourselves. In fact, if you recall that prayer today from the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, his words seem to sum up what both

these writers are trying to tell us, in these words: 'Let us be aware of the source of being common to us all, and all living things'.

So, writes Thich Nhat Hanh, we ourselves share with all life, that source of being ... or as Rumi puts it more exuberantly: 'The source is within you, this whole world is springing up from it.'

OK, OK, perhaps there may be some kind of life force common to us and all living things – but why do we need faith in it for goodness sake? ... and if there is some kind of blind life force, that certainly doesn't mean God exists, does it?

Very interesting questions, thank you! ... and not easy to answer, but maybe we should approach this another way? If we think for a moment about the most important things in life, we realise so many of them cannot be seen. Like what? Well, love, loyalty, courage, compassion, integrity, honour ... None of them can be seen, yet we put our trust in them, yes, we put our faith in them.

So might we also be able to put our faith in the source of these things, which surely may be more than a blind life force? Well, possibly, but please don't tell me this all equates to God!

You know, it's a funny thing -- there're so many celebrities today, including pop and rock stars ... but I think you know you're really over the hill when you read about a big star who seems to have been around for ages, and you realise you've never heard of them. So, who's this latest star I've never heard of? Well, the lead singer in the Go-Go's, one Belinda Carlisle. A few days ago she was being interviewed in the paper about her earlier life ... her wild past life ... how she never went on stage sober, and cocaine binges, eating disorders, coming to hate herself, missing rehearsals, hitting rock bottom – until finally, on a cocaine binge in her hotel room, alone and frightened, she took the decision to start climbing back: coming off booze and drugs, joining Alcoholics Anonymous ... getting back to work ... extremely difficult years, she tells us, but the start of the most interesting part of her life. She read a lot about Buddhism, embraced the practice of chanting -- to quieten her mind. Then, she tells us: "I was doing a lot of soul-searching. I wanted to connect to something bigger than myself." And today? She rises each day at 4 am to do yoga and pilates, leading again a very active life again.

But those words of hers struck me, in particular: 'I

wanted to connect to something bigger than myself' ... doesn't this convey her deep yearning, a yearning that may be common to all of us? Why would it be, though? Well, is it because we do want to connect with that source of life, that source we never see, but sense is within us – and in all living things?

But are you trying to say that's God then, a supernatural being we're meant to believe in? Thank you again for the question! I may need to be a bit blunt now ... The point is, we don't know what God is. And 1600 years ago, the great Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo said: "If you think you understand what God is, you do not". The Divine and the nature of the Divine are mysteries to us, well 'beyond our ken'.

But we do yearn to connect with that source of life and love, that is eternal yet ever-creative, growing, changing, evolving – that spirit of life and love, that remains forever a mystery to us.

And we may be wise to put our trust in that source, one we cannot see, but which authors forth all we do see. And we may want to pay our respects to that mysterious source -- in praise and thanksgiving, in word and song and silent prayer, as we are doing in this service today.

This is our faith, and our reason for faith. May we continue to celebrate it!

Praise be.

Continued from page 4:

How to join the forum?

To join the forum you have to become a site member at the new website, and be a paid-up member of the UCA. Then you just need to log-in to access the forum.

To become a site member follow the following simple steps:

1. Go to our new website at unitarianchristian.org.uk
2. Click on Free Christian Forum at the top of the page.
3. You'll see a form asking you to sign-up or log-in. Click on 'log-in'.
4. Enter your email address (the one that the UCA holds) and a password of your choosing.
5. That's it! You should now be able to access the forum.

Either your computer will keep you signed in, or use the same email address and password to sign in.

6. If you're having difficulties go to the page 'Contact' (click 'more' at the top of the site to get the menu of further pages, including Contact). Use this page to send a message explaining the problem and someone will get in touch to help you out.

St. Paul – The Road to Damascus-on-Sea

by Wade Miller-Knight

If you believe *Acts*, Paul was a Pharisee Jew who grew up in Jerusalem, studied at the feet of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel, persecuted Christians, spoke fluent Hebrew, and had a sudden conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus.

Rabbi Tovia Singer convincingly drills several holes through this story. If Paul was a Pharisee, he asks pointedly, “why would a Pharisee be working for a Saducee? If he was a student of Gamaliel, what would he be doing working for the High Priest?” Besides, “what authority would a high priest in Jerusalem have over Syria?”

Paul’s own words tell a totally different story. He wrote in excellent Greek, using a large vocabulary with great precision. He was almost certainly educated in Tarsus, a cosmopolitan, predominantly Greek-speaking city in which religious identities were lightly held, and intellectual curiosity was valued. Bible scholars have convincingly shown that his letters were written in the formal style of the times called Rhetoric, and Tarsus was one of the centres celebrated for its schools of Rhetoric – the equal of Athens. As Singer observes, “Paul’s teachings fit very well to the Greek mind and are alien completely to the Torah in every way. Paul’s mind was cultivated in Tarsus. His knowledge of Judaism was abysmal. It is doubtful that he had even a superficial knowledge of the Hebrew language”.

What’s more, he opposed Jewish scripture and law. In II Corinthians, Paul proclaimed his valuing of “human hearts” not “tablets of stone” – a direct put-down of that centrepiece of Jewish law, the Ten Commandments – and he saw himself and his co-worker Timothy as servants of Spirit, which makes everything alive, and not of written documents because “the written text brings death”.

As for Jewish scriptures in general, Paul must have seen them as unnecessary to his work, for there are no references to them in three of the seven letters

that Bible scholars consider substantially genuinely his – Philippians, I Thessalonians and Philemon. And in the other four letters the arguments from those scriptures are turgid and repetitive, in complete contrast to Paul’s normal writing style, so their authenticity should be seriously questioned.

Luke’s story featuring a blinding light on the road to Damascus doesn’t stand up, either. The enquiring scholar Robert Price noticed that “it seems plain, as soon as one reads the texts in question, that Luke has borrowed freely from two well-known literary sources, Euripides’s *Bacchae*, and 2 Maccabees’s story of the conversion of Heliodorus”.

So what *did* lead Paul to inspire people across the Greek-speaking east-Mediterranean world? And what really happened on the road to Damascus?

Paul had a direct personal experience of Jesus Christ which gave him his life’s work and purpose. Let’s recall what Paul himself wrote. In I Corinthians: “I have seen our Master, Jesus” and “Christ revealed himself to me”. To his house-churches in Galatia: “About the Joyful Message I brought you... it came to me by Jesus Christ’s direct revelation” – and that Christ said “that I would spread the Joyful Message among the Greeks”. Paul then stated “I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus”.

So where was Damascus? Thereby hangs a tale.

We have a clue. Paul’s next words are “then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem”, indicating that he left Damascus after three years. In an aside in a later letter, Paul shared that his leaving was, let’s say, rather adventurous: “In Damascus, the local governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket through a window in the wall, so I slipped through his hands”.

This drives a coach and horses through any idea that Paul’s Damascus was the ancient city that is

today Syria's capital. That city was inside the Roman Empire, so would not have had a King Aretas. But there was a King Aretas of Nabataea, an Arab kingdom to the south and east of Herod's Judea, from about 9 B.C. to 40 A.D.

If the key dates of St. Thekla's life given in the non-Biblical *Acts of Paul and Thekla* are correct, Paul's time in Damascus was well within Aretas's reign. Thekla was 17 when she met Paul in Ikonion, and 90 when she died in Selifke in 106 A.D. Therefore Paul must have left Aretas's kingdom in time to meet her in 33 or 34 A.D.

So, might there have been a different Damascus, in Nabataea, to make perfect sense of Paul's two references?

Yes! There is a manuscript, the 'Cairo Damascus Document', which Matthew Black informs us "tells of Essene camps in the land of Damascus... It may possibly have meant Qumran." 'Damascus' was either Qumran itself, by the Dead Sea, or fairly nearby.

Essenes were a sect of Jews; and they had a three-year training period, which matches the time Paul told the Galatians he spent in Arabia when he "returned again to Damascus" after receiving Christ's commission. I imagine him as first trying out life among the Essenes for a few months, then leaving their 'Damascus' with doubts in his mind about their teachings and crossing the border back into the Roman Empire – only to have a 'turn again, Whittington' moment when Christ gives him his commission, including asking him to first become an Essene initiate. Blessedly for Paul, one of the four groups of Essenes was not strict. It did not require its people to keep Jewish law.

I am persuaded that Paul's sole purpose (and Christ's) in taking this group's Essene-lite training was to learn secrets that, like every Mystery School of the times, it taught only to its initiates. Paul succeeded: he wrote to the Philippians "I have been initiated into all the Mysteries".

I have found evidence scattered through Paul's letters that he taught meditation techniques: but only in person, never in writing. I infer that these techniques were the meditational core of the 'Joyful Message' that Christ commissioned him to impart to Greeks who were spiritually ready for them, and that he needed Essene initiation before he could learn them, and then teach them. With practice of these meditations, and with disciplined lives, spiritually advancing people could become *teli-ee* [perfect], and *en Christo* [at one with Christ], and thus work out their own salvation. I figure it was these techniques that were the secrets which Paul and Timothy had to "keep safe" from "spies" in Jerusalem, and which they kept "hidden from people who are perishing".

I also reckon that Paul's need to get out of 'Damascus' over the wall by night, unobserved, was because of his intention to teach those meditations outwith the Essene community, in faithful service to Christ but violating his oath to the Essenes of secrecy.

It is a reasonable supposition that *Acts* is geographically correct in saying he began his life's work after meeting St. John on Cyprus, going first to Antioch-ad-Pisidiam, and from there to Ikonion (the city now called Konya). In these two cities he founded his first 'house churches'.

What Luke omits, but *Acts of Paul and Thekla* credibly says, is that in Antioch he met Onesiphoros, a rich citizen of Ikonion. Next, he walked to Ikonion and gave discourse in Onesiphoros's house, where he met Thekla, the maiden who would be his first saintly protégé, perhaps a stone's throw from where a thousand years later another great soul, the mystic Rumi, wrote his poems. With these encounters, Paul's fulfilment of his commission from Christ had begun.

from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOJ2JITzuro>

I Corinthians 3:3, 6.

The other four are Romans, Galatians, and I and II Corinthians.

Price, R. "The Legend of Paul's Conversion".

http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/art_legend_paul_conv.htm.

I Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8.

Greek: 'evangelion', usually misleadingly translated 'Gospel'. It was not a selection of Jesus's teachings or of stories from his life and work.

Galatians 1:11-12 and 16-17.

II Corinthians 11:32-33.

Black, M. "The Scrolls and Christian Origins", p91. See also Lay, R.E. "Paul and Damascus". In:

<http://christianorigins.com/pauldamascus.html>

See "Sicarii Essenes, 'Those of the Circumcision', and Qumran", by Robert Eisenman, who draws on a version of Josephus quoted by Hippolytus.

Philippians 4:12. I have not seen this in English translation in any Bible, but Paul wrote *memi-emaí*, for which Strong's thorough concordance gives "I have been initiated into the mysteries" as the normal translation.

Philippians 2:12

Galatians 2:5.

II Corinthians 4:3.

Christmas thoughts from the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit

John Bunyan (John is a retired Church of England minister but still active hospital chaplain in the Diocese of Sydney, a member also of the U.C.A. and of King's Chapel, Boston.)

Christmas for those in the southern hemisphere at the beginning of summer, often in southern Australia a pleasant season, sometimes before the coming of great heat, with summer holidays beginning just before it and continuing until the end of January and the new school year. Oddly enough at one time there was a more Australian note to it. The Christmas postcards my grandmother sent and received at the beginning of the 20th century were often adorned, for example, with our beautiful Christmas Bush and Christmas Bells (pictured below). And in the mid-century John Wheeler's lovely Australian Christmas carols were sung, not often heard now when everywhere there is artificial snow and holly berries and reindeer.

Christmas Bush

Jingle bells continues to be sung here with words quite silly for our season. Even those in Britain are unlikely to be dashing through the North American snow. I have written words that make more sense,



in the parish church where for 22 years I was rector, at the annual St Nicholas' festival early in December (for which I also wrote two St Nicholas hymns) and at family services on Christmas Day itself. Only now have I thought to change the chorus. "Christmas bells" may refer to our beautiful Australian flower or to the bells that ring Christmas in, in so many lands or that would do if tyrants allowed them.

*God's call comes each year,
comes on Christmas Day,
asking for our gifts
for our Lord's birthday ;
think of how they help
children sick and poor –
may we cheerfully respond
and share God's gifts once more. O –*

*Jingle bells, Christmas bells,
hear what angels say :
give your gift to Christ our Lord
on his own birthday : O –
jingle bells, jingle bells,
here and far away
as we help the living Christ
rejoice this Christmas Day.*

tune : Jingle Bells, the last stanza sung gently, the last four lines softly



Christmas Bells

I have never dared to have sung in church the only Christmas hymn I have written. It comes from a book that gathers up my believing and unbelieving, my quests and questioning, and my faith, *From Golden Gully to Kingdom Come : A Pilgrim's Sixty Songs and Ninety-Three Sonnets*, available from my home, bunyanj@tpg.com.au. It reminds me that the two wonderful but fairly different Christmas ta-

les in the Gospels are poetic or symbolic. It helps, however, if they are sung to one or other of the two suggested tunes. It helps even more, I think, if those stories are always read in the incomparably language of the Authorised Version. Many of the modern versions of the stories lack any poetic quality and so encourage people to take the stories literally – and then in some cases, not realising their true character, which the AV version suggests, perhaps help some to give the faith away altogether.

In it I emphasise the fatherhood of Joseph who, like Mary, must have greatly influenced his firstborn son. Facts we know now about genetics of course rule out a virginal conception. If God had to create for Jesus the genetic inheritance which Joseph otherwise would have given him, Jesus would not have been truly human, as Anglican priest-scientist, Arthur Peacocke, points out, not DNA of our DNA. But a story that is not literally true can be *more* true, morally and spiritually, and truly expressive of the Word of God.

*The record of celestial song -
stories in S.Luke
and shepherds in the night,
the story of the Magi's gifts
and in S.Matthew
and of a family's flight,
are tales that were discovered
in ancient Bible scrolls
by those who found in Jesus Christ
the saviour of their souls.*

*The cave, and stone basilica
in Beth'lem's manger square
are, like the tales, true symbols still
of God's incarnate care –
the inner truth of Galilee
when Joseph's son was born:
the child of mother Miriam
has brought the kingdom's dawn.*

86.86 D (DCM) Christmas tune: Forest Green or St Louis

The sermon I preached each Christmas hardly ever changed although I doubt if it registered very much! I myself said little about the two Gospel stories, the readings and the carols telling of those. I said that to me Christmas was primarily about the *life* of Jesus, all that is represented by just a comma in the creeds. Just as Florence Nightingale's birthday celebrates her life and work, and Shakespeare's birth-

day celebrates his, so too to me Christmas celebrates the life and especially

our Lord's ministry and serving and healing and all that this means for us still and our world. And I would add, our first and most valuable gift should well be one we give to Jesus in the person of the sons and daughters of the King. But Christmas of course means many things to others. To change the words sung by Bing Crosby, may all your Christmases be *right* and as Tiny Tim says, God bless us, everyone.

BETHLEHEM

Joseph Hooper

A star appeared at Christmas time
and guided by its light
I took the road to Bethlehem,
where the snow lay white.

The little inn was dark and still
but in the stable yard
an ancient door was left ajar
though all was freezing hard.

Inside, the breath of animals
like incense filled the air;
I lit a lamp and held it high
to see who sheltered there.

The ox, the ass, the camel
lay contented on the straw,
but search as I might in the
flickering light
no human soul I saw.

No child lay in a manger-bed.
No mother knelt and prayed.
No shepherds stood in wonderment.
No kings their gifts displayed.

Had I misunderstood the story?
Had I mistaken the way?
I listened for angel voices
but heard only the beasts in the hay.

Next morning, a cheerful servant
brought breakfast and some tea;
"I expect you'll be moving on, Sir?
There's not much here to see".

I looked into his smiling face
as radiant as the dawn,
"You seem to have spent the night, Sir,
in the place where I was born".

Unitarian/Trinitarian: Does it Matter?

Bruce Bebington

One doesn't find in Unitarian churches, sermons about the Trinity. Indeed, one is told that the issue is not of significance by many ministers in the modern work of the church. This article suggests that such an approach is very misguided.

For commencing, it is necessary to reiterate what Trinitarian stands for as regards its formulation of the essence of the godhead. The Trinitarian speaks of three identities comprising the godhead: father [God], son [Jesus] and holy ghost. These identities are unified in a single being and are co-equal, complimentary and united in work and purpose but can present to humans in their three different forms.

The Unitarian sees only the father as the godhead while, in Christian thinking, recognizing the son and the holy ghost as operatives of the father. Most of the distinction between the two conceptions of God lies in the treatment of the son in Unitarian thinking. This level of distinction is not to downplay the different explanations of the role and essence of the holy ghost or, if the term is preferred, Holy Spirit.

One classic Unitarian explanation of the son's importance is set out in the thinking of Transylvanian Unitarians:

"Transylvanian Unitarians believe that Jesus was a human and a prophet of God...Jesus was a leader and a wise teacher, not a savior"

The contrary Trinitarian position is that Jesus is the son of God who took human form and came down to earth as the scripture tells. He then proceeded to preach his beliefs, perform miracles and establish his future mission according to normal Trinitarian belief. The problem here is that this belief does not explain his apparent human form or the necessity for adopting this form. This problem is addressed by mainstream Trinitarians by affirming that Jesus was both divine and human while on Earth but such affirmation is not shared universally by Trinitarian Christians. For example, the Armenian church holds that Jesus was totally a divinity while on Earth.

The difficulty does not end in determining the nature of Jesus while in this world. There is also the difficulty of determining the means by which Jesus emanated from the father. The mainstream Trinitarian position is that Jesus came from God and was an

eternal part of God and thus was God in word and deed while in this world physically and remains so for eternity. Essentially, this position is set out in the Nicene creed of 381 A.D. which is the benchmark for mainstream Christians. It says on the subject:

"We believe in one lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the father, god from God, Light from Light, begotten not made, of one being with the father. Through him all things are made"

A number of Theologians from the classic historical period questioned this definition of Jesus and, perhaps, the most important was Arius. Arius was born in Libya in the 250s at a time when the Christian religion was increasing in importance in the Roman Empire. He became a leading theologian and held positions in the Egyptian church in his adulthood. He wrote a lot about issues facing the Christian religion at that time which included the determination of the nature of Jesus. Some of his writings have not survived up to our epoch. Arius maintained that Jesus was created after the father. The father had no time limit applicable but as he was created later, Jesus had a time limit for his inception. Here are quotations from Arius referring to the father and the son:

"We call him unbegotten on account of the one who is unbegotten [i.e. the son]; we sing his praises as without beginning [i.e. the father] because of the one who has beginning [i.e. the son]."

Pro-Nicene theologians tried to disprove the above formulations of Arius by appeal to scripture. For example, in Mathew 28.19.20, the writer says:

"Go thee therefore and teach all nations in the name of the father, son and holy ghost"

And the pro-Nicene advocates argued that Jesus would not have said the words in that verse if he and the holy ghost were not equally eternal and powerful as the father. However, this argument is contradicted in the last words of this quotation from John 14.28:

"Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away and come again with you. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice because I said I go unto the father for my father is greater than I"

The truth is that scripture is contradictory on the

nature of the son. The following passages suggest that he is co-equal to the father: John 17.11, Matthew 11.29, Romans 8.39, Hebrews 3.1/2 and Philippians 2.9/10. These passages suggest a subordination: John 16.30, 14.10, 26.39, Mark 13.32 and Acts 2.36.

These facts bring us to another truth. Scripture is not the direct word of God but rather an attempt by holy and learned writers to articulate what they perceive as God's word.

Therefore, as we cannot discern the nature of Jesus from scripture, how do we determine it? One evangelistic answer is that acceptance of the Nicene creed is a necessary act of faith on this matter. There are two objections to this answer. The first is that, even if we are to accept that the word of the bible is to be taken on trust, the Nicene creed is nowhere therein. Therefore, one asks how far further one's faith extended. The second and more serious objection is that one cannot eliminate a part in determining the issue for intelligent reasoning from deciding on the whole validity of the Trinity. The act of belief in any faith must be partly an acceptance of things that we cannot experience such as the Mosaic laws for the Jewish faith. Therefore, any act of belief draws to some extent on personal experience and what can be reasoned from that experience. So, taking the example again of the Jewish faith, the Mosaic laws are not only accepted as given by God but also because past events have shown them to be beneficial to Jewish society.

In accepting the Trinity or not, we are faced with a number of points which reasoning can bring to bear on deliberations. Firstly, there are no clearly right answers and are no such wrong answers. Indeed, in all senses, the answer develops with each generation and we cannot look back to a normative response to this religious dilemma. The whole issue of the response of Western thought to theology determined earlier is further discussed in "Time and Other: How anthropology makes its objects by Johannes Fabian".

The second point is that the doctrine of the Trinity is intrinsically connected to a view of the creation of the universe. The theist maintains that God created the universe but plainly God has set out a system which holds the whole of matter together. The gospel writer, John, calls this system the word which, in Greek, is the *logos*. I prefer the Greek term because the "word" confuses the reader into thinking that we are dealing solely with biblical texts. There is some question whether the *logos* is part of God or a separate entity which God created but, for the purpose of this article, the question seems irrelevant. We shall return to how John and subsequent Christian theologians developed the idea of the *logos* later.

Finally, our view on the Trinity affects dramatically how we worship. The view takes us much deeper than words in the liturgy. Ultimately, this effect on our worship is the reason why the issue of the Trinity is so important. It has taken many words to reach the central issue of this article but, without the background, two matters could not be safely promulgated. We cannot prove whether the Trinity is true or not. The acceptance of the Trinity is bound up with the type of faith that is professed.

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One issue that arises from the acceptance of the Trinity by the church is, that since the doctrine cannot be proved, how can the church ensure its uniform acceptance among its congregations. Of course, the whole requirement revolves upon a desire for conformity in churches under a certain hierarchy of command. This conformity is not sought by British unitarians whose churches have been autonomous and banded together voluntarily. The corollary to a regime of conformity is that certain preachers or individuals are excluded from the church as they do not follow its doctrines. Nowadays, exclusion is a measure of last resort for such churches. For example, there will be many vicars who do not ascribe to the 39 articles in the Church of England except in a nominal way to get through their ordina-

tion.

Nevertheless, there is a powerful tendency for a church to arrive at a certain doctrine of faith which then becomes binding upon its members. Historically, people who rejected the binding doctrines, were called heretics. Free Christians reject the requirement for binding doctrines holding, usually, that they wish only to espouse simple Christianity consisting of what Jesus taught and showed in the bible.

The question is whether heresy has a place in Christian thought as most churches would say without, to be fair, seeking sanctions against heretics beyond disapproval from the pulpit. I suspect that most Unitarians would say that heresy is inimical as a concept because it is an impediment on free religious thought but, logically, free thought can continue outside a church where such doctrine is determined. The free thinkers don't have to join the church with the doctrine of which they disapprove. Further, the concept of heresy assists a church to recognize a view that cannot fit with its theology.

Returning to Arius, his view, on the son's nature, was condemned as heresy by the church establishment. The view meant that it would be difficult for believers to address their prayers to Jesus rather than God, the father. For, if the father was more powerful, there was good cause to direct prayers to him. Further, there is a historical context in the Graeco-Roman world as the Roman emperors were deified during their lifetime or, with two exceptions on their death, by proclamation in the Roman senate and a religious ceremony following their religious rites. It was therefore essential in that culture to give Jesus as much Godlike status as possible and consistent with scripture. Arius diminished the status of Jesus in his theology.

Whether or not one endorses a theological doctrine [which is usually part with other doctrines forming a creed], the question of the status of Jesus cannot be glossed over for Christians. Returning to the concept of a logos, scripture says that the logos

“became flesh and dwelt among us” : John 1 1-34. Jesus therefore becomes the embodiment of the logos and thus the system and workings of God and his word and action become divine according to John. It is difficult for Christians to deny the meaningfulness of this scripture although one can argue exactly how and when Jesus exercised this embodiment. Denial would mean that a Christian ceased to follow Jesus save as a spiritual and moral mentor and such an approach is against the whole tenor of the New Testament. Thus, the description of Jesus, cited earlier, by the Transylvanian Unitarians must be inadequate.

There is a point therefore that Christians ought to give Jesus some divine status in worship. This point in action would be a method of connecting with God in worship. The action would have similar benefit with the recital of scripture and other holy texts by chant, reading aloud or meditating upon for which benefit I argued in an earlier article in this magazine. By so venerating Jesus, we join a mystical communion around a divinity which appears in different forms to humans. If we do not venerate Jesus thus, we reduce him to a moral and spiritual teacher whose reported words and deeds are simply to be pondered upon and then emulated as we understand their meaning in our lives. Of course, this process of considering the words and actions of Jesus is vital but it should not be the end of our contact with him.

Also, our theological conception of Jesus makes for a different type of church organization. If Jesus is a “leader” and a “wise teacher” only, then individuals can make their personal decisions based on their understanding of his teachings, albeit with probable guidance from others. If he is a spiritual divinity as well, individuals require a hierarchy and set of prescribed worship services to attain some union with him. In “Arius: Heresy and Tradition”, Rowan Williams describes the difference:

“The contrast between a transactional universe in which categories of will, choice and relation define

church life and a world of defined substances, divine and other whose relations are specified in authorized terms once and for all"

A transactional approach tends to create an egalitarian church structure whereas an isolated monotheism goes with a pyramidal hierarchy although there are exceptions in some churches. Thus, Catholic churches have bishops, a pope etc. to provide a mechanism for the laity to commune properly with God. Many churches have no hierarchy specifically for this purpose such as the Congregationalists holding that the congregation and individuals therein will basically find the pathway to God

Unitarian churches tend to identify with their Transylvanian counterparts. The British churches either put Jesus as a leader and wise teacher among many or in paramount position among teachers and leaders as a whole. Generally, they seek some form of communion with God but their difficulty is that they offer no great guidance as to the nature of this God with whom they seek communion. They throw out or ignore the discussion of whether the Trinity is the correct approach but have little adequate with which to replace a conception of God.

Indeed, there are many descriptions in Unitarianism of what God plus the proposal that God isn't at all. The American Unitarian/Universalist, Paul Rason, describes the situation;

"Some reject God altogether and hold a strictly atheistic view of the universe. Others may use the term God to convey very different ideas such as the force of evolution in the universe or the power that makes transformation possible in our lives or the ongoing power of love or simply the ultimate mystery within which we must all live".

One wonders how a church holds together with such diversity but it appears to do so up to a point.

The diversity expressed by Paul Rason would not satisfy any Christian as they have a scripture and a tradition which demands more clarity. Inside the Unitarian church, Christians tend to reject the Trini-

ty for a Unitary God. However, there is no consensus of which I know as to how this unitary God fits in to the historical texts and living experience of the presence of Jesus and the holy ghost. Thus, one is left largely unguided as to the nature of the God which one approaches. This situation leads to an egalitarian and usually autonomous congregation which may be argued as a good outcome as each member reaches his or her own conclusion on this matter. The egalitarianism arises because, to use Rowan Williams' words, the congregation is faced with "a transactional universe in which categories of will, choice and relation define church life". So, each member of the congregation will be able to make his or her own choice as to their relation with God, albeit with guidance. However, it can lead to a dissatisfaction because no congregant knows exactly where the church stands.

Also, in the absence of clear guidance on this issue, the minister assumes more power to decide how the matter is to be practically addressed. In some ways, the minister becomes the fount of doctrine on the matter although I accept that the congregation may intervene if the minister's view is totally different to most of the members. Thus, congregations face the scenario where the message about the divine may change with a new minister or even if the minister changes his/her mind on the matter. This scenario is hardly the recipe for developing thought or experience about the divine although different views have a good use in any church as they provoke constructive thought by the members.

So, we do require occasional sermons where we are told what the essence of arguments for and against a Trinity are. The purpose of such sermons is not to tell us the church's "line" on the Trinity but rather to help us to grapple properly with the experiences of God that Christians and non-Christians have had.

Send in the Clown *Jo James*

The following is the text of a sermon given by Jo James on the second Sunday of advent Dec 5th at Mill Hill Chapel Leeds. The title derives from the song 'Send in the Clowns' by Stephen Sondheim which was played as the anthem at the service. Sondheim died on November 26th 2021.

According to Biblical scholar Christine Hayes in her excellent YouTube series on the Hebrew Bible the origin story of the people of Israel is in marked contrast to the origin stories of the other contemporary religious traditions in the ancient Near East: in those other stories, she points out, Gods are often shown to be fighting or quarrelling for supremacy, stars are created by bodily fluids of one sort or another leaking across the skies, or perhaps they are jewels spilt from a great store ... but the origin story of the ancient Hebrew people starts from: nothing...

At Genesis 1:1 there is absolutely nothing, as far as nothing can be described: darkness and void – and out of this only a voice that speaks with the mildest command imaginable: let be ...

The motif of nothing being the most hopeful source is continued very frequently if you care to look for it in the scriptures: an obvious example being Moses whose mother, fearing the baby will be slaughtered by the dictatorship of the day, hides him in a basket in the rushes where he is found by the Pharaoh's daughter.

Moses is an Egyptian name meaning 'the Son' or Son of. You can hear it in the name Rameses the suffix 'meses' means son of Ra. The son of ...

So the Gospel writers Mathew and Luke, the only two who write birth narratives, have a tradition to write from when they insert their nativity stories, and good reason to emphasise the lowliness of Jesus origin. Quite apart, that is, from the birth narrative of Isaiah who writes of the holy 'Messiah' or chosen one, a persecuted outsider who will be 'the baby of a girl', and a representative of God in human form – the embodiment of God. Emmanuel – God with us – (that we sing about in the advent hymn Veni Emmanuel).

There are so many clues to the ongoing story to come in these birth narratives: the farm animals; Donkeys and asses, that keep reappearing in the narrative of Jesus life, pregnant Mary is carried on one and rebellious Jesus rides one into his destiny.

The Shepherds who adore him, are representatives of outsider culture but also representatives of the displaced, the herders overtaken by agriculturalism.

Of course, a donkey also does something else for the story – introduces an element that is not only lowly but slightly bathetic, slightly absurd.

Jesus uses the unbroken colt to ride into Jerusalem as an act of political satire: Roman Emperors would triumphantly ride in on great white chargers, hauling captive slaves, so in the account of Matthew Jesus overturns this with a different, scriptural tradition: "Tell the city of Zi-

on, Look, your king is coming to you! He is humble and rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Zecharia 9:9

Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus' default mode is to confound expectation – he finds ways of slipping between extremes that are presented to him in every instance – evading the traps set for him by the literalists and fundamentalist academics of his time by ambiguous, fuzzy and equivocal turns to wrong foot his persecutors time after time, 'render unto Caesar', 'turn the other cheek', 'go the extra mile', 'give up your coat', 'throw the first stone' – all deftly parodying the expectations of his interlocutors, resisting resistance itself and resisting the rigidity and egoistic pompousness inherent in all violence ... reminding us that humility is, or can be, a superpower too, a reminder for us perhaps, right now as 'culture wars' goad us into picking inflexible sides on every available issue you can name: wearing a mask? Remainder or remoaner? taking your vaccine? inherently racist? or a bigot?

As the culture becomes increasingly obsessed with weaponising tribalism to distract us from chaos these issues present themselves evermore forcefully, I've written about this tendency prevalent in religious culture now to unconsciously mimic the self-righteousness of our puritanical past (see my blog: spaceofpossibility.wordpress.com or Inquirer issue 8021), but it hadn't really occurred to me before that this is in its self a replay of the gospel stories. Jesus defuses the puritanical literalism of religion where it existed in his own context: he subtly mocks and evades instead of feeding confrontation:

In *Jesus and Nonviolence: The Third Way* (Fortress Press, 2003) Walter Wink writes:

Jesus in effect is sponsoring clowning ... The Powers That Be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing takes away their potency faster than deft lampooning. In confronting the Powers with such clown-like vulnerability ... Jesus' words beam hope across the centuries...

Jesus instinctive tactics are tactics of powerlessness, he "collapses the narrative", confounds everyone's expectations by doing something radically spontaneous and unsettling.

Now advent is underway, and in our culture the deep advent fasting of the medieval church is pretty much forgotten, but there is something surprisingly joyous that can remind us that all is yet well with the world that refuses to take itself too seriously, Santa's on park runs, remind us that our way has refused the temptation of puritanism, and evades, God willing, the temptation of self-righteousness.



Williamson Memorial Unitarian Christian Church, Dundee



Kingswood Meeting House
Hollywood, Birmingham



Stalybridge Unitarian Church, Stalybridge



Norcliffe Chapel, Styal



Hale Chapel, Hale Barns



Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford



Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow