

The Liberal Christian

Herald

CHRISTMAS 2015

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*From
the
Editor*



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Cathy Fozard

The years rush by so quickly it is difficult to believe we are almost at the end of 2015. The autumn warmth, and possibly the fact that Sally and I were in Spain for a week in late November, have all meant that winter has arrived with something of a shock.

Not that we have been unaware of its coming. The TV has been increasingly heavy with Christmas adverts, and the shops have been progressively full of things we neither need nor can afford.

I'm writing this on Black Friday—how on earth did we come to this shopping binge just at the start of Advent? For Advent it is, and we decided some time ago that this issue of the *Herald* should go out of its way to mark the season, not only with articles specifically related to Christmas but also to include a supplement of Christmas resources which we hope you and other members of your church may find useful when planning services both now and in future years.

On behalf of the Officer Group may I wish you all a very peaceful Christmas and a New Year full of Hope.

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Catherine Fozard (see opposite page)

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The Gift of Hope

Denis and Graham Birks



Hope springs eternal. Never give up hope. Where there's life there's hope. Let's hope things get better. We can only hope and pray. The word "hope" is sprinkled throughout our language. And it makes its presence felt in some of our most stirring music – both modern and traditional – for instance "Land Of Hope and Glory", and the Liverpool Anthem, with its resounding chorus of "walk on with hope in your heart". Some of us may even remember singing along with Gerry and the Pacemakers, when he made it a hit in the sixties!

I'm sure it would be difficult for any of us to remember the object of our first hope, but we will remember hoping as children - perhaps for a puppy, or a nice holiday, or a bike for Christmas. Times have changed though, when I was a girl, I would have been hoping for something like a Post Office set, complete with an official looking ink pad, and rubber stamp, or a doll's tea set. Our 6 year old granddaughter has got an i-pod on her Xmas list, probably because her big brother recently had one for his 8th birthday. I keep referring to this as an i-pad, to which I get a roll of the eyes and "nana"! In case you don't know, there is a big difference! One thing that hasn't changed is that children are never short of ideas for presents. If childhood had a theme song, it would be hope. Hope is fixed in place at the beginning, long before a complete, clear memory takes shape. We do not learn to hope, instead we are born hoping. So, how do we define hope? It has to be more than wishful thinking.

It's no use being deep in debt, and the only thing you can think to do is wish that you win the lottery! Hope has to be realistic. Although I place a great importance in trying to be a hopeful person, I recently found myself in the strange situation of taking hope away from our daughter. We are awaiting the results of an autistic diagnostic process for our 3 year old grandson, George. We had raised our concerns and George has been under review for some time. As the process has dragged on, our daughter, who had been the first to raise these concerns, suddenly started to try and convince

herself that she was mistaken. Maybe it was just a stage he was going through. In the end, I had to point out what we all knew in our hearts – that George is clearly on the autistic spectrum. I told her that by clinging on to false hope, she would only make it harder for herself. Together, we had to find something realistic to hope for – even if it was just the strength to cope.

Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is an expectation of the future, that the oasis we see in the distance is not a mirage. But hope helps us deal with the present, it's what keeps us going. Optimism is looking on the bright side, but hope just says that striving is worthwhile, that whether or not good things happen, creating opportunity is a good thing in itself. The optimist argues with the pessimist. Hope is tougher than that. It rejects arguments, it continues to hope, sometimes even against overwhelming odds.

In the poem, "Hope is a thing of Feathers", by Emily Dickinson, it has been suggested by some that the hope she refers to can be likened to a song-bird, a thing of beauty perched rather delicately, and somewhat fragilely, on the human soul.

We would disagree, to some extent. Whilst accepting that a thing of beauty can still be tough and strong, the image of "hope as a tiny bird" perhaps suggests something a little too light and fluffy to do it justice. To deal with the storms of life, we would say that the image of an eagle described in the passage from Isaiah might serve us better:

"They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

If Dickinson referred to some weaker bird than an eagle, she could not have been talking about a bird that survives the wicked gale mentioned later in the poem. That gale would annihilate and smash delicate birds. Dickinson presents a hope stronger than whatever it must endure.

Dickinson understood that hope is not fluttery or whimsical. Whatever life throws at you, hope delivers the strength of an eagle's wings and the sound of a song that will not be silenced. Inherent in anguish is the promise and presence of hope, although at these times it can appear elusive.

When our daughter was born, she arrived 10 weeks early – a tiny scrap of humanity, given only a 20 % chance of surviving. As soon as she was born, she was whisked away in an incubator, and we started to hope and pray for her survival. The next few days were tough – she regularly forgot to breath, and the alarm would go off. Our hearts would stop, the nurses would come, give the incubator a good shake, and she would start to breath again. When she was still less than a week old, I got a deep vein thrombosis, worrying enough, but it also meant I was confined to bed in one part of the hospital, while Karen fought on in another part.

After a few days of not seeing her, it all became too much, and as I sobbed, Graham arrived. Graham's words of comfort have stayed with me ever since. "I know it's tough, but just remember that today we have our daughter - let's worry about tomorrow, tomorrow." She's 34 now, and the mother of our 3 beautiful grandchildren.

Sometimes though, there is no happy ending. We all experience the storms that life can throw at us, usually when we least expect it. And for those of us with a faith, we are often challenged by others about how we reconcile suffering with a loving God. Of course there are some who would give such answers as: GOD KNOWS BEST, IT'S ALL PART OF GOD'S PLAN, or GOD DOESN'T GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN BEAR. Well, we have to say that we don't think that any of our suffering is part of God's plan, or is designed to test us, or to teach us a lesson. We are in danger of talking nonsense, and indeed of causing further hurt, when we speak of God working out all things for our good, to someone in deep distress.

We all need to know how to deal with the reality of suffering in our world. At these times, hope can appear to be a fragile dream rather than a reality. How can we continue to have hope in a broken world? How do you believe in love in a world filled with so much hurt? These are questions we all wrestle with. There is a story, which we have used before,

that emphasises the value of holding on to faith even when life seems hopeless. One day in Auschwitz, a group of Jews put God on trial. They charged him with cruelty and betrayal. They could find no excuse for God and no extenuating circumstances for the current obscenity that they were now subject to. The Rabbi pronounced the verdict of guilty. Those assembled waited for the sentence. Was God to be killed? Was he to be cast out in to the wilderness? Then the Rabbi looked up and said – "the trial is over, it is time for evening prayers". Although they found no consolation in the usual answers to the problems of evil and suffering, nevertheless, by clinging to their traditions, and hoping for a better outcome, somehow they also still clung to their God. So what can we take from this story? When we were writing this talk, Graham and I came up with two opposing views – nothing unusual there!

Graham's understanding was that they had almost lost their faith in God, to the point of doubting the existence of God. But that hope of something better remained – this being the seed which, through prayer, leads back to faith. I thought the opposite! They were in such a terrible place that they had lost all hope, they could see no way forward. But by clinging to faith through the ritual of prayer, they were laying the ground for the possibility of the first seeds of hope returning to their life. Which one of us do you think is right? Or maybe we both are. Hope and faith are perhaps like the chicken and the egg.

In the much-loved passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about how we can only know in part – in other words we don't have all the answers. He goes on to say: "And now these three remain; faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." Paul is saying that these three are intrinsically linked, and are there to support us as we struggle to understand. As part of a loving faith community, these are the tools we need to help each other. By providing loving support we nurture both hope and faith.

C.S. Lewis once commented that we live in a universe which contains much that is bad and apparently meaningless, but at the same time contains creatures like ourselves who somehow *know* that it is bad and meaningless. God has created us as creatures that recognize the injustice and emptiness and long for something more. God did not have to make us this way. God could have made us like fish -- just

swimming around and not noticing much of anything -- but he didn't. Why is that? Lewis suggests that the outrage we naturally feel at injustice, that cry that wells up inside us, has been put there by God. The only reason we recognize injustice at all is that we have been created with a God-inherited need for justice, just as we have an inborn need for love and meaning. In other words, these are primarily *God's questions* inside of us. God has placed these questions in our hearts because God wants us to ask them. But God has also given us the sacred power of hope. Hope is an intrinsic part of the human nature.

This was illustrated in Greek mythology. I learned that quite by chance, only recently, during my forced resting period, whilst recovering from my recent operations. Many people have loaned me numerous books to while away the time, (too many to read them all actually!) One of them was about Greek and Roman mythology. In truth, not a book I would have bought from Waterstone's. However, I did dip into it at times, and I happened to come across the Greek version of the creation story. This was derived without the benefit of the Scriptures, and yet there are remarkable similarities.

Before earth, sea, and heaven had been created (ie, in the beginning), all was chaos, a confused and shapeless mass. In which however, were the seeds of all things. The Gods separated the earth from the seas, and the world from heaven. All things then came to be, including fish, birds, and four footed beasts of the land. Then man was created, by Prometheus, one of the Titans, a race of giants, who were said to inhabit the earth before Man. Man was made superior to the animals, so he stood erect, and was able to look upwards to the stars, and heaven. But he needed something to make him invincible, so Prometheus lit his torch at the chariot of the sun, and brought down fire to man, so he was able to keep warm, cook, make tools and weapons.

Woman was not yet made. The story goes that Jupiter made her and sent her to Prometheus, and his brother Epimetheus, to punish them for stealing fire from heaven, and to punish man for accepting the gift! (Make of that what you will). This first woman was named Pandora, and being made in heaven was perfect. She was presented to Epimetheus, who gladly accepted her. In his house, she came across a jar, in which were kept certain articles which had been left unused in the making of mankind. She was seized with curiosity, and

one day opened the box. There then escaped a multitude of plagues and illnesses, and also envy, spite and revenge. Pandora, realizing what she had done, hastened to replace the lid, but too late – the articles were scattered far and wide and man's existence had been scarred. (Shades of Adam and Eve)! However, before replacing the lid, she noticed one further thing at the bottom. That thing was hope.

So we see, on that day, whatever evils were abroad, hope never entirely leaves us, even if hidden at the bottom of the jar. The story illustrates that man and woman's frailty is redeemed by hope, which of course, in a nutshell, is also the story of the bible. For us, our understanding of our Christian faith is that hope is an intrinsic part of the teachings of Jesus. That is not to say that it is exclusive to Christianity. The opportunity to begin anew is at the heart of all the other enduring religions of the world. This image is common in Judaism, involving a new self, which is centered in God. One of the meanings of "Islam" is "surrender", that is to surrender one's life to God. At the heart of the Buddhist path is "letting go" of the old way and beginning a new life. In Taoism, Lao Tzu said: "if you want to become full, let yourself be empty."

God's love for us is not dependent on us adhering to certain rules or religious practices, but is constant and enduring. All that is asked is that we love God and each other. But no matter how many times we fall short, all enduring faiths teach us that we can begin again and again. Personal spiritual growth is not an upwards trajectory, but is more a case of two steps forward and one back. There is always hope for beginning again, even in the midst of what seems like an ending.

At this time of year, we can see the long, dark winter months looming ahead of us. And after the last two winters, with all this global warming, it feels even more daunting than usual! Nevertheless, no matter how harsh the winter, we do know that sooner or later we will see the first snowdrops pushing through the cold earth. It is no surprise that the snowdrop is the floral symbol of hope. When we look out onto our winter gardens and fields, we can see no sign of the seeds and bulbs that were planted in the late summer and autumn, but we know that they are there. We anticipate that some at least will sprout and grow, we just have to wait.

The Heart of a Shepherd

The Mind of a Magi

Rev Sheena Gabriel

In retellings of the nativity story, both shepherds and magi arrive at Bethlehem's stable on the same night, but the Gospel narratives offer a different chronology. Out of the four canonical gospels, only Matthew and Luke include the birth of Jesus, and they focus on different elements. Luke gives us the account of the angel's visitation to the shepherds, who are the first to witness the birth of Jesus. Matthew describes the arrival of the magi some time after - at a house, not a stable. Epiphany is marked on 6th January to convey this passage of time.

The magi, mysterious visitors from the East, have been embellished in legend. The term 'Magi', sometimes translated 'astrologers', evolved over time to 'Wise Men' - then 'Three Kings' - presumably because of the three gifts mentioned. 'Magi' is plural for the Latin 'magus' meaning 'magician, sorcerer, or oracle.' Some scholars suggest they were holy men or priests from Babylon, a centre of astronomy, with a thriving Jewish colony at the time of Jesus' birth. Others suggest they hailed from Persia, followers of the Zoroastrian religion which predicted the coming of a saviour who would triumph over evil.

Other scholars refute the story of the magi has *any* historical validity. Similar legends exist about the births of other great men, and Matthew may have included it simply to validate Old Testament prophecies about Jesus and his kingly rule. Even so, the image of these mysterious travellers, following a star by night, bearing strange gifts for an unknown child, has captured the imagination. Like all good myths, the story is rich in symbolic meaning. What is sometimes noted is the contrast between the two nativity accounts in Matthew and Luke, perceived through

the differing lens of the shepherds and the magi - and it is this angle I wish to explore further.

In Luke's narrative, the shepherds were going about their business, tending sheep, as they did every day. Religious matters were probably the last thing on their minds. Yet they are granted a sudden vision in their own back-yard, serenaded by angels who announce the good news of a Messiah. The shepherds are left in no doubt as to what it all means; told where to go, and what to look for. The magi had spent years honing their religious craft. All they have to go on is a strange sighting in the night sky. They risk an arduous journey across inhospitable terrain into foreign lands, with no angels to light the way.

The shepherds and magi offer two contrasting ways of understanding religious experience. For some, the journey to faith seems easy and straightforward - heralded by a sudden experience, like St Paul on the road to Damascus. Brought up in a Pentecostal Christian church, I was familiar with such conversions; people with no previous religious convictions, sometimes with shady pasts, were granted a vision which transformed their lives. Like the shepherds, such people are given answers to questions they have not even thought to ask.

Growing up in this environment, I felt like a fish out of water. As a serious, bookish child, I could not relate to the heartfelt immediacy of other's experiences. However much I wanted to believe in a God who made himself known in signs and wonders, it never happened; there were no choirs of angels, only what seemed like a long, dark night of the soul. Like the magi, my journey to faith was long, arduous and far from predictable; spurred on



only by the hint of a deeper purpose – the glimmerings of a star shining in the darkness.

Finding the Unitarian church in my late twenties was a great relief; finally a place where my questions and ponderings were welcomed. I think it's fair to say that many Unitarians are more akin to the magi than the shepherds, applying intellect and reason to the religious quest, suspicious of easy answers or emotionalism. But as I consider the church of my childhood, I find myself returning afresh to a faith that engages the heart, as well as the head. I think it a mistake to look down on the shepherd's journey, as Unitarians are sometimes prone to do. The magi are called 'wise men' but sometimes 'head' knowledge is deceptive, keeping us circling around and leading us down blind alleys.

In Matthew's account, the magi first head for Herod's palace in Jerusalem - an obvious place, following the logic of their calculations. Where else would you find a new-born king, but in a palace? This deductive knowledge leads not to the divine child, but into a trap, unleashing Herod's rage and leading to the 'Slaughter of the Innocents'. Too much head knowledge and reliance on the wisdom of this world can be dangerous.

The author and apologist G. K. Chesterton wrote an essay on three modern Wise Men who journey to a new Bethlehem - a city of peace. The first brings gold which can buy the pleasures of the earth. The second,

instead of frankincense, brings the modern scent of chemistry - with the power to drug the mind, seed the soil, and control the population. The third wise man brings myrrh in the shape of a split atom – a symbol of death to those who oppose the ways of peace. At the Palace of peace, St. Joseph refuses them entry. The Wise Men ask what more they can do. Between them they "have the means to provide affluence, control nature, and destroy enemies." St. Joseph whispers in their ears, telling them they have forgotten the child. The Wise Men leave with sadness in their hearts.

John Shea, in his imaginative book 'Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle all Year Long' offers Chesterton's tale as a critique of contemporary wisdom: "The Wise Men come with the benefits of wealth and technology, and think that those assets will bring peace... The real problem is not what the modern Wise Men have brought, but what they have not brought... The enigmatic symbol of the child points to the missing ingredient of modern wisdom."

Shea continues: "The problem is that our mind is not humbly at home on the earth...[nor] rooted in the graciousness of divine presence... It knows everything except the most important thing. Peace will not be won by our affluence and technology, until we know the earth as our home... The Wise Men need the baby to save them from their own knowledge... [they] need to enter into the house where Mary and the child are, or else they will journey forever over the earth and never be at home. When they worship the God who lives on the earth, the mind that studies the sky will be saved."

Not finding the new-born king in a palace, the magi continue on their way. The star finally stops above a humble dwelling. Matthew tells us the magi were 'overwhelmed with joy', but were they also bewildered? Could *this* really be the birth-place of a king? It made no sense logically. All their calculations

could not have prepared them for this. But deductive reason gives way to humility, because not all truths can be grasped by the intellect.

Something prompts the magi, men of status & learning, to kneel and proffer their gifts to an infant of humble origin. Perhaps in that moment, they were granted a vision as powerful as the shepherds; a recognition of divinity amidst the ordinary. The magi searched the heavens, because God was found in high places and worshipped from mountaintops.

But from the giddy heights of the spirit, in their longings for transcendence, they are granted a reminder of the immanent. From the macrocosm of the universe - to the microcosm of flesh and blood; swapping the fragrance of incense for the smell of hay, the sound of bells for the cries of a hungry infant.

So too, we may read our weighty tomes and engage in 'high-falutin' spiritual practices, only to find God in unexpected places - the tiny hand of an infant clasping our finger, a smile of recognition that startles us, the roughness of an animal's fur, the kindness of strangers at journey's end... It seems apt this story is called 'Epiphany'. The word comes from the Greek, meaning 'appearance or manifestation of the divine'. But in its wider sense 'Epiphany' means "*any sudden intuitive perception or insight into reality usually initiated by some simple or commonplace experience.*"



Both shepherds and magi encounter the same mystery, but the journeys they take arise from different circumstances,

and to put a modern gloss on it, different personalities. The psychologist William James, in his study on religious experience, concluded human beings are infinitely varied, which manifests in a bewildering array of approaches to religion.

Recent studies in neurology show that stimulation of what has been dubbed the 'God-spot' in the brain, can trigger visionary experiences. Some people seem prone to such experiences without

The long, circuitous journey towards faith is necessary for some, but it is not the only way.

artificial stimulation; some really *do* have visions of angels and the like. This may be partly explained through neurology, but we should not conclude such experiences have no validity. Maybe some people are wired up to access different levels of reality?

I'm guessing most Unitarians are not prone to visionary experiences and find it hard to understand those who are. I recall a small group session at my chapel in Godalming, when someone asked what we would do if a person came in claiming to have seen an angel. The response, quick as a flash: 'I'd sit them down and offer them a nice cup of tea!' Even if we cannot relate to such experiences, I don't think we should be so ready to dismiss them.

But neither should we hanker after them. As a child, I longed for an 'in-your-face' encounter with God that would end my doubts and questions. It never happened. But as I grew older, I began to realise that the quest of the magi, is just as valid as the immediacy of the shepherd's vision. As Phil Cousineau puts it: "*The real treasure...is never far away... But the strange fact is that it is only after a pious journey to a distant region, in a strange land...that*

the meaning of the inner voice guiding our search can be revealed to us... all of the answers are within us, but... sometimes need to venture to a faraway land to tap our own memory”

The long, circuitous journey towards faith is necessary for some, but it is not the only way. The shepherds were down-to-earth men, preoccupied with practical matters. In the midst of lambing season, familiar with the mess of birth, the sight of a baby in a manger was not so unusual. But in their encounter with the angels, they were given an unexpected glimpse of exaltation – entering for a brief moment the domain of the magi, “Glory to God in the highest”.

For those preoccupied with the cares of the world, maybe visionary experiences are granted as a reminder of the transcendent; a chance to turn the gaze from earthly concerns to the possibility of angels. In biblical times shepherds were considered social outcasts, ‘sinners’ even. Should it come as any surprise that God announces his message of peace first and foremost to the poor and lowly – rather than the rich and learned?

The magi represent our human capacity to transcend the earth and reach for the stars; but ultimately we are brought to our knees by the fragile beauty shining out of human flesh. Sometimes those of us with a ‘magi’ personality over complicate things, becoming too attached to the search.

Reluctant to validate any spiritual experience that doesn’t fit our intellectual framework, we become one-sided. The shepherds also need to temper their one-sided tendencies. Blind trust and un-questioning acceptance can be just as harmful as over reliance on intellect. And as the mystics warn us, visionary experiences need to be filtered through our rational brain, for us to remain grounded.

It’s not a case of ‘either-or’. Both the path of the magi and the shepherd are valid. There is a place for doubt and a

place for trust; a time for searching, and for finding. Both head and heart need to be integrated. John Shea, quoted earlier, describes W. H. Auden’s Christmas Oratorio ‘*For the Time Being*’ in which the Wise Men and the shepherds appear at the manger together:

“The Wise Men talk of hunting high and low, travelling with doubt and the unknown, and finally finding an ending to their endless journey at the manger. The shepherds are the opposite. They talk of travelling nowhere, living in uninterrupted routine, and finding a beginning of their journey at the manger. They represent different types of people, but also they refer to different dimensions of each person. They are both asked to bless their overriding drives - the Magi their impatience and the shepherds their laziness. Then they bless each other's weakness and exchange places. The Wise Men give away their exceptional conceit and the shepherd's their average fear.”

Their final words are said together:
*Released by Love from isolating wrong,
let us for love unite our various song,
Each with his gift according to his kind,
bringing the child his body and mind”.*

The journey ends in unity, combining “*Magi motion and shepherd rest*”, the magi finding in the shepherds “*the lost partners of their one-sided passion.*”

So may we bring to this Christmas-tide, both the simple trust of the shepherd and the wisdom of the magi – a meeting place of heart and head. And in the year to come, may we follow the star that shines in the darkness - remaining open epiphanies amidst the commonplace.



A Light to All People

Rev Jim Corrigan



So which came first, the Word or the Thought? Well, whichever is the case, the Word goes back at least to the origins of modern humans -- it can be seen as a co-creator of modern humanity, one of the unique and original characteristics of human beings.

Perhaps most striking about the opening of John's Gospel is the identification of the Word, Jesus, with life and **light**. 'What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people'.

This expresses the idea that all of us carry a spark of this light within us, a spark of the Divine. Of all the descriptions of Jesus (the Christ) in, what seem to me, clunky and legalistic Christian creeds, the only one that touches me, that seems to point to a great truth, is the phrase that Jesus was 'light from light' – a beautiful and poetic way of conveying the concept that Jesus embodied Divinity, that the light of God shone in him, and through him. But can we Unitarians accept Jesus as divine, or even fully divine? Well, we are not creedal Unitarians, we are not required to subscribe to a creed, so any member is of course free to believe this. And we also have a Free Christian tradition, which aimed to bring Unitarians and Trinitarians together ...

So then, seen as 'light from light', this idea that Jesus embodied divinity – that he was the Divine Word 'made flesh' – perhaps may not seem so preposterous.

In fact this view has been expressed some by Unitarian Christians in the United States.

The Unitarian Universalist minister and writer Erik Walker Wikstrom suggests that Jesus, through his attitudes, actions and very presence, 'grew into' divinity. Wikstrom writes that Jesus 'identified himself so closely with the Sacred, that he became as one with it'.

He became 'as one with' the Sacred, the Divine, with God ...

Is this believable? Is it possible? Well, I think if we see Jesus – like the other great prophets of world religions – as a revelation of the Divine, it is believable ... because great prophets surely reveal divinity to us? I see Jesus in this light – not as unique, but surely as one of the greatest 'Revelations of the Divine' the world has seen – as Krishna, Buddha and Muhammad can also be seen as.

And of course, as the John passage makes clear, we all have the spark of the Divine within: 'What has come into being in him was life, and life was the light of all people'.

So, potentially at least, we all reveal the Divine.

So can we all be like Jesus then? Sadly, probably not.

But I think, even today, we can see people so filled with divinity, that they appear to embody it ...for example when we describe someone, even colloquially, as 'a saint'. I'm thinking more though of great modern examples, like the Dalai Lama – doesn't he exude, doesn't he radiate, great dignity? – and humility, humour, compassion – it's in his bearing, in his smile, to me he embodies holiness (and I've only seen him on television).

I think we saw it too in the great South African leader, Nelson Mandela, who died two years ago. I was privileged to meet him once, and the humility of the man, his humour, wisdom, nobility – shone through.

Now both these men achieved this state through great self-discipline, self-sacrifice, through rising above suffering, transcending it and all that the world threw at them, through great humility of soul.

Most of us are perhaps far from such achievement ... or from receiving such grace.

But I think the example of Nelson Mandela shows that this achievement is not necessarily religious ... Mandela's path was not a religious one ... he achieved greatness through allowing love to overcome hate.

So the message for us this Christmas? Allow that light within you – that spark of the Divine – to shine outwards, as love and joy, so that you – and your families and friends – all enjoy a loving, and a joyful Christmas, this Christmas.

So let us enjoy this season!

(This is an extract from a longer article based on a sermon)

THE UCA IN EDINBURGH



The organ gallery of the Regency –style chapel, situated in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle



UCA Officers, the Rev Alex Bradley, the Rev Jean Bradley, Cathy Fozard and the Edinburgh minister, Maud Robinson (in red), and participants listen to Jeff Gould introducing the workshop

Photos by Ian Bradbury

On Saturday 10 October, the UCA made its first visit to Scotland when it held its Autumn Meeting at St Mark's Church in Edinburgh.

Participants in the day's events were welcomed by the minister, the Rev Maud Robinson.

UCA members had travelled from far and wide to take part in an afternoon of table fellowship, an act of worship in the style of the Taize community in France, and a workshop entitled, 'What has Liberal Christianity to do with me?' The goal of the exercise was to challenge a congregation in the General Assembly that is not in membership of the UCA to assess how committed it is to the denomination's stated object, 'to uphold the liberal Christian tradition'. A buffet lunch began the proceedings, which ended with afternoon tea. The UCA was especially grateful to the members of St. Mark's Church for the generous hospitality they offered to visitors and longstanding members.



UCA member Gavin Lloyd chats to a member of the Edinburgh congregation

A joke is shared by all



Looking forward ... To Easter

Rev Jean Bradley

The Unitarian Christian Association officer group believe firmly that our primary role is to offer ourselves as a resource to everyone who holds an interest in or a commitment to liberal Christianity in our denomination. You will be aware that this issue of the Herald has a Christmas Supplement/pack (*not sure what to call it*) enclosed. We feel that this may be both helpful on a congregational and personal level.

With that idea in mind, I would like to suggest that our next issue of the Herald be focused mainly on the subject of Easter. Some members may consider Easter to be the most important aspect of the Christian year, others may see it as a time of renewal both spiritually as well as in nature, and others may simply see it as a time for personal reflection.

I would like you to send your thoughts, favourite poems, quotes or readings on Easter to me or any other member of the officer group, so that we all can be part of a resource that encourages and emphasises our liberal Christian faith.

There are many non-members who read *The Liberal Christian Herald* in our Unitarian churches and chapels and I think it is important to offer a wide liberal view for those who are trying to work through their own faith journey. So many people come to Unitarianism from other Christian denominations and are unhappy with restrictive creeds but are still true to the Christian ideals. We need to encourage these and other seekers to find solace and religious understanding within the UCA.

I really look forward to reading all your thoughts and favourite Easter words. Perhaps we could continue gathering material on other subjects too? If any of you wish to e-mail or write to me about Easter material that you are thinking of sending, I would be very happy to hear from you. May God bless you and may you be a blessing to others.

Jean Bradley UCA Moderator chattyministerjean@gmail.com

The first CHRISTMAS

Marcus J Borg and John Dominic Crossan
'What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth'
SPCK ISBN 978-0-281-06004-7

This book examines the familiar nativity stories of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke by posing the question, 'what do these stories mean?' The authors consider the Christmas stories in both their first and twenty-first century context.

They expose the differences between the stories of Matthew and Luke and explain how crucial it is to acknowledge these differences in order to understand their original meanings and what they might mean to us today.

The authors do not focus on the factuality of the nativity stories but rather on their historical and theological context. They remove the sentimentality that has developed over two thousand years to reveal stories with much richer and more challenging meanings.

There is an interesting comparison between the Roman empire of the first century and the powerful American 'empire' of today. They describe the political message of the Christmas stories as 'anti-imperial'.

How did the contemporaries of Jesus react to this message and how do we react today? As the authors write, 'there is a political meaning and challenge in these stories, both in their ancient settings and today.'

The authors emphasise that the Christmas stories speak to us as individuals. They are emotionally powerful, bringing light into our lives, fulfilling our hopes, giving us peace and joy. To quote the authors, 'The stories speak of personal and political transformation, they are comprehensive and passionate visions of another way of seeing life and of living our lives.'

Cathy Fozard

Unitarian Christian Association



Annual General Meeting
Saturday March 12 2016
Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford
Cheshire WA16 8DY
Lunch 12 noon, Worship 1pm
AGM 2pm, Workshop 3pm
Afternoon tea 4pm

For further information contact Jean Bradley
E. chattyministerjean@gmail.com T.01565 754465

Next year marks the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Unitarian Christian Association. We are hoping to celebrate this occasion in the summer of 2016. Further details will be announced as soon as possible.

GA , Annual Meeting, Birmingham March 30- April 02 2016
The UCA will be launching their latest publication,
‘One Unitarian Pilgrim’s Progress’
Sue Woolley



The Whole World in His Hands . . .