

**The Liberal Christian**

# **Herald**

**We can love St Paul**

**Liberal Christianity**

**UCA AGM**

**Easter 2017 No 89**



UCA members and friends who led the Worship at the AGM in Birmingham  
(left to right, Sue Woolley, Ant Howe, Graham Birks, Denise Birks, Winnie Gordon, Alex Bradley)

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**The Liberal  
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Easter 2017 - No 89**

***Contents***

4

**Editorial**

5

**UCA AGM in Birmingham**

Rev Jean Bradley

6

**We can love St Paul**

Wade Miller-Knight

8

**Liberal Christianity**

Adrian Long

10

**The Resurrection**

Roger Booth

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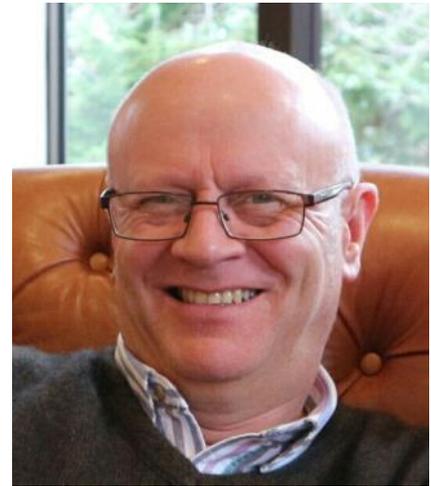
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Catherine Fozard (*see opposite page*)

# ***From the Editor***



**E**aster is arguably the most difficult festival for Liberal Christians to observe. Celebrating Christmas is easy, especially if you ignore the “minor detail” of the paternity of Baby Jesus. It’s a story which demands no understanding other than that of the birth of a child, an event traditionally and easily seen as a cause for celebration. The appealing details of the tired refugee parents, the stable, the animals, the shepherds, the angels and the Wise Men are easy to depict as images, however much they are based on speculation, exaggeration or confabulation.

Holy Week and Easter are, however, different. Although there’s a happy ending, it’s not at all convincing to those of a rational and enquiring mind. The Crucifixion is all too easy to believe and imagine, and it is no surprise that its depiction is so central to Christian art in all its forms. We have all seen and heard enough of humankind’s capacity for evil to believe that a patently good man could be condemned to a death sentence by a fickle crowd, and that sentence carried out by a despotic occupying power.

The Resurrection is, however, so beyond our understanding, let alone our experience, that we find it hard to describe and depict. In the secular world we resort to the symbolism of eggs, bunnies and fluffy lambs, thereby turning Easter into a pagan celebration of Springtime.

For Liberal Christians, the challenge is even greater: to recognise the reality of a living Christ without necessarily claiming he overcame life’s only certainty: death. And yet it surely behoves us to explain to a sceptical world that the greatest truths are indeed invisible. There are plenty of other things which are palpably real, yet invisible, like the Risen Christ.

Try any abstract noun for a start. To quote a favourite line of mine from Saint Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*: **“And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”**

May the spirit of the Risen Christ live in us all.

*Adrian Long*

# UCA AGM

at Birmingham  
New Meeting Church

## *Rev Jean Bradley*

The pleasant spring sunshine made the trip to New Meeting Church, Birmingham on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> March an enjoyable journey. On arrival we were welcomed by Rev Winnie Gordon and members of her congregation and ushered into the hall where a wonderful buffet lunch was set out.

The worship was to be held at 1 p.m. and it had been decided beforehand to create a service with six participants who were asked to share their personal liberal Christian perspectives. This began with Rev Winnie Gordon who offered a warm welcome to those assembled, in her role as Minister of the New Meeting Church. After sharing her opening words, she invited Rev Sue Woolley, the Midland Unitarian Association District Minister to bring greetings on behalf of the District.

The MUA has sixteen member congregations covering a very wide area. Graham Birks, a member from Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford led the prayers, and readings were given by Denise Birks and Rev Alex Bradley.

The sermon was given by Rev Ant Howe, who spoke with both optimism and humour about his own Christian Unitarianism.

After this uplifting service, the church was quickly changed into a meeting room in readiness for the AGM. The gathering held a moment of silence and respect for the loss of Sheila Garrard and Rev Pat Shaw. They were both devoted members of the UCA and will be greatly missed.

The meeting itself was quite straightforward, with very positive reports. Membership continues to slowly increase and we have two new life members. A total of 15 congregations are now corporate members of the UCA. Facebook participation has increased by 54% since the last AGM, and interaction continues to be steady. *The Herald* now has Adrian Long as guest editor and Rev Philip Waldron who was officially elected on to the officer group (after being co-opted at the previous officer group meeting), will be happy to work on the layouts of the *Herald*. The Chair gave thanks and paid tribute to the previous *Herald* editor,

Brian Hick, who had given valuable service to the UCA in his work .

A Rocha, a Christian based environmental charity, was adopted as the charity that the UCA will support this year. Rev Jean Bradley offered to create a display to promote A Rocha on the UCA stall at the GA in April.

Shortly after the end of the AGM, a representative from A Rocha, Sian Nicholas, gave a talk on the charity. Sian explained the name A Rocha means 'rock' in Portuguese and the organisation was founded in Portugal in 1983 by Peter Harris, an Anglican Minister. It is an international network of environmental projects with a Christian ethos whose aims are to protect and restore the natural world, drawing on the insights and skills of people from diverse cultures, both locally and around the world.

By 2016, A Rocha played a positive part in twenty countries. Sian focused her presentation on the United Kingdom and showed images of many conservation projects, ranging from turning rubbish tips into community sensory gardens to changing a 36 hectare site into a country park in the London Borough of Hillingdon. In developing the park, a cycle circuit was installed, as well as grasslands, ponds and wild life areas for monitoring purposes, and playgrounds for local use. The charity's aim is always to work with the local community and other environmental agencies.

A Rocha sees education as a major factor in helping us care for God's creation and so the charity works in schools and alongside local residents, encouraging a greater interest in conservation. The charity also supports churches and chapels by offering a free online survey towards working for a Eco Church Award and thus helping to promote an environmental ethos to encourage the best possible use of church buildings and land.

Sian finished her talk by reminding us that no matter how small, every good action in caring for the earth will benefit both human kind and animals.

After she answered questions from the floor and was thanked for her interesting talk, everyone was welcomed into the church hall for a delicious afternoon tea.

In short, the Unitarian Christian Association's Annual General Meeting 2017 was a very worshipful, pleasant and absorbing day in which we gave thanks for the progress made during the year and looked forward in faith and hope to the future.

# We Can Love St Paul

Wade Miller-Knight

**S**t. Paul was gentle, wise, and meditative. He esteemed women hugely. He was a spiritual giant. So why do many Unitarian Christians distance themselves from him?

Paul knew God by direct personal experience, through his pure intuition, and had both the methods and the will to teach his followers to likewise themselves personally become wholly filled with God.

The methods Paul taught included energising the subtle currents in our body, which we nowadays can call our 'chi' (as in 'Tai Chi'); breath control; and unwavering stillness. In plain English, **techniques of meditation**. This is most strongly expressed in his letter to the Colossians, Chapter 1, where Paul asks God that his Christians be "energised with all energy, unto all steadfastness and staying-power, [to] truly continue in stillness, unwavering, to be completely absorbed in the mind of God".

To my mind, such a state of being is as high a fulfilment of one's spiritual journey as anyone could wish for.

This meditational message is masked in the Bible by having been broken up; and is additionally obscured in English by translation issues. Today, however, we can readily recognise that the way to achieve this energising and to attain unwavering stillness and to feel Paul-like total absorption in God, is deep meditation. There is a Christian school of meditation, as well as methods of Hindu or Buddhist origin.

Paul himself was so wrapped in Godliness that his prayer is intense, unceasing, and according to Chapter 4 of his letter to the Philippians it consists of gratitude plus requests for others. And, himself setting an excellent example, Paul assures us there that we need never be anxious because the God of peace will be with us and supply all our needs.

If we should slip or lapse in our spiritual

commitment, he would have our spiritual fellow-travellers restore us in a spirit of gentleness. And I love his concern to come across as gentle when he said to his church in Galatia: "how I wish that I were with you now and could change my tone"? He is concerned that his words might be heard as sharp, as telling them off, when he is giving lovingly-intentioned support. Perhaps every parent who's sent their teenager an email knows that wish?

Paul's gentleness and Godliness shine through his guidance to his Christians on how to be towards others, as for example in Romans Chapter 12 with "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone, never avenging yourselves, beloved ones", and with "Bless those persecuting you. Bless and do not curse them. Don't repay anyone evil for evil."

How privileged I would feel to spend time with such a person! How blessed I would be! Paul's spirituality is rooted in his intuitive experience, in his heart, in his energy, in his very breath. It is **all experience and no theory**. This is the spiritual life I want for myself. The clearest evidence for Paul's esteeming of women is his greetings to specific people he appreciated highly for what they did for his work.

Of Priscilla and Aquila, the leaders of the church in Rome, he said (Romans, chapter 16) "They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the Greek churches are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house." The word 'greet' in English does not fully convey a Greek person's meaning, which I hear as: 'give a Mediterranean kiss to, as you give to a firm and loving friend'.

And then: "Greet Andronicos and Iunia, my kinsfolk, who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles." No gender bias there.

He also said to the Roman Christians: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a teacher

of the church in Cenchreai (the port of Corinth). I ask you to receive her in the Lord ... and to give her any help she may need, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” High enough appreciation?

So what’s putting Unitarian Christians off loving this saint and striving to follow his guidance? It is, of course, aggressive, patriarchal messages like, in 1 Corinthians, “women should obey their husbands” and “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church”, spiels about the wickedness of sexual immorality – even giving orders for capital punishment for it! – threats of God’s wrath, and an assertion that male gays will not be allowed into the kingdom of God. It’s also the long arguments about circumcision and eating or not eating kosher, and the heavy theology with words like “sacrifice” and “salvation”.

But using modern scholarship techniques we can cast grave doubt on the genuineness of any of these passages as being written by St. Paul. Their tone is very different from the gentle, nurturing, compassionate style of the genuine Paul. This in itself suggests the probability of interpolation. Before the invention of printing, interpolation was common. Copyists of manuscripts added words that were not in the original, and often only the altered versions are now available. Historians of the manuscript eras have to wrestle with this – witness, for an excellent example, John Scott’s work on the 11<sup>th</sup>-century author William of Malmesbury. Differences in writing style are one way scholars distinguish interpolations and tease them out of a doctored text.

Another way to identify interpolations is incongruity. The chunk of the Letter to the Galatians (Chapters 2:11 to 5:6) about kosher laws, and fine-tuned messages about who should eat what in front of whom, and about Gentiles and the children of Abraham, purportedly by Paul, clashes with the inconvenient truth, archaeologically attested, that in Paul’s lifetime there was no synagogue in Galatia. The culture of Galatia was a mix of Celtic – hence the place’s name, which is cognate with ‘Gaul’ and ‘Gaelic’ – and Greek. The context in which that chunk *does* make sense is *after* the Roman sack of Jerusalem, *six years after St. Paul’s death*: when Jewish Christian refugees settled among Greek Christians, and churches therefore sought to

find compromises between the conflicting doctrines of the two groups. Orthodox Jews didn’t allow women religious leaders – neither then nor now. De-feminisation of church leadership was one of those compromises. The idea of a God who can get angry rather than having unconditional love for everyone, the vicious hostility to sexual immorality, and the damning of male gays, do not arise from Greek culture. But they are in the outlook of Jewish scripture.

Likewise, the doctrine of salvation by believing this or that about Jesus has no place in the mouth of a man who experienced God directly, intuitively from within, and taught his followers techniques of meditation by which to become able to do so too. It does fit, though, with the teachings of the men nowadays called “The Church Fathers” – the doctrinaire leaders of the emerging Orthodox Church in the *second century* CE such as Irenaeus and Tertullian.

The coherent conclusion is that everything most Unitarians dislike about what is written in St. Paul’s name was never his. It was a product of the later infiltration of Greek Christianity by Jewish Christians and of the doctrinal arguments among Christians 100 years after Paul’s death.

It is surely high time we rejoiced in the wise and saintly St. Paul, freeing him in our minds from the distortions of his teachings by patriarchal and Jewish-Christian authors after his death.



# Liberal Christianity: *from an inquiring Unitarian*

Adrian Long

Like many lucky enough to be born in a Western democracy in the second half of the twentieth century, I grew up believing the world to be an increasingly free and fair place. My generation - the baby boomers - was raised with the idea that our immediate predecessors had fought to preserve the ideals of freedom in a World War, and it seemed that as the twentieth century drew to a close, Western liberalism had won the day. The British Empire was morphing into a benevolent commonwealth of nations, progress in civil rights was laying to rest the ghosts of the American Civil War, apartheid was crumbling in South Africa, and communism doing likewise across Eastern Europe as the EU expanded. It was easy to believe that freedom held the key to a better and happier future, despite all that was still horribly wrong in the world.

Combined with an increasingly meritocratic and less deferential society, the march of world events up to the dawn of the new millennium suggested that we would all end up living in a world where more and more people would be free to live their lives without fear of persecution, and to act according to their conscience rather than doing what their elders and betters told them to do.

Yet rather than seeing the relentless advance of liberalism continue, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the assumptions upon which we baby boomers grew up challenged, undermined and even overturned. Liberalism seems now to be an ideal under threat as we face up to Brexit, a resurgence of the sort of populist nationalism personified by Donald Trump and alarming echoes of the 1930s across Europe. And the threat to liberalism certainly extends into religion: far from being in decline, authoritarian religion of the sort which subjugates individual freedom of conscience appears to be resurgent in the guise of radical Islam, whilst it also often feels as if the only part of the Christian Church which is flourishing and growing is that driven by illiberal fundamentalism, with its unreflective practices and bible-based dogma. It is not, it seems, a good time to be politically, socially or religiously liberal.

So what does a socially and politically liberal soul like me turn to? Is there a home for the

many who are “spiritual but not religious”? Can organised religion still cater for those who do not want to rule out the existence of some sort of God and recognise in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth a good example of how to live life, but who don't want to believe in articles of faith, unlikely miracles and a moral code which has been left behind by changes in what society has come to not just tolerate, but to celebrate?

The easy and long-established answer has been free-thinking religious movements such as Unitarianism, or the Society of Friends. Generations of liberal-minded dissenters have sought a spiritual home in these and other creedless sects, and there was a time when in some parts of the world, these provided a genuine and vibrant alternative to mainstream Christianity. Reforms which genuinely improved the lot of millions of ordinary people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often driven by free-thinking non-conformist Christians: one thinks in particular of the role of Quaker philanthropists in establishing better factory conditions in industry. Even in the late twentieth century, it was a British Unitarian, Tim Berners-Lee, who gifted to humankind his invention of the World Wide Web, making knowledge and communication more freely available than ever before. Yet even as social and political liberalism advanced in post Second World War politics and society, religious liberalism retreated as much, if not more, as the established churches.

Why? The standard critique of established religion is its irrelevance to the real world. The Church, which meets in drafty old buildings, whose leaders dress in archaic vestments, read from a book written 2000 years ago and evoke the names of long-dead saints, and which talks a different language - *thou* and *thy* not *you* and *your* - is easily accused of being outdated and irrelevant. The Church, it is easily said, is “not of this world”.

Faced with this criticism, the obvious response has been to “modernise”. Throughout its history to an extent, but especially over the past fifty years or so, the established churches have desperately sought to become more “with it” (deliberately ironic use of 60's term). The language and music of worship have been

updated, with results which are hilarious, outrageously bland and often both. In an effort to appear less stuffy, family worship has become common in the Anglican Church, with sermons re-branded “talks”, “Collect of the Day” re-named “Today’s Special Prayer” and *hymns* now called *songs* in a manner which insults the intelligence of would-be church-goers. And of course in many churches, hymns, anthems and organs have given way to worship songs and guitars, with words projected onto a screen.

The main effect of such attempts at modernisation is in my view to impoverish our language, depriving children in particular of the opportunity to experience the richness and variety of the English language and undermining their ability to distinguish between different registers of language. Attempted modernisation also seeks to address the perceived over-formality of

*Choral Evensong . . . lifts those present onto a higher plane without demanding anything in return.*

church, re-naming Sunday School (or dare I say Catechism) as “Messy Church” in a questionable attempt to equate mess with fun. Meanwhile, clergy, terrified of the “more tea Vicar?” stereotype, feel obliged to adopt an informal, matey persona for fear of seeming unfriendly. Services are more often than not preceded by functional announcements rather than “The Lord be with you”, creating a secularised atmosphere more akin to a social club than a place of worship.

My own view is that all such attempts at informality are doomed to failure in the long term. The Unitarian Church and other free and non-conformist churches took this path a generation ago and are hardly thriving. If the Church merely replicates the secular world in its language, behaviour and practices, it becomes just a derivative and inferior copy of that world. If the Church borrows “the Devil’s music” (and we all know that the Devil has the best tunes), it merely creates a poor imitation of it. Listen to any gospel rock and dare to disagree.

So what is the alternative? It is no coincidence to me that one of the few areas of significant

growth in church attendance here in the UK is in those attending services at our great cathedrals, which have by and large retained the more archaic language and practice of traditional worship. Why? I believe it is because the experience of, say, Choral Evensong, is one which genuinely lifts those present onto a higher plane without demanding anything in return. It provides a complement to our busy everyday lives rather than an extension of it, and this, surely, is the religion that we need in a noisy and busy world.

But what of belief? Does attendance at an act of worship replete with archaic and mysterious language (“*Lighten our Darkness, we beseech thee O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all the perils and dangers of this night*”) necessarily imply belief in the literal truth of those words? Not for me: quite the reverse in fact. I enjoy cathedral services precisely because I don’t believe the detail of what’s being said.

The relatively anonymous and non-participative nature of cathedral worship provides the mental space for reflection on life’s cares and concerns that we all so badly need. It’s Mindfulness accompanied by beautiful words and music in a setting that feels like a much-needed escape from the secular world.

Does it matter that I hear, and even sing, words with which I cannot literally agree? Not really. Think about this analogy from another passion of my life: football. During the football season, I join thousands of other worshippers at one of the cathedrals of this alternative faith: the Macron Stadium, home of the once-mighty Bolton Wanderers. As I join in with the hymns of praise to these lesser gods dressed in white, singing the words “they’re by far the greatest team, the world has ever seen”, I do not actually believe that they are better than, say Real Madrid 1960, Brazil 1970, Holland 1974, Liverpool 1978 or even Man United 1999. It’s the spirit of the words that counts, and surely that holds good for what we say and sing in church.

So this explorative Liberal Christian, who does not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, that Mary was a virgin mother, or that Jesus died to save the rest of us, prefers to attend a church which teaches that all this is true. That it does so using beautiful words and music means that it takes me where I want to go in my spiritual life.

My ideal church? A Unitarian Cathedral, where the theology is liberal but the liturgy formal, dignified and anything but Liberal.

# The Resurrection

*Roger Booth*

**D**id Jesus live again after being killed by crucifixion and, if so, in what way?

“If Christ has not been raised.....then your faith has been in vain”(1 Cor. 15,14). So wrote Paul to the Christians at Corinth and this has remained a cardinal belief of followers of Jesus. There are several reports in the Gospels which support this belief. For example, all four Gospel writers say that those who visited Jesus’ tomb found that it was empty. To rebut any allegation that the tomb was empty because Jesus had risen from the dead, the story that the disciples had stolen the body arose. Matthew states that some of the guard told the chief priests “everything that had happened” and the chief priests paid the soldiers to say that his disciples had stolen the body while they were asleep. According to Matthew the chief priests, recollecting that Jesus had promised that he would rise again after 3 days, feared that the disciples would remove the body to fulfil this promise. So they asked Pilate for permission to make the tomb secure which they did by sealing it with a stone (26,62-66). Luke states that on the following day Cleopas and another disciple were walking to Emmaus and were joined by Jesus whom they did not recognise until he blessed, broke and gave them bread. They returned to Jerusalem and told the disciples who informed them that Jesus had appeared to Peter.

At this moment Jesus appeared and they thought they were seeing a ghost, but he showed them his hands and feet and ate broiled fish in their presence.

He commissioned them, and led them out to Bethany where he was carried up to a cloud. John adds that Thomas did not believe that Jesus had appeared but a week later Jesus appeared again when the doors were shut and invited Jesus to feel his hands and side. This convinced him. John reports a third appearance on the beach by the sea where Jesus gave bread and fish and talked at length to the disciples. These incidents, if authentic, constitute

strong evidence that Jesus lived again and appeared in some form to the disciples. Indeed, Paul states that he appeared to over 500 people. As indicated above, the evidence conflicts over whether he appeared with his human body or whether he possessed a spiritual form. These reports that Jesus showed the disciples his hands and feet on two occasions and ate with them on the road to Emmaus attest his possession of a physical human body. The Jews of that time believed that there was no change in bodies after death - “as the earth received them, so it will restore them. (2 Baruch 49.1-3 cf. 1 Sam.28,14 (Samuel and Saul)) This belief is opposed by the fact that corpses disintegrate. It would, however, explain the origin of the stories that Jesus ate food and showed his hands and feet. For, to convince the Jews of Jesus’ resurrection, it would be necessary to show that he retained his human body.

Alternatively, the Gospel assertions about Jesus’ appearances could be interpreted as meaning that they were subjective, internal experiences of the disciples. The psychiatric term for the ‘seeing’ of something which has no reality outside the ‘seer’ is an hallucination. An hallucination may be caused by severe tension and the disciples would suffer this on the death of Jesus and the expectation of his immediate return. However, hallucinations by more than one person (collective hallucinations) are rare, and the amount of speech and activity of Jesus during the appearances renders them an unlikely explanation,

The evidence of Jesus appearing with a spiritual, immaterial, body seems more cogent. He appears suddenly and vanishes both on the road to Emmaus and in Jerusalem and rises into a cloud at Bethany. Paul stresses that there are both heavenly and earthly bodies “it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body”. (1 Cor.15,44).

Consistent with this is Jesus’ reply to a questioner that there were no marriages in the after-life for they are like “angels in heaven” (Mark 12,25).

Only about 20 years after the crucifixion Paul wrote that he had passed on to the disciples what he had received, namely that Jesus appeared to Peter and the disciples.

His assertion that Jesus also appeared to more than 500 persons at the same time seems exaggerated even though collective visions of the Virgin Mary are reported to have been experienced over 2700 times by crowds of young people in recent years in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia.  
It accordingly seems reasonable to conclude

that Jesus did live again after being killed by crucifixion. It also seems that he appeared with a spiritual body at least on the road to Emmaus and in Jerusalem. It remains mysterious that no trace of Jesus' body has ever been discovered despite the tremendous motivation for those opposed to the resurrection to produce it.



## A Tribute to Arthur Long

Saturday, 15 July 2017, 2-5pm

Luther King House, Brighton Grove, Manchester, M14 5JP

[www.unitarian-college.org.uk](http://www.unitarian-college.org.uk)

The UCA will pay tribute to the life and ministry of the Reverend Doctor Arthur Long, who died in December 2006. Arthur's leadership of the Unitarian Christian Association and his many contributions to the life of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches will be honoured through an act of worship, presentations on different aspects of his pastoral and scholarly vocations, and the sharing of refreshments. The setting will be appropriate, as Arthur was one of the founding principals of the theological colleges that formed the ecumenical federation in Rusholme. There will be no charge for participating in the afternoon's events, but donations to the Unitarian Christian Association would be gratefully received.

The gathering will conclude with a substantial afternoon tea, and it would be appreciated if guests indicated their wish to attend by contacting the UCA Secretary, Jeff Gould, at [jeffreylanegould1959@talktalk.net](mailto:jeffreylanegould1959@talktalk.net) or by telephone on 01625 403509.

