

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker,  
Jane Blackall and Tristan Jovanović  
at Essex Church, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2010

## A Unitarian Communion

Hello everybody and welcome to Essex Church, where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each Sunday for worship as well as for other activities during the week. We are a community made of all those who walk through our doors and we welcome you here today.

Let's take a moment now to settle ourselves. We have journeyed to be here – be that journey real or symbolic, short or long. As we take a few calming and centring breaths you might choose to deliberately let go of that journey and all that is there in your outside world – be that things that are troubling you or indeed sources of joy – let us lay all these concerns to one side as we commit ourselves to this hour of singing and silence, pray and thoughts – we are here now in community with one another, with chance to connect with our inner being, with chance to connect with that which we hold to be divine. In a shared moment of silence now let us strengthen our sense of connection with self, with others and with God.

Today's service has as its theme a Unitarian Communion and towards the end of the service there will be some shared words for us to speak to one another and then those who wish are invited to come and share bread and wine together in a simple ceremony. As always with Unitarian activities you are welcome to join in as much or as little as you wish.

### Chalice Lighting:

The chalice with a flame is the symbol of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists all around the world. It's good to know that a similar chalice flame will be lit today as part of worship in liberal religious communities as far afield as the Khasi Hills of north India, in Canada, in Uganda. The chalice is an ancient symbol of containment and infinite possibility, the flame is dynamic and illuminating. May the time we spend together this morning be blessed with these qualities and may these symbols remind us of our connections with people both near and far.

### Reflection One – by Rev. Sarah Tinker:

I wonder what you were all like as teenagers. I was pretty obnoxious at times particularly with my family who I regarded as old fashioned, snobbish and boring. I took an unhealthy delight in being different and annoying my parents as much as possible. Looking back it's clear that I was influenced by the spirit of the time – this was the late 60s and life was exciting and new. My older brother and sister had been confirmed into the Church of England because that was people did and when my mum asked me when I was going to be confirmed I put on that haughty look and said I'd never be so hypocritical – and anyway what was the point. "Well," she said. "You won't be able to take communion unless you're confirmed."

And that stayed with me. On my occasional visits to church I would watch people going up to receive the bread and the wine from the priest – and I wondered about it. And even though I never was confirmed I did go and take part in this ancient ritual once and a tiny part of me wondered if I would be struck down by divine wrath for cheating.

Then when I started on religious studies many interesting things about this ritual of sharing bread and wine in religious communities became apparent. It has its roots in truly ancient times – the symbolic eating of a god and through that act sharing in the god's divine qualities – this is recorded for example in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. It's a ritual that was practiced by the pagan Mystery traditions – and it is the mystery traditions that worshipped Mithras and Attis in particular that were popular when Paul was establishing the early Christian church. Scholars debate the historicity of the account of the Lord's Supper in the Gospels in which Jesus offered his followers bread and wine with the injunction that they should do this in remembrance of him – is this historically accurate or was it written later by members of the early church as a way of explaining and formalising the origins of their important new ritual?

But the historical truth of these biblical accounts is perhaps less important than the way in which this ritual then helped to shape the development of Christianity – whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used brought about the split between Catholicism and the Orthodox church, whether the bread and wine did become the blood and body of Christ was one of the splits that emerged between Catholicism and Protestantism.

And what of us Unitarians? Well, as a nonconformist dissenting church we had our roots in the Protestant tradition and a communion service would have been held in most Unitarian congregations a few times a year well into the middle of the 20th century. Most of our congregations to this day have communion silver just like this (pointing to our silver cup and plate) locked away in their safes. As a ritual it would have been most probably interpreted as connecting people with Jesus, with the Christian tradition and with one another in community.

In the twenty years that I've been a Unitarian I've taken part in a beautifully eclectic range of Communion services – with flowers and chocolates and bread and biscuits – and what has touched me is that each of these ceremonies has been created from the heart of those who have led them and so it is today. Tristan and Jane have explored both together and on their own – what this ritual of offering bread and wine really means to them. I think this is what we Unitarians do well – allowing people to explore what is significant to them and to re-enliven and indeed reclaim traditional ways of worship – in community with one another.

## Reflection Two – by Jane Blackall:

In this short reflection I hope to say something about what communion means to me – or, at least, what it has become in my imagination – and why I am so strongly drawn to this ritual with which I have almost no history or previous personal experience. I struggled to articulate my fuzzy and nebulous thoughts in a way that might make sense outside of my own head! But I'll attempt to explain...

I want to begin by drawing your attention to the words on the front of your order of service. They are taken from a poem called 'Separation' which, for me, points towards the essence of communion. In the poem, an old man hears of the death of a friend, and laments the loss of so many others who were dear to him. He realises that he can now count just four men, who he has known and loved, that remain – and even they are scattered across thousands of miles – no-one is close at hand. Thinking of his beloved friends, he says:

*"Longing for each other we are all grown gray;  
through the fleeting world rolled like a wave in the stream...  
When shall we meet and drink a cup of wine,  
and laughing gaze into each other's eyes?"*

The sense of longing and loneliness – and the depth of love – in these words touches me deeply.

I imagine that it is an experience common to many of us at one time or another – when times are good we might feel steady enough, but at other times we may feel so alone in the face of life's troubles, and that nobody is really there to keep us company as we are "rolled like a wave in the stream". We may encounter so many people in our day-to-day life, and yet it is rare to go beyond surface things, rare to be truly present and make a deep connection, rare to feel that we know and are known by another, and that we are cared for in some ultimate way.

This resonates strongly with my own sense of what communion might mean – and what it might be able to do for us.

It perhaps shouldn't be all that surprising that I found my thoughts and feelings about this so difficult to put into words. Maybe whatever-it-is that we're dealing with in communion – for me, something around the ultimate unity of all-that-is, our often-unspoken love for each other in community, and the cosmic love that holds and permeates us all – is something so deep and powerful that it is best approached obliquely, metaphorically, poetically, or even silently.

For me, the ritual of communion offers a chance to reach out to each other with tenderness – to symbolically cross the boundaries of our separate human selves – to express something simple but profound about the depth of our connection and caring – and to affirm the truth that, ultimately, we are one with each other and with all-that-is. We share each other's joys and sufferings, and our fates are inextricably intertwined, as part of the interdependent web of all creation.

As we prepare to hold our own communion here today, it feels right that we keep an awareness of what communion meant for our Unitarian Christian forebears – and that we are respectful of what it means today for our brothers and sisters in other churches – and yet one of the joys of our liberal religious tradition is that each generation can take the rituals, symbols, and metaphors that have been handed down to us, and make them our own.

I hope that those of us who are here this morning are able to offer our presence – our "nearness" – as we enter into this precious communion ritual together, or simply sit in loving witness, each bringing our own subtly different understanding of its meaning, and each taking something of worth from the experience in our own way.

## Reflection Three – by Tristan Jovanović:

For some of us, the thought of communion brings to mind boring times of Church past, the acrid smell of incense wafted once too many times and long, troubling words like ‘transubstantiation’ and ‘epiclesis’. It might conjure up images of the priest, resplendent in archaic dress holding aloft a wafer and a cup, back turned as he whispers secrets over them in Latin, before distributing part of those mysteries to an expectant queue, kneeling reverently before the altar. To any with a racing heart at these memories, I can assure you, this will not happen today.

Today’s service came about by two companions talking over shared cake and tea. Companions, which means literally those who share their bread, in communion with each other. We wondered what it would mean to share bread with our beloved community as part of our worship as well as our fellowship. We talked about how Jesus took something so simple and made it so powerful but remembered how each tradition has some form of prasad or holy food.

Once the go-ahead had been given, I began to wonder if I could really do it. Could I stand at the altar and touch bread and wine, break it and share it with my friends no longer as agapé but as sacrament, taking a full role in the priest- and prophethood of all believers? All of a sudden, I was stepping up to take responsibility for the words which so easily flowed from my lips: of course all have the authority to minister to each other, because, to draw from my Quakerism, that of God is in everyone.

For me, Jesus was not divine. He was no more the son of God than we are all sons and daughters of God. But Jesus was different. In the words of a hymn we sang two weeks ago, Jesus, Krishna, Buddha had the wisdom to see clearly. Jesus overflowed with that of God: compassion, gentleness, love. That is why I can try, stumbling, falling, scraping my knees, holding his scarred hand, to follow his way.

Today, I invite you to leave bad memories of church past behind. I invite you to look within yourselves and each other. You would not be you without your neighbour, just as the bread would not be bread without sunshine or rain. You would not be you without stardust, without the wind. You would not be you without your faults or your perfections. Look at yourself, look at your neighbour, see the broken and the whole. That is what we remember as we pray the words of the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving. That is what we remember when we break a piece of bread off and say, ‘The bread of heaven,’ and hold the cup and say, ‘A cup of blessing.’

As a good (former) Protestant, I find the image of sacrifice in communion to leave a bad taste in my mouth. This is about atonement, at-one-ment. This is being at one with each other, with God, with the beyond. An outward sign of an inward grace.

My friends, today I ask for your companionship and your communion. Remember the flowers of the field and how they would not be so without the sunshine. Remember your neighbour and how she would not be so beautiful without the clouds. Remember your own broken self and remember that sense of at-one-ment and be whole.