

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 29th November 2009

Advent Sunday

Hello everybody and welcome to Essex Church where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each Sunday morning as well as for various activities during the week. This is the first Sunday in Advent, the time when the Christian church calendar begins its new year and begins the month leading up to Christmas.

How are you feeling this morning I wonder? In this room we probably together contain a spectrum of human possibilities – from sleepy to alert, weary to energetic, feeling great to feeling awful, from feeling anxious to optimistic let's take a moment to turn inwards and to acknowledge in silence how we are this morning.

This hour can be a time in which we acknowledge how we are - so that those feelings, these moods, may then perhaps be laid to one side for a while, allowing us to align ourselves with something greater – be that the strength of community, our sense of God, the divine, our connections with one another or with the natural world. It is good to know that we are part of something greater than ourselves.

This is the dark time of the year when a symbol of light can be very cheering and so I light the first of our advent candles today as one such symbol. This flame can represent the triumph of hope in the darkest hour, the power of love to overcome evil, the strength of human warmth and courage in the face of adversity. May we all know and use our abilities to be as lights shining in the darkness - and when dark times assail us, may we be guided along life's path by the shining lights that others bring.

Prayer:

Spirit of life and love, be with us now in this our time of worship. We are moving into the dark time of the year, when nights are long and days are short. Help us to adapt to this changing season and to accept the darkness. May we keep returning to the spiritual values of this season, the promise and the responsibility that belonging to a community brings. In the midst of our plenty we also strive to remember those who have little and in that remembering we can commit ourselves to creating a fairer world for all.

In recognition of World AIDs day let us pray for all those whose lives are blighted by the illnesses of HIV and AIDs that they might receive the treatments they need and the support that will help them through the hard times. Let us work to improve understanding of this illness that its spread may be slowed and its stigma removed. May our thoughts be with all those who suffer.

In dark times it is easy to lose our way. Let us think in silence of issues in our own lives where we are unsure what to do next, where greater clarity would help us understand what is required of us, or where we seek new directions.

Divine light shine down on this beautiful and troubled earth and bring light to all those dwelling in darkness so that all may know peace and beauty and love. Amen

Reflection on Trees:

(based on information from Ros Coward's 2004 Guardian newspaper article)

I don't know if you've ever heard of Wangari Maathai, the winner of the Nobel peace prize in 2004. Maathai won the prize for her tree-planting work in her native Kenya. Her organization, which is called Green Belt has grown into a movement that could perhaps lead to a transformation of political priorities in Africa, and perhaps here in Europe, too. Her work stresses the importance of trees as symbols – as well as their immediate practical value as a source of food and fuel, Wangari realised that trees can help to boost self-esteem in those who grow them.

It started in community politics when Maathai noticed how often the difficulties faced by women could be traced all the way back to poor soil caused by erosion, and lack of fuel and drought caused by deforestation. She encouraged local women to start growing trees, donated by a local plant nursery. Slowly her Green Belt movement grew.

The trees were a source of income for the women, but they also became, in Wangari's words, "their own ambassadors". In tropical countries trees grow fast. "They become a presence," she says. "People feel as if they can talk to them, as if they are

talking to us. As the trees grow, they give hope and self-confidence. They begin to transform people's lives. The birds come back, the animals come back, there is less dust. You don't have to persuade people any more."

The Green Belt movement widened out, spreading across other African countries and in doing so it has become a broader political and educational movement while never losing sight of the central issue, which is to protect and re-plant forests and encourage biodiversity. Organising community meetings, Maathai quickly discovered a lack of democratic structures and was hampered by corrupt politicians who support land grabs and the privatization of forests. Now she openly links the future of the environment with the future of democracy, peace and security in Africa.

Maathai's ideas have such power I think because, at their heart, is the extraordinary symbolism of trees. Trees are sources of shelter, fuel and food, as well as the most important means of protecting soil and air quality and preventing drought. For that reason they have immense symbolic power, representing life itself.

And this symbolism is found in religions and cultures across the world. There are numerous cultures where ancient trees provide a focus and meeting place in villages and where trees are decorated at festivals. In countries such as Thailand, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, the way the Bo tree is celebrated in Buddhist festivals is a way of remembering that Buddha was under a tree when he experienced enlightenment. In west Africa, silk cotton trees are highly regarded and are dressed with a ring of palm leaves around the trunk. In Mexico bags of sweets are hung on trees in December as a treat for children, which anthropologists claim is an allusion to the bounty that trees provide. In Tibet, trees are often decorated with prayer flags. The tree-dressing ceremonies of Australian Aborigines have always acknowledged their importance.

Here in England since time immemorial evergreen trees have been used as a symbol of life. Our ancient ancestors would have adorned a sacred tree that stood before the house of the gods, hanging on it fern seeds and wreaths of mistletoe, garlands of myrtle and ivy, all of which represent fire and life. From the trees branches they would have hung small lamps and the tree would have shone out in the darkness with the aim of guiding the sun god back from the lands of darkness.

So tree dressing is an ancient act with its roots stretching deep back into our pagan past when humanity felt itself one with nature, totally dependent on nature's goodwill. No wonder then that the people would wish to please the natural world and thank it for its bounty and encourage it to be generous once again next year. The tree dressing ceremonies often involved hanging fruit on the tree in the hope of encouraging a good harvest.

But for today I'm going to suggest a slightly different focus. I invite you to take a ribbon from the basket and to come and tie it to the tree in silence and, as you do so, to give thanks or say a prayer, make a wish if you want. We'll have music playing gently in the background and create a meditative atmosphere by dimming the lights for a while. Then Harold will sing for us.

Reflection on Advent:

One thing I have gained from studying religions is a belief in the profound value of symbols. Not cymbals with a c – those big round metal musical instruments that I was never allowed to play at Junior school because of a terrible lack of a sense of rhythm - but symbols with an s – symbols that stand for something, that make us think of something else.

In this reflection I'm going to consider three symbols:

- the wearing of ribbons such as this
- the lighting of advent candles
- the tradition of dressing trees

I'm wearing this red ribbon because it is the symbol of World Aids Day, which happens each year on the 1st December. I wasn't sure about this wearing of ribbons as a symbol of support until a few years ago when I read a newspaper article about someone in this country who has HIV, the condition that comes before AIDS. You can be HIV positive for many years and never know of your condition because you remain seemingly quite healthy but this young woman did know and it had changed her life irrevocably. She spoke in this newspaper article of her fears of dying young, of how she coped with uncertainty. But what touched me the most was her description of what it is like to know you have a scary illness yet feel unable to share that information with anyone. Hers is a secret disease because there is still much prejudice and misinformation in our society about HIV/AIDS. So she has a disease that no-one else except her doctors knows about and when she described the feelings of support she gained from seeing people wearing these red ribbons out in the street each December I knew that I would wear one each year from now on. Because you never know who you pass on the street; perhaps one of them will feel a little less isolated because of a ribbon, a symbol, just a small red ribbon like this.

As we enter the time of Advent, this time of anticipation, of waiting and hoping, we light the first of the advent candles symbolising traditionally – hope and prophecy – future candles represent peace, joy and love – with the final candle

representing the birth of Jesus, the Christ child. In this northern hemisphere where light outside seems ever more precious, the lighting of candles such as these is a potent symbol indeed. And for me more than anything else, it is a reminder that darkness and light are an inevitable duality in this physical realm. We do well to accept their presence in ourselves and in our world and it is good to remember our power to make a difference – as lighting a single candle brings light to the darkness so a single action, however small, may make a positive difference in another person's life.

The story of Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai and her Green belt re-forestation project is inspiring. I was also inspired to read of another grass roots project involving trees, established by the community action group Common Ground. They declared the first weekend in December as a time to celebrate Tree Dressing Day. Groups and individuals are encouraged to show their love of mature trees in the streets, parks and gardens by 'dressing them' – until Twelfth Night. The aim is to draw attention to trees that we might otherwise take for granted particularly in our busy cities.

Their campaign began in 1990, when, to show that 'every tree counts', 150 large, cut-out numbers were hung, with the help of tree surgeons, on a group of three London plane trees at the junction of Shaftesbury Avenue and High Holborn in Covent Garden, London. This launched Common Ground's Tree Dressing Day; since then local communities, authorities, schools, colleges, arts groups, hotels, parks departments, health centres, theatres and sheltered homes have taken part, organising colourful hangings or simply gathering to read with candles under their favourite tree.

Three symbols –

- wearing red ribbons
- lighting candles
- dressing trees

Three simple ways of demonstrating connection – connection with ourselves, with one another, and with our world.

Advent is not all about joy and excited anticipation. There is a sense at this time of year of the unknown lying ahead of all of us in life. And in our materialist world there can sometimes be a deep weariness in response to endless injunctions to aspire more, shop more, buy more. We might sense a yearning for a return to deeper values, more lasting values. One of the dangers I perceive in our increasingly secular society is the terrible emptiness at the core of frenzied getting and spending. This then is our challenge as religious liberals – to offer an alternative way – a path to deeper, more spiritual values – to answer people's yearning for a better world by offering a community of commitment and love.

It is said that on his death bed the German poet Goethe cried out joyfully "light, light, let there be more light".

Michael de Unamuno, reflecting on this, wrote that:

"It is not more light we need, but more warmth.
Warmth, warmth, more warmth!
We die of cold not of darkness.
It is not the night that kills, but the frost."

So let us, in the way we live our lives, be the ones who bring more warmth to our world. I think we can do that.

Amen

Benediction:

Beneath the Christmas tree of the world may we lay imperishable presents of goodwill, spiritual service and unconditional love for all people. For these are the gifts that our world yearns for and we are the people able both to give and receive them.

Go well and blessed be.