

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 11th October 2009

A New World

Hello everybody and welcome to Essex Church, where this community of Kensington Unitarians meets each week. This is a gathered community made up of all who come through the doors. The world can be a tough and troubling place at times as well as beautiful and delightful - and we need places in which we can reflect, re-charge our batteries, find comfort and strength and new possibilities. This church is such a place. We do not offer easy answers or certainties, except the certainty that life takes on a different character when we share the journey with others. And so I welcome you this morning and invite you to:

Come into this circle of community. Come into this sacred space.
Be not tentative. Bring your whole self!
Bring the joy that makes your heart sing.
Bring your kindness and your compassion.
Bring also your sorrow, your pain.
Bring your brokenness and your disappointments.
Spirit of love and mystery; help us to recognize the spark of the divine that resides within each of us.
May we know the joy of wholeness.
May we know the joy of being together.

Thanks to Andy Pakula our minister in Islington and Newington Green for those words of welcome.

Chalice lighting:

I light our chalice flame this morning in thanks for the visionaries and dreamers who dared to think bigger thoughts and so have brought about the social changes that future generations take for granted. I light our chalice flame in fervent hope that human society will continue to make progress towards justice and equality for all people of the world.

Prayer and Reflection:

Let us join now in a time of prayer and reflection as I call on the divine spirit of life and of love to be with us now and to bless all that we say and do together here today.

As we sit quietly and turn our attention inwards
And focus our thoughts
what we focus upon is different for each of us.
For we are unique beings and each of us has our own unique sense of that which we hold to be divine.

Yet we share a common humanity
And it is this common humanity
That brings us
Our concerns and anxieties
Our hopes and fears
Our gratitude and our joy.

For this is what it is to be human:
We care for others – both those close to us and those whose lives we hear of only in the news,
We delight in the natural world with its rich gifts for our senses – the sounds, sights, smells, tastes – the very touch of it all,
We have an idea that we can be greater than we often are – that there is perhaps something of the divine in each and every one of us,
We sense mysteries beyond our comprehension as we look at the stars or gaze upon a flower.

As we enter a time of shared silence together now, may we be open to the possibility of divinity within and beyond us and hear its whispered messages to us.

(Silence)

May the peace and the stillness of this time and this place stay with us and strengthen us for the task of living our lives, now and always, amen.

Meditation

– on that which we would wish to change in this world and imagining that this is already so – your utopia.

Address:

Some of you will remember a couple of years ago an address here at Essex Church in which I introduced a game known as ‘who would you invite round for a meal’. You ask yourself which person, real or imaginary, you would want to spend an evening with. I decided on my latest choice of dinner guest after going to see the Trevor Griffith’s play *A New World* at the Globe Theatre a couple of weeks ago. The play was about Thomas Paine and I left the theatre wondering how one human being could have packed so much activity and experience into one life time.

By all accounts Paine ended his life detested and reviled by most people. Newspaper reports made much of it at the time. When he died in 1809, 200 years ago, the obituary notice from the *New York Citizen*, stated that Paine "had lived long, did some good and much harm." Only six mourners came to his funeral. Writer Robert G. Ingersoll described that day:

“Thomas Paine had passed the legendary limit of life. One by one most of his old friends and acquaintances had deserted him. Maligned on every side, execrated, shunned and abhorred – his virtues denounced as vices – his services forgotten – his character blackened, he preserved the poise and balance of his soul. He was a victim of the people, but his convictions remained unshaken. He was still a soldier in the army of freedom, and still tried to enlighten and civilize those who were impatiently waiting for his death. Even those who loved their enemies hated him, their friend – the friend of the whole world – with all their hearts. On the 8th of June, 1809, death came – Death, almost his only friend. At his funeral no pomp, no pageantry, no civic procession, no military display. In a carriage, a woman and her son who had lived on the bounty of the dead – on horseback, a Quaker, the humanity of whose heart dominated the creed of his head – and, following on foot, two negroes filled with gratitude – constituted the funeral cortege of Thomas Paine”.

From my reading this week about Tom Paine’s character I doubt he would have minded who came to his funeral. In his life he had experienced so many ups and downs that popularity was clearly not one of his main motivations. But the pursuit of truth and justice did motivate him and are at the core of all his writings, which are many. He was not an easy man to be with and perhaps visionaries rarely are easy people – for they are ‘marching to a different drum’, they can hear or see, or perhaps simply imagine, greater possibilities up ahead.

Born in Norfolk, England in 1737 Paine later described himself as a citizen of the world and indeed he was made a citizen of both France and the newly formed United States of America as well as being an English citizen. In all three of these countries he was at times praised highly and at others threatened with, or literally, thrown into prison and harangued by an angry mob. He was deeply involved with both the American and French revolutions yet the governments of both those countries, once their revolutions were complete tried to silence Tom Paine – because he would not be silent about the terrible injustices they were perpetuating. His pamphlet *Common Sense* published in 1776, sold 200,000 copies and did much to encourage the American colonialists to consider the possibility that they really could be free from the burden of British rule. But when that liberty was won Paine kept mentioning that two groups in American society were still far from free – the slaves and the native American Indians – not a popular message at the time for a new government that felt it needed to maintain the status quo. Paine spent time studying the Iroquois Indians and their means of government. He praised their true democracy.

And in France, though Napoleon said that he slept with Paine’s book *The Age of Reason* under his pillow, Paine watched in despair as the revolutionary leader became a dictator – he later described Napoleon as ‘the greatest charlatan that ever existed’.

In biographies Thomas Paine is described as an author, a pamphleteer, a radical, an inventor, an intellectual and a revolutionary and as you read about his life you get a sense of the great ferment of ideas that was bubbling away in the 18th century – exciting if not comfortable times. Paine had a number of careers – training as a stay maker with his father, being a school teacher, then an excise man – working for the government – where he campaigned for better pay and conditions. His first wife and child died in child birth and he left the south coast town of Lewes and moved to London for a while, where he met Benjamin Franklin and many of the other great thinkers of that time. They encouraged him to emigrate to the American colonies but after freedom from British rule was won Paine returned to London where he was a key figure in the intellectual circles that were part of the development of our own Unitarianism. He also at this time worked as an inventor and an engineer – designing several iron bridges in Rotherham and Northumberland, designing a smoke-less candle and making improvements in steam engine design.

In the early 1790s Paine went to France where he was at first highly regarded by the revolutionaries and then seen as a threat and imprisoned in 1793-4. It was in prison that he wrote his book *The Age of Reason*, in which he advocated the pursuit of free thinking especially in matters to do with religion. He narrowly escaped the guillotine in that French prison because guards failed to see the chalk mark made on his prison door.

When we hear Paine's words today we have to imagine just how shocking his views were to people of his time. Here are just a few of his statements:

'I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.'

'All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.'

'I am a citizen of the world and my religion is to do good'

'Priests and conjurers are of the same trade.'

'The story of the redemption will not stand examination. That man should redeem himself from the sin of eating an apple by committing a murder on Jesus Christ, is the strangest system of religion ever set up.'

'What is it the New Testament teaches us? To believe that the Almighty committed debauchery with a woman engaged to be married; and the belief of this debauchery is called faith.'

'The Bible: a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalise mankind.'

Paine described himself as a Deist – believing that God created the universe, with natural law to govern it, then left the earth with its population of humans and other living beings to continue spinning through space forever, as a perpetual motion machine. It was because of his Deist views and his unfettered criticism of Christianity that Paine was hated by so many people towards the end of his life. Indeed as he neared death assorted Christian ministers tried to gain admittance to his home so they could harangue him further and perhaps persuade him to repent through the power of their prayers. But for Paine there was no interventionist God that could be called upon for assistance, it was entirely humanity's responsibility to find ways to live harmoniously and justly with one another and with the whole of creation. In Deism there is no divine revelation of knowledge through scripture. Human beings must use their powers of reason to discover knowledge and understanding. This was a radical view in the 18th century, a heretical view, and it held a number of implications – not least of which the idea that all people are created equal – only human beings have made some people free and others slaves, it is not a god given situation. Deist thought places responsibility firmly on humans and their governments to treat all members of society fairly – hence Paine's radical suggestions of a minimum wage, maternity grants, an old age pension, and the abolition of inherited wealth – some of which we had to wait until the 20th century to be introduced, some of which we wait for still.

So I would like to invite Tom Paine for dinner not because he'd be a comfortable guest but because we need people to rant at us from time to time, to wake us up to the injustices of our age and to remind us that there is much still to be done. It's perhaps not surprising that Barack Obama in his inauguration speech quoted Tom Paine's words

"Let it be told to the future world...that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive...that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]."

These words came from Tom Paine's pamphlet *The Crisis* and were read to the demoralized troops by George Washington. Paine's words inspired those soldiers and many other people in the 18th century and his words continue to inspire us in the 21st century. His message – like the message of many visionaries and dreamers, is not a comfortable one. It reminds us that life could be different – but only if we are prepared to make the effort and to give up some of our own comforts and fixed ways of being. Not comfortable, not easy, but a message worth remembering – and so I give thanks for Tom Paine and rebels like him. Amen.

Benediction:

May we like Tom Paine be citizens of the world whose religion is to do good, willing to stand up for issues we know to be right, not daunted by criticism or uncertainty, committed to causes of justice and equality, daring to imagine that this world really could be a better place. For we 'have it in our power to begin the world over again' said Tom Paine and may it be so. Go well and blessed be.