

Sermon Delivered by Rev Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 18th September 2005

Believing and Belonging

*We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells that we did not dig.'*

I found these words the other day when I was thinking about writing this address on the theme of believing and belonging and they evoked for me important images about our Unitarian faith. Unitarianism is not a faith that we just made up recently - it stems back hundreds, possibly even thousands of years to individuals who wanted to think for themselves, who were not prepared to pretend to agree with religious doctrines, individuals who wanted to be free to think their individual thoughts and to shape those thoughts into forms of worship that respected their individual freedom of thought.

Now freedom of thought is not generally popular with those who hold power in a society and that is why so many thousands, no doubt millions of people, throughout the course of human history have lost their lives for what they believe. The history of religion in this country and throughout our world is a bloody and unpleasant story.

But you'll be pleased to hear that I am not going to focus on blood and gore today; let's look instead at what it means to believe and to belong. Human beings are social beings - we are designed to live in communities of one sort or another, to be healthy we need to spend time with others, to communicate, to help one another, to learn and grow together. Human beings do not generally live well in isolation. As thinking beings we have a desire to find meaning and purpose in life, to find answers to those age old questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What, if anything, is the purpose of life? To who or to what do we belong?

And from the search for answers to these age old questions comes our beliefs, our faith - those answers to life's questions that we hold dear, that cannot be proved by scientists, that will not be sorted through debate or argument, for debate will never prove or disprove such matters. These are our beliefs, the foundation stones of our faith. And in our search for connection we find others with similar beliefs to ours and we join together.

The French philosopher Voltaire once commented about religion in England that if the English just had one church there would be dictatorship and rebellion, if the English just had two or three different churches there would be battles between them and inevitable bloodshed, but that the English had about 31 different churches and it seemed to suit us very well.

And one of those churches is us Unitarians, tiny but very much still alive around this country of ours - today some 180 Unitarian & Free Christian churches will be open for worship. In 2001 the General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches finally agreed on a statement that in some ways sums up who we are as a denomination. This had taken years to achieve, spurred on by the thought that "if you do not know your own identity, then who is going to identify you?"

Though some people are disappointed that this statement is couched in the formal language required by the Charity Commissioners it at least represents an attempt to express who and what we Unitarians are. It speaks of our congregations, societies and individuals "uniting in a spirit of mutual sympathy, cooperation, tolerance and respect; and recognizing the worth and dignity of all people and their freedom to believe as their consciences dictate; and believing that truth is best served where the mind and conscience are free" and having one shared object, which is "to promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition". Now if we are anything like a standard Unitarian congregation, if such a group exists, there will be at least half of us now feeling uncomfortable with at least one or two of the words in that statement!

When I used to work for our Unitarian headquarters, one of the job's delights was travelling around the country visiting congregations and meeting people. You would be amazed at the diversity that exists within this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches of ours - there are some congregations that must have a Bible reading every week, and congregations where the bible has not been opened for the last year. There are congregations that call themselves free Christians rather than Unitarians and there are others who say adamantly that they are not Christians and don't believe in god. There are congregations with links to freemasonry, the peace movement, the rotary club, the Liberal Democrats, the animal rights movement, Buddhism and Sufism.

If you join the Quakers, the Society of Friends, then you know that one of that religious group's clear commitments is to the peace movement. Quakers are committed to peace. Unitarians are not committed to peace, not all of us all the time. Individuals might have gone on anti-war rallies before the invasion of Iraq but other Unitarians felt that it was a correct thing for Britain and the United States to do. A friend at Fulwood chapel who I'd introduced to Unitarianism rang me in some distress after a service when she'd spoken out against the invasion of Iraq and someone had disagreed with her. "How can he be a Unitarian and support the war?" "But that's the point of Unitarianism isn't it" I had to reply, "that we allow people to make up their own minds as their reason and their conscience dictate". So when it comes to beliefs Unitarians do not think alike. We have no uniform message to give the world. As a denomination we may be committed to social action but no more so than any other church in Britain today.

But for me the identifying badge if you like of Unitarianism is our commitment to freedom of thought and of belief. I wonder if you have ever heard the story of the escaping sheep. I suspect it's a story from long ago when lots of stories were told about sheep, perhaps because sheep were so important in people's lives, or perhaps it's because sheep can be so poorly behaved. This particular sheep managed to find a hole in the fence, wandered far away and spent the day eating juicy green grass only then to find that he had lost his way home. Then he realised, horror of horrors, that he was being followed by a wolf. The sheep ran and ran but the hungry wolf was gaining on him. Just when he thought he could run no further the farmer found him, lifted him up and carried him lovingly back to the field.

But despite everyone telling him to the farmer would not nail up the hole in the fence. Anthony de Mello told this story specifically for religious educators but it raises key issues for anyone committed to freedom.

Now of course some people would argue that a sheep might feel better if the fence was safely mended so that it couldn't wander off, but we are not sheep. Most religious organisations today give people a sturdy, safe fence to put round their thoughts. Most churches worshipping today will be basing their worship around shared beliefs, doctrines and creeds. There is a comfort in certainties. But for me there is something far more real about admitting the truth - which is that on religious and theological and spiritual matters - we just don't know for sure. We don't know what happens after death, we don't know if heaven exists and if so where and who gets to go there. We don't know what the purpose of life is or if there is a purpose or meaning to existence. We sometimes do not know what is right or wrong, but are oh so aware of the grey areas in between.

Perhaps most of us sitting here today are aware of what might be described as the spiritual aspects of life yet that may not mean we believe in a divine being that exists in any tangible form. Perhaps the best we can say is that we just don't know anything for sure. But admitting that we just don't know can be uncomfortable at times; we then have to find comfort in other ways - not the comfort of insisting that we know the truth - that our religious beliefs are right so therefore everyone else's must be wrong - but the comfort instead of community. There is great comfort in simply being together, sharing not the delight of certainty but the fascination of being on the path, of being spiritual seekers who haven't got a road map but who have a general sense of the direction they want to go in. And in this day and age, a liberal approach to religious matters is I think just as important as it was all those hundreds of years ago when people were fighting, and even losing their lives, for the cause of religious freedom in this country.

We are not fighting oppression in this country anymore but there are other forces at work - forces of materialism that can leave people spiritually adrift. How can we as Unitarians meet the needs of people in the 21st century? What might liberal believing and belonging look like in our day and age? Huge questions perhaps better left for another day! After all that I can only say Amen!