

Festivals of Light

Welcome:

I light this chalice to affirm that new light is ever waiting to break through to enlighten our ways:
That new truth is ever waiting to break through to illumine our minds:
And that new love is ever waiting to break through to warm our hearts.
May we be open to this light, and to the rich possibilities that it brings us.

Reading:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone, and as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

1994 Inaugural Speech, Nelson Mandela, written by Marianne Williamson

Prayer and Reflection:

I call now on the divine spirit of life and love to be with us now and to fill this place with light and warmth and to shine also within us. We humans who have so much potential within us – yet too often let our fears and anxieties hold us back and keep us small. May we be braver, bigger, brighter beings this autumn – people who recognise their gifts and use them for the good of all, people who encourage others to shine too.

We live in a world that needs us. A world that needs us to be the best that we can possibly be, a world that is calling us to shine a spiritual light in a material dimension. And how can we shine that light? Through our smallest actions, through the quality of our thoughts, through the love for ourselves and for others that we express in so many ways.

And may we use the power of our thoughts and our actions to shine a light in troubled places both in ourselves and in our wider world that conflicts may be resolved and peace may prevail. We all know some of the troubled places in ourselves – our burdens and anxieties, the difficulties that assail us – may they be lightened and eased; we all know some of the troubled places in other people – may they be lightened and eased; we all know some of the troubled places in our world – may they too be lightened and eased – and may we each find a way to play our part in this process of bringing light to troubled places – playing our part however small it may be, using the potential we have for the greater good of all and may this be so, Amen.

Address:

I know I'm not alone here in my admiration for our Mayor of London Ken Livingstone – who for all his faults and foibles is I think doing a great job in making London a good place for people to live. His commitment to making this a safe and welcoming city for people of many cultures is one that lots of us support. The campaign of a year or so ago with its slogan many Londoners one London, struck a chord didn't it. Walking around this area still gives me a tingle of delight when a good proportion of the people I pass are speaking languages other than English. Our supermarkets cater for different diets, both racial and religious – Indian, Chinese, Arabic – foodstuffs readily available in Asda and Tesco's.

Last week I mentioned advent calendars with a chocolate behind each cardboard window – a few months ago you could buy similar calendars to mark the days of Ramadan and someone said they'd seen something similar that had been created for the Hindu festival of Divali. We inhabit a culturally rich and varied world here in London. And it's a world that is constantly changing and developing – genetically mutating to fit the times.

We are all used to our annual Christmas lights that brighten up shopping streets. Up in Muswell Hill this year I have seen for the first time a giant lit up menorah – to celebrate the Jewish festival of Hanukah. The Jewish tradition does I think tell some of the best stories, often stories that gently poke fun at the Jews themselves. To enjoy this story, which is one I found on the Internet told by UUA minister Rev Ishmael Ford and have adapted, all you need to know is that until twenty years ago or so Hanukah was a very, very minor Jewish festival.

There's a story from the turning of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, a story that tells of somewhere in the eastern part of Germany where a Hassidic rabbi, following the nature of Hassidic spiritual leaders, had a vision. It was a terrible vision. He saw what would happen to the Jews of Europe over the next fifty years.

Shaking with terror he began to fast and to pray for a solid week, hoping to intercede on behalf of the Jewish people. Finally the prophet Elijah was sent to him. The prophet said, "Rest your heart my son, the unnameable One proclaims a new age in Jewish history that will follow those terrible times. Let me show you." And in a flash Elijah and the rabbi were on a street corner in Muswell Hill, this very year of 2007. It was Hanukkah and there were menorahs in many house windows, in windows that belonged not only to Jews but Christians too and even people who had no religion at all. The prophet Elijah showed the rabbi that in the midst of the shops there was an illuminated and enormous menorah. They even walked by a synagogue with a sign out front announcing a Hanukkah party.

The rabbi exclaimed, "Amazing! If they do this for such a minor holiday, I can barely imagine what they do for the Sabbath!"

Now it may be the power of the spirit that has caused Hanukah to become such an important festival for the Jewish community or it may just be the power of our commercial world that is ever eager to find new marketing opportunities and would not want anyone to be left out of the spending frenzy that is Christmas time. Whatever the reasons I am glad that after the horrors of the mid 20th century the Jewish community is buoyant enough and feels safe enough to switch on the lights.

But let's not pretend that all is hunky dory in our multicultural society. There always have been, and perhaps always will be, forces that pull us in the opposite direction. The British National Party is said to be the fastest growing political party here in Britain; fascists groups are quietly spreading their messages of hate, crimes of racial and religious hatred continue to be committed.

In many other countries in our world people are far from free. There is much still to be done in the creating of a world of freedom and plenty for all and we all have some role to play in that work of co-creation. I started writing Christmas cards this week and came across the slogan used by Amnesty International – it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness - it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Just one candle – in the face of our world's seemingly insurmountable issues it is understandable if we sometimes feel despair. In the face of the challenges that we ourselves face in our own lives and in the lives of those we care about – it is understandable if our hopes diminish at times. Life is tough and living it is tougher.

And in the turning of our planet earth we are given the changing seasons of the year that are mirrored by the seasons of the human spirit. In our adult RE session on Thursday evening run by Daniel Hughes our ministry student we considered the ancient pagan origins of many of our festive traditions – the spiky holly that was thought to ward off evil spirits, the evergreen miseltoe that was revered partly because it grew without any root system, the candles and fruits that remind us of brighter, sweeter times.

The lighting of just one candle, literally and metaphorically, can remind us both of brighter times and of our own power to switch on the lights.

And light is a symbol that recurs throughout human history and throughout all religious traditions, a symbol which carries such ancient primeval messages for us that they don't need to be spelled out, because we already know them. We can look at the symbols from other cultures, other traditions – and we can fill in the gaps – we can add our own meanings, our own messages, the symbolism is universal. We can hear the stories and something resonates within us.

The Hanukkah story based on a historical event of the tyrannical Syrians invading Jerusalem in 165 BCE, of being repelled at last by the brave group of Jews known as the Maccabees. The story of the special oil in the temple that was enough to last only one day and yet miraculously burnt for 8 days till more oil could be prepared.

Don't we all want to repel tyrants and have miracles happen in our lives?

The marvellous myths surrounding the Hindu festival of light Divali that took place in November this year:

Rama and Sita, the king and queen at last vanquishing the powers of evil and returning to rule their kingdom – greeted by the delighted crowds who had lit their path with long rows of lights to guide their way.

Don't we all yearn to have our path laid out before us with guiding lights to mark our route?

The Hindu goddess Lakshmi who brings good fortune and prosperity, for whom houses are cleaned and decorated before the start of Divali and lights are placed on windowsills and around the door, so that she will want to enter the house and bring her blessings to its inhabitants. Debts are settled and generosity is shown to all.

Don't we all want to invite the spirit of Lakshmi into our lives?

The Christmas story with its powerful imagery of the innocence and infinite potential of new life born in seemingly inauspicious circumstances in a stable, new life that proclaims itself to be the light of the world.

Can't we all at times be a light to the world? – in the simplest of ways – in our speaking and listening to one another, in our smiles and expressions of care and concern, in the way we dress or in the beauty we bring into our homes, in the writing of personal messages on those Christmas cards we may or may not get round to writing.

There's no shortage of stories and images for us humans to explore from these festivals of light. And one of the gifts for us in living in our multi faith multi cultural world is that we can choose the stories and the symbols that work for us. If the vibrancy and meaning of our celebrations has diminished for us then we can re-create them and give them new life. We don't have to go through the tired old rituals if we don't want to, if they have lost their meaning, we can seek new sources of light in the darkness. We can learn from the stories and rituals of other faiths. And here at Essex Church we can celebrate the eternal light of the world, we can share that light with one another and we can it beam back out to the world. I look forward to celebrating festivals of light with you all.

Amen

Benediction:

We walk in a world of light and darkness, they are qualities that live side by side. In the week ahead may we be people who walk in the light bringing brightness to those we meet and may we accept the darkness as that which defines the light and gives it meaning as the light of hope and the light of love, - go well, blessed be.