

John Biddle: 17th Century Thinker

Words of Welcome:

Hello and welcome to Essex church home of Kensington Unitarians. It is cold outside. Icy winds are reaching us, blown from the Arctic north. It is cold outside. Our world is full of harsh challenges which we experience sometimes in our own lives or in the lives of those we care for, and sometimes we hear of those challenges in the news, challenges that face people many thousands of miles away from us. But their challenges are not theirs alone. In our world we now hear more of the difficulties that other people face; news reporting may be suppressed but the truth finds ways in which to be revealed.

We Unitarians may not feel comfortable with the word worship, yet worship is what we are here for; perhaps today we can join together to worship truth itself and commit ourselves to once again to the cause of freedom for people the world over.

It is cold outside. May we now in this our liberal religious community generate a warmth of community that can drive away the icy winds of loneliness and isolation; a warmth that can help us in reconnecting with one another and with that within us which knows our true purpose and can give us the strength and resilience to follow a path of truth and righteousness. Welcome all of you.

We would not be here today in this building were it not for the bravery and commitment of those who came before us, who believed so strongly that they should be free to follow their own religious convictions. Will you join me then in singing a song for those people long dead who fought for the liberty we now enjoy, sometimes sacrificing their own freedom and even their own lives. I think they deserve a song of thanksgiving – it's number 17 in our green hymn book (*read 2nd verse*):

We sing of the freedoms which martyrs and heroes
Have won by their labour, their sorrow, their pain;
The oppressed befriending, our ampler hopes defending,
Their death becomes our triumph, their loss is our gain.

Both this and next week's services have a historical theme but for me history only really comes to life when I discover its links with life today. As I prepared for this service this week and read about people, mostly in England and the rest of Europe, in the 15th, 16th 17th centuries struggling against religious and political oppression I was struck by the similarities in the news today – in place names repeated in daily news broadcasts - Zimbabwe, Palestine, Iraq, Tibet.

At half past eleven today, in about 15 minutes in fact, the Olympic torch will be carried by a runner along the Bayswater road – just round the corner from the church. That torch carries a strong symbolic message of peace and harmony amongst nations, a message that is being carried literally by its torch light around the world before arriving in Beijing for the start of the Olympic Games.

I am glad that torch is being carried, I think the Olympic Games are a positive event in our fragmented world. But I am equally glad that at various points along the route that the Olympic Torch is being carried here in London our capital city there will be protestors who are seeking the ending of Chinese repression in Tibet. The protestors are meeting this afternoon in Argyle Square and will be lighting another torch which they are calling the Tibetan Freedom Torch, and which, like the Olympic Torch, will be then taken on a journey around the world.

And so I light this our Unitarian chalice flame in recognition of the Olympic Torch that will be passing through Notting Hill in a few minutes, in recognition of the Tibetan Freedom Torch that will be lit this afternoon, and in recognition of the importance that the symbol of light has played throughout history for people committed to causes of peace and liberty and justice – the world over (*light chalice*).

The flaming chalice as a symbol of Unitarianism the world over was only created during the 2nd World War but its roots as a symbol of religious freedom and equality can be traced way back to the streets of Prague. Here in 1415 a Czech priest called Jan Hus was burnt at the stake. His crime? At the time the Catholic Church would not allow priests to give the elements of the communion table, the bread and the wine, to ordinary people. Jan Hus thought that all people were equal in the eyes of God and that all people should therefore be free to receive communion. And for that he was burnt to death.

But his free spirit lived on through the actions of his followers, who under the cover of darkness used to paint a simple symbol of a flame on the walls of the city as a way of commemorating Huss' courage and his message – that all people are equal and that the flames of oppression will not remove the truth of that essential equality of all people.

In lighting our chalice today I salute all those who have sacrificed their freedom and sometimes their lives in order to pursue truth and justice and equality. What better words can we say in memory of the sacrifices they made than 'thank you'.

Candles of joy and concern are lit.

Time of Prayer and Reflection:

I call on that divine spirit of life and of love to bless our time together here today and to enfold all our joys and concerns in the warmth and companionship of a shared humanity. May we remember that we are not alone. We share the challenges and the delights faced by humanity around the world. We know that at times we take our freedoms for granted and turn away from yet more disturbing news about the oppression faced by people around the world. But we know too if we ignore the sufferings of others those sufferings still continue but if we take an action, however small, we can be part of a movement that will bring progress.

We give thanks that throughout human history there have been people brave enough to take a stand, to risk their own liberty for a cause they believed to be of more importance.

Let us give thanks for the freedom of thought which we enjoy and which is still denied to so many people of the world. Freedom of thought, coupled with freely accessible education – surely these are the right of everyone.

Let us give thanks for freedom of speech that allows us to speak our minds and speak our truths. Let us remember places in the world where people lose their liberty, even their lives, simply for speaking a truth that is unacceptable to those in power.
Short silence

Let us give thanks for our freedom of movement that allows us to step on planes, cross borders, go wherever we want to go – a freedom denied to so many people still today.

May freedom become available to all and be fully appreciated by those of us already privileged to possess it.

Amen.

Address:

Years ago I used to teach children who had attention deficit disorder or ADHD as it is often shortened. These were incredibly lively, unstoppable children and they were sometimes treated with a drug called Ritalin which helped to calm them down. Interestingly Ritalin is based on amphetamines – a drug generally used to liven people up, so this one drug could have two completely different effects on different people.

Well I have come to think that Unitarian history must have similar qualities. There are people I know within our movement whose pulse quickens and eyes light up when the history of Unitarianism is mentioned. And there are people who start to glaze over and feel strangely soporific as the first date of a particular Act of Parliament is recalled. I tend to slip into the latter category and so my commitment today is to make this address as palatable as possible for the non-historians amongst us.

What brings history to life I think is people and relevance – and these stories of fighting for freedom against oppression are remarkably relevant to us today and the people I am going to talk about are certainly unusual characters.

Now they say that a good story needs a strong main character, the protagonist, a good story needs a clear start date and place. No wonder then that we have problems with Unitarian history because we can't point to one key person at one key time in one key place and say 'it was them - they started it.' I cannot tell you who founded Unitarianism because the name describes a theological idea about the nature of God and humanity rather than one religious movement that began at a certain point.

The word Unitarian was created in response to the word 'Trinitarian' meaning the Christian belief in the three fold nature of God – the father, son and holy spirit. We are I think the only denomination stemming from Christianity, that is named after a religious doctrine like this – a religious doctrine that is probably not all that relevant to most Unitarians today.

But it was certainly relevant a few hundred years ago. It was actually illegal to hold Unitarian beliefs until an Act of Parliament in 1813 – not all that long ago. And before that around the world many people lost their lives because of their Unitarian beliefs, including the person I want to introduce to you today, John Biddle.

John Biddle, English man, born 1615, by all accounts a remarkably intelligent scholar who became headmaster of the Crypt Grammar School in Gloucester at the age of 26. He was born into the religious ferment that was England, and indeed much of Europe at this time. What caused this religious ferment? Why were people questioning the doctrines of the established churches in this way? People sometimes speak of a zeitgeist, a spirit of an age, an unstoppable force if you like, we speak of ideas whose time has come. But a practical underlying cause of this zeitgeist many scholars agree was that the churches had lost some of their power once people had access to the Books of the Bible, through the advent of printing and its translation into English. Not that John Biddle needed a translation of the Bible. No, John Biddle could read the Bible in its original Greek, not only read it – he knew the vast majority of the Bible off by heart in both English and Greek. And once you can read a text you start forming your own ideas about it – a thinking person will no longer automatically believe that X is true just because a ruler of the church tells them it is true. A thinking person will read a text and make up their own mind about its meaning.

On the front of today's order of service sheet I have quoted Charles A. Howe's words from his book called For Faith and Freedom – A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe:

"For his persistence, influence, and his courageous and open exposition of beliefs, John Biddle has long been known as the 'father of English Unitarians'."

John Biddle, father of English Unitarians, yet he never, so far as I know, used the word Unitarian.

John Biddle was greatly influenced by the writings of an Italian called Faustus Socinus who went to live in Poland in the late 1500s. Poland at that time was a religiously tolerant land where Protestant ideas were becoming very popular. Faustus Socinus has also been called the architect of modern Unitarianism (Parke p.24) and his writings spread quickly throughout Europe even though in most countries including England, it was illegal to possess them. Large numbers of texts were smuggled into the country in the 16th and 17th centuries. Shortly before his death Socinus encouraged his friends to complete the work he had drafted known as the Racovian Catechism – a hugely important document that set out Socinian views in a traditional question and answer format. This catechism set out key beliefs that John Biddle would fully support:

- That the holy Scriptures ie, the Bible, are the source of all authority rather than any later teachings of the church fathers
- That Jesus was a man, a supreme example of goodness for all humanity to follow, conceived by a virgin, risen from the dead
- That God is one being, not three separate beings.

John Biddle had come to similar views from his own reading of the Bible and in 1644 composed for his friends a brief theological statement, known as his 12 Arguments, in which he argued using scripture as his source that the holy spirit is not God, that God is one. He argued powerfully that the doctrine of the Trinity was both 'unscriptural and unreasonable' (Howe). It was for publications like this that John Biddle spent over half of his adult life in prison or under house arrest or in exile in a castle on the Scilly Isles. He was lucky not to be executed since Parliament had voted the death penalty for deniers of the Trinity. His works were ordered to be publicly burnt by the hangman as heretical texts.

The fact that he was freed and imprisoned so many times gives a sense of the religious fervour of his time but also of its confusion. Biddle and his beliefs were mentioned often in Parliament, Oliver Cromwell, he who had promised religious tolerance, Cromwell was the one who banished Biddle to the Scilly Isles but also gave him an annual subsidy of 100 crowns for his subsistence – no small sum in those days.

Biddle's works were banned yet he was often given a Bible and writing paper when he was in prison. The mainstream church regarded him as a heretic and demanded the burning of his publications, yet also cared for the state of his soul. A famous churchman of the time Archbishop Usher, visited Biddle to try and persuade him to change his beliefs. What a conversation that must have been. Usher who had studied the Bible in minute detail and undertaken complex calculations that allowed him with some certainty to declare that the world had been created in the year 4004BC, a belief still held widely in the Victorian era

some two hundred years later. Biddle an equally determined Biblical scholar, who believed in god as one Being – a truly anthropomorphic God as father up in heaven, up there in the sky.

The 1600s were a long time ago. If you were to read Biddle's writings I suspect that most of you like me would find them long and turgid and hard to comprehend. Strange to think that Biddle gave up his liberty and died at the age of 47, broken by ill-health caused by frequent imprisonment. Strange to think of the many others who were executed for their religious beliefs. And then we remember what is happening around the world today. In Tibet you will be imprisoned for possessing a photograph of the Dalai Lama or for waving a Tibetan national flag. In Zimbabwe most people are too frightened to speak out against their government. In Gaza as a Palestinian you cannot cross a border or leave to seek refuge in another land. The cause of freedom around the world still needs all the help it can get. I hope that we as Unitarians are empowered by our brave forebears such as John Biddle – his theology may be old fashioned but his commitment to freedom is as relevant today I believe as it was all those years ago. Amen.

Benediction:

May peace and justice and harmony and freedom prevail in our world. May all people of the world and their leaders be touched a by a spirit of gentleness and love and may we find that gentleness and love in our own hearts now and always, amen.