

One World, Our World

Welcome everyone to Essex Church, where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each week. Our community is created by all those who walk through our doors, welcome to those who are new to this place or to Unitarian worship, welcome to those of you who are here most weeks, welcome to visitors and welcome everyone. I invite you now to take a breath and to tell yourself that you are truly here, you have arrived. Be focussed and present. Relax. Know yourself to be truly welcomed just as you are. Allow yourself to feel accepted for who you are, just as you are. And as I often say at the start of our time together on a Sunday morning, may we all find something of what we most are in need during the next hour – may the weary find rest, may the troubled find peace, may those who feel blessed find new ways to share their good fortune with others, and may we sense that we are part of something greater than ourselves – for whatever our faith and our beliefs, we are part of the great stream of life itself, flowing, moving, ever onwards together, inhabiting together this our one world.

Chalice Lighting:

This week is designated as One World Week here in Britain – an interfaith initiative that began back in 1978. Its aim is to raise awareness at a local level of global issues, to take action to overcome poverty, promote justice and work towards sustainability. One World Week encourages us to celebrate all that is good about living in a diverse yet interconnected world and this year's theme is called Peacing Together One World and reminds us of all we can do to bring a culture of peace into our daily lives. So may the light of our chalice flame this morning, this symbol of our worldwide Unitarian community, may this light shine in all of our hearts and in the togetherness of our gathered community and be reflected out into our one world, shining out to all places where the light of peace and tolerance, justice and love might brighten and lighten and warm people's lives.

Prayer for Candles of Joy and Concern:

May the joys and concerns spoken here this morning and those which remain unspoken, known only to those who hold them close, may all our joys and concerns be enfolded in the warmth of this community and may that warmth extend in sympathy and compassion to all who are hurting in our wider world. Amen.

Story:

When I was a teenager, a long time ago, there were certain items of clothing that you just had to have and when I look back it's hard to imagine that I wanted them so very very much. One of these essential items was an afghan coat – a beautifully soft sheepskin coat covered with bright embroidery. I've never forgotten the conversation I had with my mum one day when I said 'mum, mum, I really need an Afghan coat,' and she looked at me in that kind but parental sort of way and said "Sarah you don't need a coat, you want a coat – and they are two very different things". Here is an Islamic story...

'Once upon a time a holy man came to the court of a great King with a beggar's bowl and asked the King if he could fill his little bowl.

The King looked at the holy man with disdain and thought to himself: 'Why is this holy man asking me, a rich and powerful king, to fill his tiny little bowl?' He proudly and confidently said, 'Yes, I will fill your bowl!'

But the bowl was not an ordinary bowl - it was a magic bowl. Hundreds and thousands and millions were poured into it; but it simply would not fill up. It always remained half empty - its mouth wide open for more and yet more!

When trying to fill it made the King begin to feel poor, he said: 'O Holy Man, tell me – are you not a magician and is this not a magic bowl? It has swallowed up my treasures and yet it is still empty.'

The holy man answered quietly: 'O King, if the whole world's treasure was put into it, it would still remain empty. Do you know what this bowl is? It is the 'want' that lives within us human beings, the yearnings and desires that can never be fulfilled, will never be satisfied'.

This story of our never ending human wants reminds me of Mahatma Gandhi's words that "our world has enough for everyone's needs but not enough for our greed". The challenge of our time is then how to share the world's resources more equitably – the cause for hopefulness in our time is that there is enough to go round and we have our marvellous human capacity for inventiveness and problem solving to help us find the way. My personal hope is that political and economic strength may be added to the commitment made by many people the world over to reduce poverty, because I believe that the

root causes of many conflicts lies in the unfair sharing of resources – be that land, or food or water. We learn in childhood that we can't have everything that we want, but let's live in hopefulness that we can and will meet everybody's needs.

Address:

Isn't it refreshing when you meet someone who is disarmingly honest about their failures. Last year I went to hear Rowan Williams the arch bishop of Canterbury speak about 17th century poetry, on which he is very knowledgeable. And at the end when there was time for questions the subject strayed from poetry to the Anglican church and he was asked how he thought his efforts to keep this community together were going, maintaining links between the African churches with their needs along with the very different needs of north American congregations. He gave a rueful smile, rubbed his head and said that he felt he was not doing a very good job at all. And at that moment my respect for him grew. Rowan Williams is also a fine writer and communicator – these words of his were written in response to the environmental problems that assail our planet:

"...the fundamental question is who we are, where do we belong, do we belong anywhere in this world? Because we behave as if we didn't, and one of the underlying, evasive, moral and imaginative questions that arises in thinking about climate change and the wider environmental agenda is this habit, this ingrained tradition of behaving as if we didn't belong, as if we were not part of an interactive system, as if we were brains on stalks. So the moral question is not simply ... about what you do, it is about imagining who we are, reviving that sense of being part of a system, not one that imprisons or crushes us, but one in which we become who we are by interaction... we are now in an environment in which local resolution, local decision has to open out into global perspective."

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury

The theory has been proposed that humanity's relationship with the earth changed forever the day that the now iconic photo was beamed back by the American space mission – you can perhaps visualise it now – that glorious photo of the planet earth spinning in dark space, the earth with its swirling white cloud patterns and the rich blue depths of its oceans. By all accounts that view had a profound effect on the astronauts who saw it and I think in some way it has touched us all. We may know intellectually that we live on a spherical, rocky globe spinning in space but to see that is in some sense to know it within your body as well as your mind, for the first time.

What that image leaves me with is a sense that this is it – we are here now, the planet is as it is, it has its magnificent qualities, the gifts with which all life is supported – we belong on it – there's nowhere else to go, there is no external agent to rescue us – we are here now and the planet and all of existence is in our hands as the song said at the start – this is where we belong and this is our task to behave as Rowan Williams said as responsible and interacting parts of the whole system, living in harmony and balance with the whole.

As we all watched the dramatic rescue of the miners trapped deep in that mine in Chile this week I think we were reminded once again that we live on one planet and that global media links join us with people on the other side of the world. What a powerful story this rescue has been. It's so rare for us to have good news beamed at us from our TVs isn't it. And the whole event was so carefully managed from a media point of view. One commentator said that this story and the way that it was managed will soon be appearing in media studies text books, not least because of the skilful way that the new president of Chile has utilised what seemed at first a disaster to be instead a rallying cry for a new Chile that has shaken off its old image of dictatorship and repression. And why not. Perhaps we too can use this event for our own purposes – to seek symbols in our own lives of good emerging from bad, of that which was trapped and hidden being released.

Meanwhile I read yesterday that an explosion in a coal mine in central China has killed at least 20 miners and trapped 17 more. The drama of human life goes on and people working in a perilously dangerous industry will continue to risk their lives. And yet... perhaps another benefit of being part of a world community is that the news media that encircles our world will be able to shine the light of awareness into places that have previously been hidden, kept secret. Maybe the newly invigorated government of Chile will enact much needed mine safety legislation. Perhaps the Chinese government will want to be seen as being fully in charge of its countries many industries. And so as I now start to pass this globe round and invite you if you wish to say something you want to celebrate about our world community – I'd like to start by giving thanks for our media with all their flaws – who still do their bit to spread good news and to shine light in places that were once closed

Benediction:

The world is in our hands, the whole world is in our hands, but it is does not have to be a lonely or burdensome task to look after this precious gift for it is a shared task that comes along with the gift of being alive. And just as we look after the homes in which we live and keep them as functional and as comfortable and as beautiful as we can so we can together look after our shared home, planet earth – and may we take on this task lightly and joyously for the good of those who follow us. Go well, Amen and blessed be.