

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 25th October 2009

Unitarian Views of Jesus

Hello and welcome to Essex Church, where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets each week. Isn't it lovely to have the autumnal sun shining outside, lighting up the changing colours of the trees. It feels warm again.

And whatever the weather outside may we all experience warmth here in this community and in this time we share together. May our common humanity help us to feel connected, part of something greater, and may we be inspired by this community to be all that we can possibly be, living our lives for the greater good of all as well as for ourselves.

Let us take a moment to settle ourselves here, and to raise our awareness of our connectedness with ourselves, with one another and with that which we hold to be of ultimate worth. And may the divine spirit of life and love be with us now, filling this place with warmth and with love always.

Chalice Lighting:

I light our chalice this morning, this flame that symbolizes our world wide liberal religious faith, and remember that if it wasn't for Jesus, with his liberal and indeed radical message, we wouldn't be here at all in Essex Unitarian Church this morning.

Candles of Joy and Concern:

I spoke earlier of our common humanity – when we light candles of joy and concern I am often aware of other people speaking for me in some way – that together we truly express the joy and the challenges of being human. So do come and light a candle and if you wish tell us who or what you are lighting it for – speak up so all can hear.

Address:

They say that the old jokes are the best – so how many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb? Ten – one to hold the light bulb, whilst the rest of us have a long discussion about what we mean by light and how our ideas about light have developed over the years. And since this is Kensington Unitarians you can rest assured that a few people would be busy in a corner making a 3 dimensional light bulb out of multi coloured felt.

And so it is with Unitarian views of Jesus – the possibly ambitious title of this address – there is no one set idea about Jesus in Unitarian circles – there never has been and there never will be – it has to be 'views' in the plural. And any discussion of Jesus quickly comes upon another stumbling block, which is what we mean when we speak of God. So my plan in this address is to give just a bit of an overview of how Unitarian responses to Jesus have developed, to touch on some of the interesting issues that emerge when we start searching for the historical Jesus and to ask what it means to have a personal relationship with someone who lived and died nearly 2,000 years ago. All this in twelve minutes.

And I have secret ambitions – that at least one person in this room will be interested enough in this topic after hearing this woefully inadequate exploration of it that they will ask where they can read some more. And that at least one person who knows more about this subject than I do will fill in the gaps for everyone as we eat together in our shared congregational lunch after today's service.

And of course eating together is one of the themes that emerges in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life – food was as important then as it is now – and it is notable how often shared meals appear in the parables and in the accounts of his life – from the feast prepared for the prodigal son, to the meals eaten with the untouchables of Jewish society – prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners, to the Last Supper – aspects of which became enshrined in Christian doctrine and are being re-enacted on a daily basis by millions of Christians around the world in the Eucharist and Holy Communion.

The Gospel emphasis on eating and drinking as aspects of Jesus' every day life help to convey a sense of his humanity. He comes across as real. Yet I have read more than one quite scholarly consideration of the possibility that Jesus might never have lived at all. Not mainstream theology by any manner of means but worth knowing about.

For someone who has had such a profound effect on human history and the development of modern western society there is actually very little hard and fast evidence of Jesus' existence. There are no written records from the time when he was said to have lived and died – around 30CE. The four gospels written by Matthew Mark Luke and John came later – Mark's gospel as the earliest was probably written around 70CE – forty years after Jesus' death. Paul's letters were written earlier but not even he had ever met Jesus in the flesh.

There are two non-Christian sources that are often cited as corroborating evidence for Jesus' life – a Jewish historian called Josephus writing around 70CE and a Roman historian called Tacitus who mentions Jesus in passing. But scholars have realised that Josephus' account has been over-written at a later date by Christians so Tacitus gives perhaps the more convincing evidence of Jesus' actual existence.

Scholars who query whether Jesus existed or not generally point out that most of the supernatural elements in the gospels are very similar to pagan mystery traditions – the virgin birth, adoration by kings, death on a tree, resurrection after three days, even the bread and the wine of the last supper with its symbolism of eating the flesh and drinking the blood – the latter were common ritual elements in the worship of Dionysius, for example.

I wonder how you react to this possibility – that Jesus might never have existed?

Because for me the best bits of the story are the human bits, the times when Jesus sounds like a flesh and blood human being struggling with some of the life issues that face us all – family, friendship, truth, authority, emotional highs and lows. This interest in the human Jesus became known in biblical scholarship circles as the search for the historical Jesus:

- involving careful study of biblical texts in Greek, seeking out any bits of the Aramaic language of Jesus' time as possibly indicating remnants of oral accounts,
- considering the gospel writers' own positions and reasons for writing and trying to work out the particular slant they each put on their material
- looking for links and divergences between the gospels.

This kind of textual scholarship has been fuelled by studies of documents that were not included in the collection of Books of the Bible that we recognise today. There is a well known fifth gospel – the Gospel of Thomas – and scholars reckon that there must have been at least another 15 gospels – accounts of Jesus' life and teaching – some written earlier than the ones we have in the Bible.

These studies began in the Victorian era. Famous work was carried out by Albert Schweitzer on the historical Jesus and later in the 20th century The Jesus Seminar brought together a diverse group of clergy to consider the biblical accounts in depth and to decide what if anything could be considered authentic. They worked for years and came to the conclusion that only about 20% of the words attributed to Jesus in the gospels were likely to be authentic – which is hardly surprising given that Jesus lived so very long ago, in generally pre-literate times.

So what of us Unitarians and our views of Jesus? A classic Unitarian view of Jesus is that he was human rather than god, that we therefore do not worship him, but consider him to be a, if not the, supreme example of goodness. We didn't invent these ideas – indeed we Unitarians arrive late on the scene – and the history of Christianity is marked by one almighty row after another in which different groups tried to assert that their doctrines were correct and everyone else's were wrong.

The main theology of the very early Christian church seems likely to have been a belief in Jesus as having god like qualities but being less than and therefore in some way separate from God the father. In the late 3rd century CE this teaching was challenged. It became known as the Arian heresy after bishop Arius of Alexandria who held to this view. In the 17th and 18th century Arianism was taken up by a number of Anglican clergymen, some of whom moved towards Unitarian views.

Another key thinker was the Italian Faustus Socinus who in the 16th century taught that Jesus was fully human and saved people, not through atonement through his death on the cross, but by teaching people how best to live through his life and example. Socinus lost his life for this heresy – burnt at the stake in Geneva by Calvin – but he left an important theological legacy in Poland, where he did much of his work, and indeed throughout Europe.

By the 18th and 19th century people who identified themselves as Unitarian mostly placed their beliefs about Jesus into these two areas – either he was fully human or he was in some way divine but less than God. 20th and 21st century Unitarians have far more diverse views – yet I suspect that like our forebears many of us have a sense of connection with Jesus the flesh and blood man – do you have your favourite stories and teachings – learnt in childhood and carried with you into adult life? I ask you to have a think about your favourite stories from the gospels

[talk to person next to you – then ask to share thoughts briefly with one another – examples given were – feeding the 5,000, the story of the prodigal son, Jesus protecting the woman caught in adultery – let him who is without sin cast the first stone, the raising of Lazarus, turning water into wine.]

Many of these examples fit with the Unitarian view of Jesus as the supreme example of goodness – yet let's not forget some of the stories that have him appear less than perfect and far more a flesh and blood, and therefore flawed, human – for example, he showed a racist streak when he refused to give his teachings to the Syro-Phoenician woman he met at a well, because she was a Gentile. Yet he relented when she challenged him. He cursed the fig tree for having no fruit even when it was out of season. He over-turned the money changers' tables in the temple in rage at their misuse of its sacred space.

There is much to explore about Jesus' key teachings and how much of his message was original to him – an area of exploration to save for another day but it could be said that his message can be simplified down into that which matters most in life – like the story we heard earlier on – and what comes across to me from the threads and fragments we have of his life are these two strands – Jesus said that how we live our lives is important – how we treat others – those meals with the untouchables, the kindness to strangers, the judge not lest ye be judged, not throwing that first stone.

And Jesus also said that the relationship we have with God, the divine, that which you hold to be of greatest worth – our individual inner relationship with something that is greater than ourselves – that is equally of importance. Our life's task then is perhaps to explore the relationship between these two strands – that is both our unique path and our common humanity – and both can be found in the simple pleasure of sharing a meal with other people – I hope you can join us for lunch after today's service – or at the very least a cup of tea.

Benediction:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
Its temple all space
Its shrine the good heart
Its creed all truth
Its ritual works of love
Its profession of faith
Divine living

May the power of peace and of love be with us now and in our weeks ahead.
Go well and blessed be.