

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 16th July 2006

What a Wonderful World?

These words are an extract from a letter someone wrote to a friend - “I cannot believe the mess that this city is in – the roads are full of potholes, the streets are so filthy, our politicians are corrupt, scandals occur daily; I do not know what this world is coming to. There has been such a decline in standards in all spheres of public life it seems. The young are disrespectful and quite out of the control of their parents. Why even the fruits and vegetables do not taste as sweet as they used to. The prices of everything are shooting upwards. What is this world coming to?”

Do you ever share that feeling that life is not as it used to be, that standards are declining; it's a common feeling. The words I've just quoted were read out at a workshop I attended. The course leader went on to encourage us all to agree with the letter writer – to complain about all that is wrong with life today. She then revealed that the letter had been written in Rome around 1800 years ago and used that to underline our timeless human need to complain and find fault – perhaps even Stone Age people would have been complaining that the mammoth meat was so tough and chewy these days, that the river water just didn't taste as sweet this year, that the weather was too hot or too cold, that the tribes' leaders were telling lies and feathering their own nests.

Yesterday I conducted a wedding in a place so beautiful – a walled garden in Hampshire with glorious flowers and spreading trees and the kind of vegetable patches I have always yearned for – raised beds and rich earth. After the service I was talking to the groom's father and at the end of our conversation I asked him if he would mind me telling his story today and he said that would be fine. It was the simple and beautiful story of his family and their life – his joy at his son's wedding and the delightful sense of being surrounded by those he loved. But on Monday morning he has to make the difficult decision to commit his wife, who has a degenerative illness and no longer knows who anyone is, to commit his dear wife to a care home because he can no longer manage caring for her on his own. That one story of one family's life said it all for me about all our lives – they are beautiful and precious and full of joy and full of sadness too. This can be a beautiful world and at times it is a very tough place to be.

To some extent our view of the world is linked to our theology – our beliefs about divinity; we should not underestimate the influence that our religious beliefs have on our world view, particularly our unconscious beliefs, those shaped long ago by our upbringing or education. Are people inherently bad do you think – does the doctrine of original sin make sense to you? If you think that people are basically good, how do you explain the evil acts that are perpetrated in this world? Do you believe that we have free will or that our lives are in some way pre-destined or pre-determined? Do we have any power to change the realities of our lives or the lives of others?

We run lots of evening groups here at the church and the latest adult education group was called 'Unitarian What's That?' Any of us who attended that group should now be able to answer that question people ask – 'you go to a Unitarian church do you – what's that then, what do they believe?' – we can be tested over coffee later. We took ourselves back to various key historical times in the development of Unitarianism – one of which is late 18th and early 19th century England – a time when a Unitarian could not attend university for example, when an Act of Parliament was needed to allow Unitarian congregations to own their churches and chapels. Challenging times yet they led into, in the later 19th century, a time of great expansion in all areas of life, an expansion of which Unitarians were at the centre, being involved as they were in so many of the causes of their day – governing towns and cities, improving education, sanitation, medicine, running factories in an enlightened way, engaging in inter-faith dialogue. It's hard for us to imagine now the sense of promise that the Victorian era held – people believed in the possibilities of progress, they had tangible proof that they could make this world a better place to be and they had no reason to imagine that this onwards and upwards progression could be halted. They thought that life could get better and better, that industrial developments could fund social developments, that colonialism was a good thing for everybody concerned and that civilisation was indeed being spread across the world with the British flag waving at the front.

But as we know, that endless progress could not be maintained, life's complexities re-asserted themselves, we entered a century that was to contain two world wars, new challenges to the world's health, and the on-going repercussions of European colonialism. It's a rare person now who speaks entirely positively about life here on planet earth.

But speak positively we can – maybe learning from the rabbi on the train – to speak only praise. And if you were speaking only praise about our wonderful world, what would you mention? Those words of Louis Armstrong’s – “the colours of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky are also in the faces of people passing by. I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do, they’re really saying I love you,” touch a chord in me. The Quakers have that lovely saying about looking for God in everyone they meet, and this idea of seeking the holy in every person is found in many faith traditions. The Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan speaks of humanity’s ‘possibility of rising higher than anything else in the whole of manifestation, whether on earth or in heaven. Therefore the point of view of the mystics and thinkers of all ages has always been respectful in their manner to all people.’

Listen to these words from American poet Walt Whitman:

*I see something of God each hour of the twenty four and each moment then,
In the faces of the men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street and every one is signed by God's name
and I leave them where they are, for I know that whereso'ere I go, others will punctually come for ever and ever.'*

What makes this a wonderful world for you?

At Great Hucklow last year I sat with the teenagers in a circle and we passed the globe around, taking it in turns to sit with the world in our hands. Then we said something that made the world special to us. It was touching to hear those young people speak. I had expected they might give silly answers, that they would say that mobile phones and plasma screen TVs make our world special but no, they were far more thoughtful than that.

Someone said languages – they liked the way that so many different languages are spoken on our planet and yet that there are ways human beings can communicate through smiles and gestures that are a universal language of friendship. She spoke of meeting people on holidays abroad and the pleasure that gave her.

Someone else said that he liked the way our planet has such a variety of landscapes. On this globe you can feel the high ground – the Rockies, the Himalayas, the Andes – he talked about the pleasure of being in Switzerland in the summer, lying in a grassy meadow and looking up at the snow capped peaks towering above.

Another young man talked about all the different cultures that exist in this world of ours and how much we gain from learning more about one another’s lives. We spoke of music and art and crafts and clothing and cooking and architecture and all the myriad ways that we humans express our individuality.

What makes this world special for you I wonder?

We all know that this world can be a terribly tough and painful place to be, a place where it can at times seem as though humanity has lost touch with all that we truly value and find of worth but those values are always there just waiting to be rediscovered. According to Rev. Ricky Hoyt: “Because those values that call us never change, no matter how far away the world slips from them, we can take comfort knowing that the value itself is not damaged by even the worst mistakes we make in our work toward them. The values don’t change, only our circumstances and actions change. Peace is always peace, no matter how much we battle. No amount of injustice lessens the power and beauty of justice. Hate does not destroy love; it only postpones it.

However far we feel today from the world of love, peace, and justice we hope for, nothing about the values of love, peace, and justice has been compromised by humanity’s current actions.... They are not ours to compromise. The values themselves are strong, good, and true, just as strong, just as good, just as true, as they always have been.”

So let us be the people who look for the wonders of the world, people who speak praise and create beauty and hold hope for the future, for we are indeed part of what is a wonderful world.