

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 18th October 2009

When the Going Gets Tough

Hello and welcome to Essex Church, home of Kensington Unitarians on this autumnal Sunday morning. There has been a church on this spot for at least a couple of hundred years now; each Sunday people have gathered here to worship together. Worship implies worshipping something, but in its roots it harks back to that which we hold of worth. We spend this hour exploring individually and collectively that which is important to us. My hope for us all today is that we understand something better about ourselves and one another, and about life itself. This time is set aside from outer concerns, so let us now turn inwards for awhile, centre ourselves here and now; we have arrived, let us be fully here. Let us gather the sometimes scattered fragments of ourselves – our past memories, our future hopes, our dreams and our anxieties, our physical selves, our feelings, our busy minds, and the less tangible but no less important spiritual aspect of ourselves, however we name that – soul, spirit. May we feel ourselves aligned, all of a piece, all the more able to hear that still small voice of wisdom, whether that is for us an inner wisdom or the wisdom of the divine – let us in the stillness of this place of worship be open to that wisdom.

Welcome to you all.

Chalice Lighting: *Words adapted from words by Albert Schweitzer:*

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by the light of another.
We all have reason to think with deep gratitude of those who have rekindled our lights.

Prayers:

Following 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

Would you join now in a time of prayer and reflection:

Spirit of Life, Source of Beauty, Great Mystery,

On this beautiful morning we give thanks.

We give thanks for this precious day.

We know each day is important.

Help us meet this day with reverence, with joy, with intention.

Help us use it to its fullest, to meet whatever life has brought our way.

If life has brought grief, help us grieve well.

Help us acknowledge the depth of our sorrow and not hide from its tenderness.

For we know that we grieve when we have loved.

We grieve when we have allowed ourselves to hope.

We grieve when something precious has been lost to us.

Help us grieve honestly, moving through our sorrow to healing.

If life has brought us joy, help us celebrate well.

Help us stop and notice the blessings we have been given

and acknowledge all those who have helped make them possible.

Help gratitude grow our spirits and teach us to be generous in return.

Help us celebrate honestly and graciously, knowing that joy is a gift.

If life has brought us confusion, help us learn well.

Help us sort through the tangled threads that seem an unfathomable knot.

Help us make peace with mystery, while seeking wisdom.

Help us let go of fear, nurturing the seeds of faith that lie in every confusing time.

Help us remember that seeking can, in itself, be an answer.

If life has brought us boredom, help us break out of the illusion of smallness.

Expand our minds and spirits until we can imagine a thousand ways to be kind,

a thousand things we can do to make life better, for ourselves or someone else.

Help us be daring as we decide what to do with this day.

If life has brought us too much to do, too much to hold, too much to manage,
help us find a spirit of calm amidst it all.
Help us remember to nurture peace of mind as well as peace in our homes and in the world.
Remind us to slow down, centre ourselves, and be present to what really matters.
On this beautiful morning, we take time to give thanks.
We know that today is important.
Help us meet it with reverence, with joy, with intention.
Help us use today to its fullest. Amen.

Address:

For some of us our school days were quite a while ago but I wonder if you can think back to biology lessons and your reaction to them. Do you remember those lessons where you had to copy detailed drawings of the insides of flowers as well as of humans? I went off the subject in a big way when we had to dissect frogs. And the only reason I'm mentioning all this at all is to remind us that one of the defining characteristics of a living being is that it responds in some way to its environment.

This address is about our religious faith and what happens to it when difficult things happen in life. Throughout human history people have been trying to make sense of the sufferings they witness and experience in our world. Humanity's earliest religious impulses were intended to please and placate the capricious deities that ruled the world – the giving of offerings and sacrifices in order to win favours and avert disasters. In our modern insurance documents we still sometimes find small print clauses that avoid liability for so called 'acts of God' – forest fires, floods, volcanoes and earthquakes.

As religious liberals and humanists I suspect that many of us hear some more traditional responses to life's tragedies with a shudder or at least a question mark:

You will have heard these before –

- That suffering is for our own good – that it makes us better people in some way
- That we cannot see the whole picture and if we could see the whole picture and understand the plan, well ... suffering would then make sense
- That everything depends on your perspective – there is a Zen story of the student asking the master why dead animals smell so truly dreadful – and the master replying that to a vulture the dead animal smells as sweetly as a rose. Suffering from another point of view might not be suffering at all.
- There is an argument that suffering ennobles us in some way – yes I suppose it may ennoble and it may also leave us horribly embittered.
- Another response to suffering is to point out that we live in a world of dualities and that we require sorrow in order to know joy, require pain to know pleasure
- Some might respond that we humans have been created with free will and that suffering is an inevitable aspect of our freedom in this world.

Those are just some of the many possible religious responses to suffering – I don't know how you react to them – some I find hard to accept, others have a ring of truth to them. And we could add to those a classic humanist response which is to say that we live and die, there will be good and bad times along the way and that we humans sometimes have the power to make a difference and sometimes not.

You know how doctors say that they prefer not to reveal their profession at parties because they get a steady stream of people telling them about their bad knee or insomnia – or asking them to take a look at their dermatitis and give a second opinion? Well there is a similar issue with being a minister. People find out my job and either beat a hasty retreat for fear I might try and convert them or spend a long time telling me about their unusual religious experiences - or they'll challenge me about my own beliefs. 'So you believe in God then do you?' some will say with a slightly mocking tone.

And I'm prepared to share with you now a classic Unitarian response which can get you out of many a tight corner when trapped in the kitchen at a party with a militant atheist: The classic Unitarian response when asked if you believe in God is to say - 'well – it all rather depends what you mean by God'.

And if they stay around to hear more, this I think is the moment to point out the damage that has been done by the traditional Christian imagery of God as kindly yet all powerful father in the sky looking down on us all. This imagery I would argue has caused more people to question religion than anything else – for there are indeed so many more possible ways to define God.

A group of us are studying a course here at Essex Church at the moment called Building Your Own Theology. I first attended that course in 1990 and will never forget the moment when Trevor Jones, the minister who was leading it – when asked about his belief in God – said that he didn't believe in God, as such – what he believed in was the power of love to make a difference in our world.

A religion existed where ministers did not necessarily believe in God – or the God that I'd been taught about in child hood – I realised at that moment that I was a Unitarian.

But it's not just Unitarians that have a monopoly on interesting ways to define God. I have been touched by Rabbi Kushner's ideas expressed in his book 'Why Bad Things Happen To Good People'. This is such a moving book – it's Rabbi Kushner's response to the terrible sadness that befell their family when they discovered that their 3 year old son Aaron had an illness called progeria – which meant that he would age rapidly and die in his early teens. Kushner struggled with his faith but came to believe in a God that is not all powerful but in a God that has given us the ability to forgive and the ability to love – and that these are qualities that can make such a difference in our world.

I also think of Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work, forged in the terrible suffering of the second world war. Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis shortly before the end of the war, movingly describes a God that suffers with humanity and the strength that may come from sensing in our darkest hours that we actually are not alone.

And it is a story from the 2nd World War that underpins this address today. You have perhaps heard it before. I read the story in Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's autobiography and last year it was made into a drama by the BBC – entitled God On Trial. I'm not sure now if this story is true or apocryphal – but it tells of a group of Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz – sickened by the hanging of innocent children earlier that day by the brutal camp guards. The Jewish prisoners decide that they will convene a Rabbinical court and put God on trial. They call witnesses both for the prosecution and defence: Why is there so much suffering in the world and what kind of God would allow it to happen they ask? From all walks of life, a physicist, a glove maker, rabbis, a law professor and at least one criminal weigh the evidence and offer thoughtful arguments taken from history, science, theology and personal experience.

After lengthy debate the court is unanimous in finding God guilty of allowing innocents to suffer. Then as they leave the court the rabbis see that it is time for the evening prayer and without a word all three fall to their knees and pray. In the end it is not God that is on trial so much as faith and in the face of great suffering the rabbis choose faith – despite everything. The idea behind this story stems I think from the ancient rabbinical tradition of wrangling with God – Jewish faith encourages this kind of deep thinking and engaging in debate about life's key issues. It acknowledges that life is at times unbearably tough and our faith has to be able to respond to the existence of suffering if it is to be a living faith.

The French philosopher La Rochefoucauld wrote that a "great storm puts out a little fire but it feeds a strong one" and I think the history of the 20th century has been a great test for humanity's faith. Not because I think people behaved any worse in the 20th century but because, perhaps for the first time, the world community as a whole found out exactly how badly people could behave and because the Holocaust in particular demonstrated the depths to which people may sink in pursuit of an ideology. The writer of the God on Trial drama, Frank Cottrell Boyce, wrote in a Guardian article about eugenics and the fact that it was a widely supported idea in the 1920s. Intelligent people really did think that it would be possible and indeed desirable to improve the gene pool – to weed out the weak and less able in society. Apparently Marie Stopes, who pioneered birth control and is generally considered to be a force for good from the early 20th century – she refused to speak to her son anymore when he married a young woman who needed to wear glasses.

What all this leaves me with is a sense of how terribly flawed we humans can be in our thinking and in our actions – how foolish and dangerous our self-deceptions can be – the depths of cruelty and violence we can at times sink to. And on the other side of the scales I remember the inspiring characteristics that I have seen people demonstrate in response to the world's troubles – compassion, altruism, generosity, ingenuity, determination, courage, patience and humour.

And as for God –well – who knows? All we can do as religious liberals is to examine our own beliefs from time to time, listen with curiosity and respect to the beliefs of others and brace ourselves for interesting conversations at parties – and remind ourselves that is we are responding to the thorny issue of suffering in our world – well at least it's a sign that we're alive – and for that let us give thanks! Amen.

Benediction:

If here you have found freedom, take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams, help one another that they may come true.

If you have known love give some back to a bruised and hurting world.

Go in peace. Amen