

‘Like a Watered Garden’ by Rev Ann Peart

GA Anniversary Sermon – 16 April 2004, at Chester

Yesterday morning Colin Fisher, in the Task Force presentation, described our Unitarian communities as a household containing people of many different religious beliefs and views, surrounded by a garden – a garden which is a riot of colour. That picture could also apply to these annual meetings – crowded with concerns, interests, simultaneous meetings – certainly colourful, though no actual riots yet, as far as I know. The bright colours of activity are contained within the quieter colours of worship and reflection, perhaps time out by the canal, or sitting in the Cloisters garden with its little pool.

Now we bear witness together in our anniversary service – celebrating the founding of our General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches seventy-six years ago, the amalgamation of bodies formed in the nineteenth century from yet earlier institutions. How gracious of the cathedral authorities to allow us to worship in this magnificent building, so rich in tradition. How good that we can fill this sacred space with Unitarian worshippers.

Yet – I can’t help wondering what the founders of this assembly would make of this occasion.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the people who gathered to form communities that were to become the Unitarian congregation of Chester in Matthew Henry’s Chapel, did not enjoy such courtesy. In 1662, after the Act of Uniformity, several clergy were ejected from their livings as parish priests in this city. William Cooke, minister at St Michael’s Church on Bridge Street, was imprisoned several times for preaching - imprisoned at the instigation of the Bishop of the time. So it is with mixed feelings that I stand here to preach to you. You may smile, but you should also know that, at the end of the seventeenth century, another dissenting minister, Ralph Hall, was also thrown

into the Northgate gaol for preaching. He continued to preach in prison, and some of those he converted were later executed. However, neither you nor I are in such danger today. Times have changed; instead of being imprisoned or executed, we are welcomed so graciously by Canon John Roff.

How can we be true to our dissenting religious heritage in this place, on this occasion? We may not share the theology of William Cooke or Ralph Hall, or the men and women who followed them, but, like them, we seek to find and practice that which seems most worthy, so that good might flourish. Religious truths are not what they were. Our ancestors, influenced by enlightenment philosophy, assumed that educated, enlightened reason, brought to bear on scripture, would reveal what is true; Christianity in its simplest, purest, and most intelligible form.

In our post modern age we have come to see that theological truths such as detailed descriptions of the nature of God, and of God's way of working in the world, can neither be proved objectively nor defined precisely, - or made to stand for all people in all time. We have begun to learn that individual standpoints and experience influence what we can believe; that much religious doctrine is a mystery or a metaphor for what cannot be defined exactly. So we have come to express our faith not in closed doctrines, but in principles – principles of free religious enquiry; trust that truth is best served where mind and conscience are free; trust in the inherent worth and dignity of all people; of respect for all creation.

I wonder if any of us would be willing to follow Michael Servetus, who, 450 years ago, was burned to death testifying to “Jesus, son of the eternal God”, when he might have saved himself by changing the order of the words to “Jesus, eternal son of God”.

Yet – we would affirm that beliefs are important. As Sophia Lyon Fahs put it, “Some beliefs are like walled gardens; they encourage exclusiveness and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies”. So we search for ways of being a religious community, or community of communities, that are not like the walled garden, but more like the watered garden that the reading from the book of Isaiah proclaimed.

How do our Unitarian principles inform this search? I would want to affirm the requirement to try to be honest – to live a life of integrity and authenticity – to witness to what seems to be true and worthy. This can be uncomfortable, and sometimes leads to a struggle between what seems to be socially acceptable, and what seems to be true or what justice demands. So often, I would really like to be comfortably respectable; but then I find myself saying or doing something that feels like shooting myself in the foot, and causes at least a raised eyebrow, or puts me beyond the pale of polite society.

Our Unitarian story has the same problem. Throughout the nineteenth century, we strove to throw off all the civil disabilities put on dissenters. We built magnificent gothic churches to prove that we were just as good Christians as the mainstream. We internalised middle class Victorian domestic values of polite society. – And then shot ourselves in the foot exactly one hundred years ago, by training and recognising, in 1904, a woman, Gertrude von Petzold, to be a regular minister of a congregation. – An event that seemed quite scandalous to well brought-up middle class ladies and gentlemen.

In more recent times we have been, I think, the only denomination to state unequivocally that our ministry is open to people regardless of sex, race, or sexual orientation; and we still struggle with the discomfort. Judy Hague, in her keynote address on Wednesday, talked of the open door, through which we welcome all in-comers. This morning Mel Prideaux, in her opening worship, showed us a picture of just such

a door. Judy talked primarily of welcoming people with recognised disabilities; but how much harder it can be to welcome those who just do not appear to fit in – perhaps people who do not wash, or who have complicated personal lives, as one speaker put it – people who make us face up to the realities of lives that do not conform to conventional respectability. Yet – our vision of the worth and dignity of each person leads us to try to overcome our discomfort. If we and our communities are to flourish, we need, not the walled garden of exclusivity, but the watered garden of social justice and enlarged sympathy.

Having the right beliefs is not enough. Robert Walsh illustrates this by telling the story of a theology college teacher in America, in Kansas City. The teacher was put on trial for heresy by the Southern Baptists who ran the college. He was accused of being a Universalist (That is, someone who believes that all people, not just the elect, can be saved.) He had stated publicly that he believed that all people born into the world are children of God. He even supported the ordination of women! Yet, after four hours of debate, the Baptists decided, by a vote of 21 to 11, that there was not enough evidence to convict him, so they let him keep his job. The only way to secure a firm conviction would be to show that the man participated in and supported a Unitarian -Universalist church. “Beliefs”, says Robert Walsh, “no matter how noble, must be embodied in a living institution, or they will have no convicting power” .

The Universalist belief in the availability of salvation for all is, of course, part of our British Unitarian heritage. However, I’m not at all sure that salvation is still a helpful concept. I respond to the words of Linda Underwood:

All this talk of saving souls – souls weren’t meant to save,

Like Sunday clothes that give out at the seams.

They're made for wear – they come with life-time guarantees.

Don't save your soul – Pour it out like rain on cracked parched earth.

The Hebrew Bible refers in places not to salvation, but to flourishing, especially in the context of wisdom and social justice, as in the passage we heard on the watered garden of Isaiah. But “social justice” sounds both cold and daunting. Isaiah talks of removing the burdens from our fellow inhabitants of this planet, of avoiding pointing the finger, and speaking of evil, (Let us remember this in our debates tomorrow.) of offering food to the hungry, and attending to the needs of the afflicted. On Wednesday, in the John Rely Beard Lecture, David Doel expressed it as reaching out, in love.

But sometimes the enormities of world conflict and global injustice overwhelm us, and leave us feeling powerless, helpless in the face of the big battalions. We go round in circles, arguing about whether to try to change the world, or just ourselves, forgetting that these are not alternatives. Just think of the move towards buying fairly traded goods in our shops. It isn't an enormous step to buy bananas, tea or coffee produced by farmers who have been given a fair return for their work; and it's a positive pleasure to buy fairly traded chocolate! Yet, when enough people do it, the effect is significant on a global scale.

Small details of our daily lives – recycling paper, as we shall do tomorrow lunch-time, refusing unnecessary plastic bags, taking the bus instead of the car – can become not just a way of living responsibly, but a spiritual discipline, feeding the soul in unexpected ways. When these small acts reflect, consciously, our Unitarian values, a simple gesture, like drinking tea with someone from a different culture,

becomes a religious act. Jean's reading of "Tea in the Desert" perhaps has a parallel in her experience as Women's League President.

Yesterday she talked of the importance of kindness, and reflected on the kindness she had received on her travels. She also presented a cheque for over £10,000 to Water Aid. Not only will this save hundreds of lives by giving access to safe water, but the water will literally enable gardens to flourish and food to grow.

To be true to our religious heritage, we cannot be content with theoretical statements of principle; we have to act on these, within our communities and in the wider world. So may we flourish, trusting ourselves to the living waters, and become, not a walled garden, but, with a riot of colour, like a watered garden.