

## **JOURNEYING IN FAITH – THE 2005 GA ANNIVERSARY SERMON**

**(delivered in Chester Cathedral on 7th April 2005)**

**By Rev. J. Eric Jones**

During this address, I want to remind you of the journeys we've all undertaken during our lives and encourage you to look with joy at future adventures, keeping our eyes on the horizon.

I have often wondered what went through Abraham's mind when the Lord said to him "Raise your eyes and look into the distance. Now, travel through the length and breadth of the land" What were his hopes, ? How did he see the journey ahead / and What was his vision ?

The world into which I was born consisted of a few isolated farmhouses, sheep grazing on the hillside, horses in the stable, ready for a day's work, cows waiting to be milked, cats who kept mice at bay and dogs who helped to keep all the animals on the move.

Two miles away was the school which I started to attend at the age of nine years , five years later than anyone else, due to the effects of Measles and Whooping Cough. Along the road to school, I crossed streams, climbed over a gate, avoided muddy patches, occasionally got into trouble with brambles and picked wild strawberries from the hedges. I learned to read and write a long time after everyone else and at some point in those early days evacuees from Liverpool and London arrived, speaking a strange language.

My journey had begun, and somehow moved on to where I've arrived today, but of course, I'm still moving and learning, trying to sort things out and having to adapt my way in life as ever before, just as organisations and institutions have to learn to change and adapt constantly. Life is not straightforward and the journey always tends to be unpredictable.

Sometimes, we all have to grapple with mud and brambles, trying to avoid our feet getting wet, and occasionally, I'm glad to say, can enjoy wild strawberries and the singing of the birds. Very early in my Ministry, I remember being asked the question "What is the point of being here, if the only purpose is to be taken away again ?" The answer, I'm afraid, was quite inadequate.

But I have learnt that whether we travel on a country path, or on a busy road or by non stop motorway, the journey takes us forward as we pass and taste new experiences and we are prepared for the next step along the road.

We are all on a journey - geographically, educationally, mentally and spiritually.

I moved from my rural Welsh speaking community to an industrial Valleys Community in South Wales - not very far geographically but a

million miles apart in the experience of the people who live there. As we move along, we are continually experiencing new outlooks and aspects, - some delightful and some dull and uninteresting, some exhilarating and some causing pain and destruction. That is the pattern of the journey of life for very many people.

I remember being fired with imagination by my Primary School teacher as she related the adventures of the Old Testament and New Testament, with accounts of people such as Abraham on his journey to Haran or Moses leading the Israelites from Egypt, Joseph and his brothers, the man who was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, Jesus roaming around the Sea of Galilee and Paul taking Christianity to Europe.

I've just been reading a book by Elvey Macdonald which follows the long journey of people from the Cynon Valley, where I live, and other parts of Wales to establish a Welsh Community in Patagonia in South America. What an adventure! Tragic losses by death along the way but a journey which succeeded because they had enough faith and determination to make it to the end and established their own community in a foreign land and made a go of it.

Similarly, there were the Unitarian tenant farmers in the Parish of Llandysul who left their livelihoods and their familiar environment in order to re-establish themselves in America. There was little choice for them but to leave because they dared to vote for the Liberal Candidate rather than the Tory Landlord in the election of 1868. That journey took even more lives.

Many of us have travelled far into places and situations which we never dreamt about in our schooldays - if not far in miles, then some distance in our spiritual and emotional experience.

Recently, a very large volume was published in Aberdare illustrating the journey of the Nonconformist chapels in the valley - 180 of them exerting tremendous influence and providing people with education - reading and writing, culture in the form of choirs, drama groups, discussion on politics, social welfare, justice, human rights as well as worship and spiritual sustenance.

The leaders of the day were men and women of stature, unafraid, with their eyes fixed to the horizon and forward they went on a journey which changed the nature of our society in many ways. They were so successful that they almost made themselves redundant. Local Authorities, the Government, professional organisations took up the challenge of providing those things which our religious communities used to provide and suddenly, our church and chapel communities found themselves left with just the spiritual sustenance to offer people.

We may have failed in our time to realise the importance of what is left, the survival of such havens of support that we still have in this day and age. I am quite convinced that people are looking around for something and somewhere to fill that empty corner of their lives, and our centres of faith could contribute substantially in providing light for those dark corners.

Up to now the journey of our centres of faith have been dangerous, (risking imprisonment and persecution) educational, enlightening ,sometime dull and uninspiring too.

But we are still on that journey today - you and I - its up to us to follow the pathway and its not as easy as we may think.

By the way, a meeting arranged by one of the chapel groups in our valley was advertised by a poster which read “ Come to our meeting house for re-assurance. This week our topic will be....HEAVEN - Where is it ? How do we get there ? Transport will be provided.

Unitarians have never really been so sure about it all.

What I do know is that we are on a constant journey and each experience adds another dimension to our lives. Our lives are filled with journeys of sadness and journeys of joy, journeys which will increase our visions and take us to fresh pastures. It was Kahlil Gibran who wrote and promised “Ready am I to go and my eagerness with sails full set, awaits the wind” A well known poster proclaims “ A ship is safe in a harbour but that is not what ships are built for “

Tomorrow is unknown but today is ours. For safety, we have to keep looking ahead, clearing a path into our future from where we are today - that’s true of us as individuals as its is true of Unitarians , Baptists, Anglicans, Muslims and Jews. As we leave the harbour, I hope that we too can leave an impression from our time - build on our traditions , more than just leaning on the traditions of the past..

As individuals in a Spiritual movement, and collectively as congregations, we are on a continual journey. Sometimes we don't like the change of scenery, the change of weather, the muddy spots and the muddy patches. We do our best to avoid them. But on we must go.

The farming communities of the countries of Britain have been through a very difficult time when the message was that they should seek ways to diversify, Holidays on the farm, create a fish farm, an adventure playground in a farm environment or even develop a Flag factory as I read recently. Its been painful.

Religious groups including our own are having to face diversification too both at the centre and at congregational level. We may find ourselves on an intersection of five or six roads. Our congregations are realising that what was popular and appealing 50 years ago has ceased to appeal by now and we find it hard to accept that the process of evolution and the continual journeying has affected us also and like the farmers, we need to find other ways to serve in a meaningful capacity.

I am a firm believer that a great deal depends on our Unitarian Congregations dotted around the land. At one time, our churches were a hive of activity as centres of culture and the arts . Much of that has been taken away but we are still left with something which is sorely needed in our present day society and that is the quickening of the

spiritual thirst all around us - that feeling inside us which sometimes makes us feel uneasy, uncomfortable, dissatisfied and empty.

Our congregational buildings can be used to satisfy the needs of such people. Some will find what they need in the traditional Sunday Worship (and too often we believe that that is all that is needed in this day and we are a little reluctant to explore any further), but there are people out there who think differently - looking for something different - meditation, music, sharing a meal, ahring a walk,holistic healing or just simply a place to savour the peace and quiet away from the rush and noise of the stressful world outside ; somewhere they can feel the warmth and the glow of friendship within the heart and soul of the congregation. We need to leave a mark on people's lives and on their outlook.

That reminds me of the story of a Welsh Minister travelling from chapel to chapel around 80 years ago . He was getting on a bit and he didn't want to admit that the years were creeping up and giving his age away. He decided that he would dye his hair black in order to hide the grey which was a little too prevalent. Things were not quite as sophisticated in those days and one lady philosophically remarked that when he came to stay on a Saturday night, ready for the Sunday , that Mr. Morgan would always leave his mark..... there would be a grey shadow on the pillow the following morning.

Paul Tillich who died in 1965 maintained that there were three types of anxiety which was a cause of worry for people. One was the anxiety in regard to illness and death, - what did life have in store for them.? The second was the anxiety caused by one's conscience - what we may have said to someone causing regret afterwards. The third was a lack of meaning and direction to life and he maintained that this was the cause of many people's feeling of distress and insecurity. What is the purpose of it all ? Why are we doing such and such a thing ? He believed, even 50 years ago that the vein which carried assurance and a sense of peace into the heart was not effective even in the midst of abundance, wealth and plenty. If it was true 50 years ago, it is even more true today.

It was Dr. J.R.Jones of Swansea University who said that even in one's own lifetime, there are gripping ideas and purposeful events that can deteriorate to such an extent , that they no longer have a meaningful purpose, and that no-one can continue to live one's life still trying to do the things which no longer have a meaning . We should all seek ways of securing a meaningful direction for life . That is where our congregations come in - our centres of spiritual support - those havens at home which mean so much for us.

Alfred Zimmern was of the opinion that the church is the only agency for transforming small scale individuals into world concerned people. I like that, because it gives us a continuous challenge - transforming us from small scale individuals into world concerned people. We exist for many reasons and among them must be combating prejudices and intolerances in

which are rooted many of the social problems of our times. We have a role which devotes itself to comforting, healing and saving individuals, perplexed, confused and wounded in the process of a complicated, tension producing civilisation. We need to promote programmes with a view of supporting those who are in need of our care and love. Also I believe that we attend our centres of spiritual support for our own good and our own happiness and wellbeing. We are in constant need of personal spiritual refreshment too.

With such challenging tasks before us, our church communities have a role which is as important as ever - as important as education, welfare, injustice were a hundred or more years ago. We stand as a clear witness to the highest ideals of human life in a world which seeks a soft, easy and comfortable life. It calls people to the highest character and the noblest service. It challenges the very best in the very best of women and men and stretches forth a helping hand to the poorer and most marginalised of human beings. It emphasises spiritual values in a materialistic age and gives value and worth to us as a family of worshippers and to individuals within our family.

Though I do not know the author, I like this quotation.

“I belong to the great church which holds the world in its starlit aisles.

That claims the great and good of every race and clime;  
that finds with joy the grain of gold in every creed.

And floods with light and love the germs of good in every soul.”

The Unitarian church has travelled some distance over the past fifty years in my experience. It may not be travelling quite fast enough as we still long for the things which appealed when we were young. My old route to school is now free from mud, there are no gates to climb over, the rivers have bridges over them and the wild strawberries have long disappeared but the steep climbs remain, the view is still the same and the purpose of the journey is very similar.

My cousin came to school along a path which crossed three fast flowing rivers, wet marshes, a derelict cottage and a dark wood but opened out into wide countryside with lots of children waiting for the school bus. I walked along that path last year and found that there was no trace of the derelict cottage, the three footbridges had collapsed into the river, nature had taken charge of the pathway and it was nowhere to be found. The path had closed and all the cottages in the remote community had become derelict. The people had gone and the place was different.

So many of our church and chapel communities have pointed the way for so many people along the generations. People have benefited. If those centres of spirituality are closed for ever, so much will be lost - but then, if we do not use them, nature will take over and they too will face closure, and another aid to the journey of life will be lost, and the world will be poorer for that.

When Clough Williams Ellis built and developed Port Meirion in North Wales he said that his dream was to cherish our past, adorn the present and build upon the future - Yes , build upon the future. our ancestors even built upon the future with their vision - it could be our privilege also.

We are the people who can make use of these pathways of the spirit and as we travel along, we will take others with us and they will be able to savour the views, experience the silence and taste the odd wild strawberry on the way.

So let us travel on our way, singing our sweet melodies as we go, radiating warmth and creating a glow in dark places. Smile a lot and believe in our mission. All that is needed and we can provide it if we have the will to keep the pathways open and the vision to open new ones.

“The future”, said John Schaar, “is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made. And the activity of making them, changes both the maker and the destination.”

Rev J. Eric Jones

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