

## **“To dream dreams and see visions”**

*Based on Joel Chapter 2 verse 28*

When the invitation came to be the Anniversary preacher our venue was to be Chester Cathedral and I was delighted because when I acted as supporter to Penny Johnson in the cathedral some years ago we were made so welcome by Canon Trevor Dennis that I wrote a special brief prayer which included giving thanks for the cathedral, its people, their warmth and generosity. I feel that is still true of many connected with the cathedral. My opening was to be, “Without a dream this cathedral would not be here.”

We have been excluded and whilst some feel bitter my feelings are of sadness and so before my main theme I want to give a brief preamble.

At the age of sixteen I almost became confirmed in the Church of England. A new vicar arrived and insisted that all the members of the Scout Group should be confirmed. At that time I attended his church regularly and went along to his confirmation classes. One night we were asked to assent to the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion. On reading them I then said to the vicar, “I can believe about half of them but not the rest.” “Oh well, never mind!” he replied, “Just tell the Bishop that you believe them!” That seemed to be the height of hypocrisy, I eventually realised that I was a Unitarian and never once regretted the move. However I have many Anglican friends and must be one of the few Unitarians who wrote to the BBC when they planned to remove Choral Evensong from Radio 3. We pleaded for its retention as part of our great Anglican choral tradition and I rejoice that a few yards away from Harris Manchester College we have New College chapel with its magnificent choir. At many weddings in our Oxford college chapel we welcome Anglicans to take part; we have allowed Anglicans to hold evensong and also welcomed Catholics to hold a Mass.

Now let’s be positive because in being excluded from the cathedral we are in good company. As Jesus of Nazareth was almost certainly a Jew all his life he would not be allowed to conduct a service in the cathedral. One of Chester’s most famous sons would not be allowed to lead worship even though he believed that music was a gift from God. The Unitarian Sir Adrian Boult was born not far from the cathedral and his family belonged to Matthew Henry’s Chapel; no doubt many of his Chester ancestors paid a compulsory church rate which helped to maintain the cathedral! So I am sorrowful that the cathedral has excluded us but I can still rejoice in the glorious language of the 1662 Prayer Book and when I hear Edward Higginbottom and his splendid New College Choir.

**Now I turn to dreams and visions.** During our days in the Unitarian College Charles Bartlett taught psychology and in one memorable tutorial he told us that all dreams are in black and white. It was one of those rare occasions when we all disagreed with him. My dreams are few and far between but as a boy my dream was certainly in colour. I wore a green goalkeeper’s jersey and was the successor to Stan Hanson in the great Bolton Wanderers team of the nineteen fifties. Then there’s my other technicolour dream. Having mown the green lawn I go round the back of the brown garden shed to the compost bin and chase away the ginger cat trying to catch the birds. My hands and shoes are covered in dirt and someone calls at the house door. They say to me, “Do you know that a bride and groom are waiting for you in the Chapel?” Rushing to the chapel I see the bridesmaids and a bride from a Sikh family in a stunning red wine coloured dress trimmed with gold. Well that dream has not come true in more than forty years but there’s still two months to go before retirement and I have conducted ceremonies for Sikh brides!

The psychologists in our congregation may well rush forward at the end of our service to interpret these dreams for me but please do not because I'll interpret them for myself! All of you will have had some kind of dreams, some will have come true and some will not.

**Can the words of Joel speak to us today? Is there a place for dreams and visions?** “To dream dreams and see visions” has been a recurring theme of mine during more than forty years of ministry and whenever people have followed the advice and acted upon their dream or vision then in my experience they have always succeeded. Listen to the words of Joel, slightly adapted.

*“Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men and women shall dream dreams, your young men and women shall see visions”*

Joel was pleading for peace and he had a vision of a new world. The exact phrase is repeated centuries later in Acts Chapter 2 and on taking a look at Cruden's Concordance I found 57 main references to dreams in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. If we looked in other great scriptures we would find more references. Some of the references refer to nations having dreams and visions but many refer to individuals having a dream like the one of Samuel in our reading.

Joel's words are still relevant in the wider community and in October of last year when the invitation came to give this address a fine example of a dream becoming a reality entered my life. Rosa Parks died that very week. Rosa was an ordinary black woman living in Alabama. In nineteen fifty five, fifty years earlier, she boarded a bus and read the sign saying “Seats for Whites only”. Rosa sat in one of the seats and refused to give it up to a younger white man. That refusal led to a black boycott of buses organised by Martin Luther King Junior and it then led to the largest protest march that America had ever known. The march was in Washington D.C. and many Unitarian Universalists were on that march. At that march Martin Luther King gave his unforgettable speech, “I have a dream”. Segregation was on its way out, a dream come true. One black woman sparked off the non violent resistance. Many of my old Unitarian friends in Knoxville, Tennessee deliberately took black people with them into white only restaurants. At the time our people didn't have a church of their own but met in rented rooms. Because of their opposition to segregation our people had to move from building to building as owner after owner turned them out. Eventually their dream came true and they built their own church.

Jewish scriptures, Christian scriptures, Rosa Parks on a bus in Alabama. They are examples of people dreaming dreams and seeing visions. What about us, can we do the same? Of course we can and not long after the invitation came to me the Unitarian Experience Week had chosen for its theme, “You've got to have dream – ourselves and others as visionaries.”

**Let me give you three practical examples that are all rooted in faith, all have a chapel at their heart and all are in places familiar to many of you.** Some here may not know that at various times the future looked extremely bleak for the Unitarian College in Manchester, for Manchester College in Oxford and for our centre in Great Hucklow. In each case a few people with a dream and a vision set to work and overcame all the pessimists.

In Manchester the Unitarian College was housed in an old building (*UCM photo 1 cover of “Unitarian to the Core”*) beloved by many older ministers, it was uneconomical, difficult to maintain and the funds were low; so low that adjoining land had to be sold off to balance the books. One of my vivid memories is of Principal Kenworthy and his wife

painting the staircase to save the cost of a painter. Then someone somewhere had the vision of a joint college with Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Unitarians and Anglican ordinands using one building. The students today (*UCM photo 2 of students*) enjoy a relatively modern building with costs and resources shared between several denominations. An appeal was launched to secure the future and many of you have donated. Then something else happened - instead of an "Us and them" attitude between our two colleges there is a great spirit of co-operation and we try to have a joint meeting once a year. (*UCM photo 3 of UCM and HMC O students*) Dream dreams and see visions.

Turning to Oxford (*HMC photo 1 of the chapel*) we find that on at least two occasions the old College Council considered selling the site. In the nineteen sixties it was saved when Principal Short brought in American students on a Junior Year Abroad. In the nineteen eighties and nineties times were hard and the buildings were a burden with planned maintenance being financially impossible. Becoming a college for mature students was suggested and the University agreed to a pilot scheme. Since then the college has only looked forward but the main dream I want to mention is a simpler dream and relates to the chapel (*HMC photo 2 of the chapel interior.*) No memorial existed to Principal Short and a few people gathered to plan one. They decided that as he loved organs an Organ Scholarship should be started. Within about eighteen months £26,000 was raised with many of you making donations. A brilliant young musician was appointed; (*HMC photo 3 of Myles Hartley at the organ*) he plays for services, runs regular recitals, leads a college choir and has made a CD Dream dreams and see visions. A year ago an Anglican was so pleased with the progress that she gave £9,000 to make Myles Hartley our Director of Music for a year.

Thirdly we move to Derbyshire for a dream and a vision. My first duty as the then GA Vice-President was to attend a crisis meeting at Great Hucklow. The future looked bleak even though it was regularly used for Unitarian gatherings like this. (*Hucklow photo 1 of the Senior Weekend*) The funds were low and Barleycrofts was in a poor state. A few people had a dream and a vision based on their own love of the place. Since that time Hucklow has thrived. A change of name took place amidst opposition, (*Hucklow photo 2 of Nightingale House*) new leaflets were printed and a marketing campaign started, Barleycrofts was restored to bring in some money and then something wonderful happened. The trustees of Hibbert House in London gave enough money (*Hucklow photo 3 of the conference room*) to build the new conference room. Then there was another dream and vision more than forty years ago. Two ministers wrote a letter to The Inquirer asking for donations towards a pilot scheme. The scheme would take a few children from Manchester for a holiday in Great Hucklow, they raised about £150 and that was the start of the Send a Child to Hucklow charity. Dream dreams and see visions.

Friends you have there many examples of Unitarian dreams and visions becoming true and I could list many more - the dream of a retreat centre on a Scottish Island, people writing books, prayers, inspirational works, a compact disc of hymns to help small congregations and a new church being built in Stockton. These are only a few examples of people making dreams and visions come true.

When I walked down the hill in Horwich from the Parish Church and first became a Unitarian I loved to sing the hymn that Arthur Vallance wrote for the Unitarian Young Peoples League and one verse reads,

“Grant us the vision keen,  
Heroes of old time knew;

Faith in the things not seen;  
Faith in our strength to do;  
That through our seeming tedious days  
Our feet may find the brightest ways.”

Those words are as relevant now as they were during my teenage years and so are the words of John Stuart Mill, “The initiation of all wise and noble things comes, and must come at first from one individual.” Friends, we may have been excluded from Chester Cathedral but that will never stop us from dreaming dreams and seeing visions. When I sent our pianist the order of service her response came back with an email quoting an American minister Harry Meserve, “Blessed are those who dream, for some of those dreams will come true.” The writer of Joel would agree with that and so would Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King.

In 1979 my good friend the late Frank Schulman gave the Berry Street lecture at an American gathering like this. His address was on The New Pietism and was eleven pages long but right at the end he said this,

*“The Pietists essentially are right: The Kingdom of God must be built, not on the foundations of institutions alone, but first of all in individuals in whom God dwells.”*

When one of our Welsh congregations in Llwynrhydowen was turned out of their chapel because they refused to vote for their Tory landlord their leader, Gwilym Marles said, “They can take away the building but they will never take away the flame of our faith.”

There we are – we might not be a William Blake, a Rosa Parks or a Martin Luther King, we might be barred from holding our worship in a cathedral but we know that individual Unitarians have already had dreams and visions that have come true so let’s go out and have even more. If we want our faith to survive then like Joel of old we have to dream dreams and see visions.