



CELEBRATION

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another anthology of prayers,
meditations and poems by
contemporary Unitarians



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Everything has its season.
All is change and decay:
In each blossom
is contained the russet browns,
foretelling the year's end.

To everything a season.
Flowers will fade and die.
Snow clouds never far
from rich harvests.

In every moment, a season
is held in every step.
Take each day, each hour,
each second.
the only certainty change
and within each dying minute
our reverent acceptance of
the harbingers of renewal.

Dick Bober

Meditation

In the quiet of meditation
A hymn of praise ascends
To celebrate the Spirit
Of the Reality Divine.

In the depth of meditation
The words of prayer are stilled
To celebrate my unity
With the Eternal Mystery.

Marjorie Easton

Summer Counsel

Open wide the window!
The soft wind warmer blows,
Sweet with the scent of jasmine,
Lily and rose.

Open the window wider,
No need to stretch the hand
Seeking delights of summer's
Enchanted land.

Open the heart to silence
Where all the secrets are,
Radiant as moonlight falling,
Sunset and star.

Muriel Hilton

Charity

Sunday coffee hour
holds its breath
With the one who waits on the edge
risking exposure out of desperation.

I heard you this morning,
your voice soaring
above the awkward harmony,
pleading for acceptance.

For love's sake come in,
for love cannot stand
to abandon the naked beggar,
reduce alms to instant coffee.

Celia Midgley

Prayer of dedication

Hear, O God, the silent prayer in all our hearts,
that in this church
we may come closer to the meaning of life.

Help us all to be true to our inner selves;
to pledge that we will speak the truth without fear,
because we are free souls;

to stand for justice,
no matter how our actions are construed,
because the flame of justice burns here
and within us;

to love the cause of human welfare,
the better life for all,
the sacred hope of a free but united human fellowship,
because this is our ultimate dream.

Help us, O God, to say all these things,
freely and sincerely,
to know them,
and to act upon them.

And help us all to make this Church
a beloved community,
where sorrows are composed,
wounds healed,
hopes renewed,
hearts up lifted,
joys shared,
and lives lived with new zest and purpose. Amen.

Sydney Knight
(adapted from 'The Language of the Heart' by A. Powell Davies)

All hallows – great souls

We give thanks for the great souls of humanity, for those whose lives remind us of what we should be. We give thanks for their devotion, for all the good they have done and still do. We give thanks for the courage and selflessness they display in the face of the world's cynicism and brutality. We give thanks for their vision of hope, which they pass on to us to keep us going.

We confess our failure to follow them as we should, our acquiescence and participation in their persecution and murder, our self-satisfied reverence for the safely-dead and our rejection of their living challenge.

We ask forgiveness we do not deserve, O God. Teach us that forgiveness first requires repentance, and that repentance means turning our backs on self-concern, embracing instead the way of your great souls, the way of love and peace, faith and hope. Help us to choose that path and so serve our neighbour and our God.

Cliff Reed

For all saints and all souls

God of the generations, we are called to remember at this time all whose lives are special to us – lives which were not and are not simply private lives honestly lived – but something more than that – lives of great significance for all humankind.

By tradition we recall Jesus and his saints, and countless others standing out for what they believed to be right. We feel their sacrifice and their suffering as we perceive the simplicity of the truths to which they clung – and the inevitability of the opposition and persecution from those whose mysterious authority went unregarded. Sadly, the prisoner of conscience is with us still.

We can name many in the catalogue of saints, well known and lesser known – And perhaps we in our tradition may include in our thoughts Michael Servetus, burned for heresy in 1553 . . . at about this time of year.

Let us remember all who suffer for truth – not only victims of cruel persecution – the men who spoke out and the women who were silenced – but also those saintly people who turned away and still do turn away from power and possessions and offer themselves to the community for the larger good; such are Mother Teresa and Albert Schweitzer. There are many more, that we may never know. – But we honour them.

And perhaps most especially, there are those souls whose lives have in some closer way touched our own. They may not become famous, but their living has in some way made ours better. – We all cherish our own special people – a leader, a teacher, a relation, a friend who have comforted us when we were down, helped us to sort out our confusions, loved us with all our faults. Their memorial is in us and in life that goes on.

Let us for a few moments focus silently on these special people . . .

(Silence)

Eternal Spirit, may we ever acknowledge that we are all part of the world-wide, ageless community of souls. We rejoice in all these lives which go before us and with us, without end. Amen.

Celia Midgley

Birthday

The day dawns like any other.
No more for me the excited scramblings of childhood, gull on a bread
crust, to devour at first light the gifts offered to my selfishness.
No more for me the anticipation of delight with its ecstasies of impatience.
Instead a sleepy kiss from the well-known woman lying curled beside me,
the creases of her pillow still carved across her cheek.

Happy birthday, darling, she murmurs in her friendly, familiar way. No
more pleasure in this than yesterday. Even the kiss tastes of ritual.

The day hangs hard, guilt like a plumb-line tugging at my ear that I am
not a-squeak with delirium as once I would have been. What's it like to be
a year older, a voice outside me asks.
Not much difference, I lie, hoping to believe my own words. But it does
feel different, though I scarce admit it, for each year has marked the
passing of an age. No more am I the child celebrating birthdays with newly
won freedoms. No more am I young Paris, wrestling with the world and
laughing at my bruises, the carefree conqueror of college crews and
creaking bedsprings. Nor yet am I the old man boasting of my years, taking
pride at each new mile-stone that I have lasted longer than my mates. I
am on the formless middle ground, where birthdays merge and lose their
meaning and so their joy.

I shall smile on my birthday.
I shall blow out the candles and wear a party hat and don the face of a
merry celebrant.
But within me will be a quiet space as I bid a solemn farewell to the person
who once was me and who now is gone forever.

David Usher

Things my father could do

Spit into the back of the fire
Turn a piece of metal on a lathe
Dance a quick-step
Ride his bicycle for miles with me on the cross-bar
Solve an intractable mathematical problem for his tearful son
Sing a comic song in the Sunday School pantomime
Play the overture 'Poet and Peasant' on the piano
Build a perfect replica of a pullman car for my model railway.

The last thing I saw him do was
Fight the pain in his chest to wrestle with the clasps
On the tin trunk which was to be sent off to Cambridge
Containing all my wordly possessions.

When I received a telegram just before Christmas
To tell me I had won an award at Cambridge
He hugged me; he wept.

When he saw me play Richard the Second at school
He was full of wonder that his own son could be somebody
So different from the boy he thought he knew.

As a boy I had never seemed to be able
To satisfy his stern demands
By doing what he wanted or would have liked me to do
– maths making models fighting to defend myself –
But when I started to do the things I wanted to do
(Things I could do) he did not stint his praise,
Almost as if he was glad that I could cope
With what he could never understand.

Almost as if
When he knew that I could do without him
It made his day.

Peter Sampson

A prayer for Mothering Sunday or Mothers' Day

Eternal Spirit, we remember our mothers this day in gratitude and love for the life which they brought forth and nurtured in each one of us. So much of what we are we owe to them; in labour they brought us into the world; throughout our infant life they cared for and protected us; in our adolescence they gave encouragement and understanding in our many joys and sorrows; and in our adult life they showed a pride, a caring love and concern that sustained and supported us as we journeyed onward into the world.

We are grateful and give thanks for all the qualities that have been handed down to us by our parents and relations. May we do all that we can to pass on to others the best that we have learnt and understood from our mothers and fathers, relatives and teachers. Let our lives be lived in such ways that are true to the rich heritage of love and kindness that they have handed onto us. Perhaps these, our guides, have passed from this life but in keeping our remembrance of them bright and clear, may we never commit any act or deed that would have made them ashamed of the child which they nurtured.

In remembering our own debts to the past, may we not forget the present and those parents the world over who grieve for the children of any age which they have lost through war, famine, disaster or illness. The sense of loss is great and for many will be deep and bottomless as the sea. Let the thoughts and prayers of those of us who are more fortunate go out to these mothers and fathers. We cannot assuage their grief but let us understand where we can, and work to heal the wounds of those with whom we come into contact.

As we have looked to the past it is right and proper we should also look to the future. We are parents to a succeeding generation whether we have children of our own or not. By precept and example do we all transmit our values and sentiments to the children of our time. May we not forget our right and heavy responsibilities to those whom we succour and influence, so that they in their time may pay tribute in love and understanding to the gifts we have given them.

While we cannot fully express our debt to those who helped form us, let us be so sensible of its magnitude that we are filled and sustained by the need to pass onto the young the full measure of what we ourselves have received from the past. Amen.

Alan Ruston

Moorland matins at Huntingdon Cross

Such a day it was as – looking back –
Imbues a whole Summer's memories with warmth
And places a gold overlay on all grey.
Larks lifted at my feet
And climbed, cascading sound, to vanishing point
In faded denim skies.
Foals like glossy chestnuts newly split
Lay fallen in their mothers' shadows
And lizards flickered the furze through.

At length the river valley wound below
For respite,
Where moorland cattle, unkempt in dark brown habits
Bowed their heads around a granite cross
And grazed by beneficent waters.
Nor moved when I approached, but by their gaze
Defied me not to join their worship there.

Richard Lovis

A reflection for Lammas

For many centuries the beginning of August, called Lammas in the Christian calendar, has been set aside for religious celebration. Early Christians celebrated a harvest festival with the bread made from the first cut corn. In older days this time, half way between the summer solstice and the autumn equinox, was dedicated to the funeral or the wake of King Lugg – the sun king who dies with the waning of the year as the days grow shorter; the corn king who dies when the corn is reaped.

Lammas is a time of death, but yet a time of renewed life. The seed from the corn provides both food and drink to sustain us, and the seeds for next year's sowing. It is a time of sacrifice – the corn must be cut to yield its crop – and a time of harvest – for us of recreation and holiday. A time of fear and uncertainty – for all the harvest is not yet in and the darkening year is before us – as well as a time of hope – the seeds of the future are available to us now.

Let us pause for a moment to look at our own fears. Think of the coming days or months; what is there that makes you feel afraid? Tell yourself about your fear; name it and face it . . . May our fears pass in the ebbing tide and burn in the waning sun, as everything fades, everything passes.

And now let us turn to our hopes of the harvest. Think of your hopes for the coming days or months . . . May the bread of the harvest, the life that ever dies and is reborn, symbolise the hope that lives in us. We pray that the grace of hope be with us always. Amen.

Ann Arthur

Prayer for harvest

We praise thee, O God,

For the bountiful provision of harvest,
for all the increase that the fertile earth has yielded,
for prairie grain and orchard fruit
and the produce of market gardens;

For the rich harvest of the sea,
for fish garnered from river estuary and ocean depths,
and for those who face peril and the elements
to bring us this food;

For the harvest of wool and cotton
and the many varied yarns, fibres and cloths which give us clothing,
and for those who spin, weave and transform nature's gifts
into apparel in which we take delight;

For the deep harvest of the earth,
for coal, oil and gas,
the energy which we use to light and warm our homes,
to illuminate our streets
and to transport us and our goods on business and leisure;

For all who buy and sell and get gain;
for all who work in mines and factories and offices,
and who bring the harvest of far lands to our local shops;

For all who till the soil and tend animals on farms;
for all who live close to the earth,
who, mid their daily chores,
yet feel they labour as fellow-workers with thee;

For all who dwell in towns and cities,
to whom the quiet countryside and the beauties of nature
are but rare delights,
who yet remember their dependance upon the good earth;

For the beauties of flower and leaf and berry;
the delights of home gardens and well-kept parks;
for the stately heavenward reach of trees and mountains;
for the whole harvest of beauty which nourishes our souls.

For seed-time and harvest, for cold and heat,
for summer and winter, for day and night,
for sun and rain, wind and cloud, fire and water,
for the earth, for life itself,
may we be eternally grateful:

Make us truly thankful, O God,
that we praise thee,
not only with our lips,
but in our lives. Amen.

Sydney Knight

Harvest prayer

God of life and love, encountered in the generosity of the good earth and in the hearts of generous men and women: we come this day to give thanks that the lines are fallen to us in pleasant places, and that we have a goodly heritage.

We give thanks this day for our dear mother the earth who sustains us and keeps us, as she sails through space like some beautiful pearl of greatest price.

We give thanks for our special plot of earth, the very soil that has made possible our human lives. We think of our own land: from the riches of the seas round our coasts, to the riches buried deep below ground; from the fertile fields of East Anglia to the collieries of Wales; from the Scottish Highlands to the orchards of Kent, the earth has poured forth her riches with such profusion and generosity.

Those who work on the land and those who live from the land need our remembrance: the farmers of the fields and the fishers of the seas; those who sweat and toil beneath the earth for her hidden riches; those who labour in factory or office, in business, in law, in teaching, in government, in care of the sick, in the care and upbringing of children, so that the riches of this land may be dealt out to all justly and rightly.

When we bring all these things to mind, we cannot but remember too what has shamed and darkened our relations with the living earth and with one another. Our human greed and vanity have turned the good earth into sterile dustbowls. We have poisoned the water that is humble and precious and clean. We have shown contempt for our God-given human dignity. Our evil ways have yielded the bitter fruit of destruction, malice and all uncharitableness. Our selfishness and corruption have brought only waste and ugliness.

We ask for forgiveness: the generosity of the land has been shamed; the heritage of good living has been insulted.

But the land's generosity and the noble heritage of dignity and decency remain, always awaiting our thankfulness and our allegiance.

We are grateful above all for those who have restored to us our true humanity, for all into whom has entered the spirit that was in Jesus, a spirit of constancy and endurance under trial, a spirit of courage and loving generosity that rises up to meet the worst that can befall humankind and whether in victory or wordly defeat, this spirit is triumphant.

So we renew our allegiance, praying as those who went before us in this land prayed: that since there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, let us choose life, that we and our seed may live.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill to all people. *Frank Walker*

Come singing into death

A glory bush of burning gold to death
In Autumn this cherry tree goes singing.
The honeyed leaf that to its bronzed sleep
Now falls, will shape a resurrected tree
In Spring. But did these trembling leaves tremble
Truly, in Autumn, long ago on trees
That other hearts had loved?

And we who plucked the cherries – that robbed the
Birds their treat – shall we come singing into
Death? Here, where the river bends into the
Moon, sink angels broken to the blackened
Ground. Slips and sloughs their timeless grief beneath
The turmoil of our living; the wind sighs
Their sorrow for the world.

What mourn I with the stricken cherry leaves
Except myself, my separated self?
When those angelic wings beat their blazing
Rings before my tardy eyes and these
Ecstatic leaps lift me from my leadened
Feet, I see the cherry tree and I are
One – in life and in death.

Death! Thou art the darkness of estrangement –
A darkness fled of light; appearances
Belong to Thee, O Death! But underneath
And within, moves the Deathless and Unchained,
The Unimpeded – the glowing secret
Of the Cherry's joy; her glad quiescence;
Fond immobility.

She flits not here, not there; neither into
The anxious past, nor uncertain future.
Come, Love, to share her light Abyss, where hearts,
Like trees, may fill with joy unspeakable.
Through darkly gleaming glass of Love now step
With me, where we shall know as we are known:
Come singing into Death!

David Doel

Autumn

The rustling leaves beneath your feet
Fallen from the trees
Laying a crackling blanket over the earth
In death more beautiful than in life.

The vivid colours,
Like flakes of rust,
They break with your weight
Smashing into smaller pieces.

Autumn is a time of preparing,
For animals, plants and people.
Trees go into suspended animation,
Animals stock with food
And people warm their homes
Ready for the big freeze of winter.
But that's another story.

Alistair Milne

Autumn coming on

The Golden Rod and Cow Parsley come now.
Apples redden on ancient trees.
The aurora borealis blooms in midnight sky:
Shooting stars arch downward.
Earth continues her harvest.
We gather in what our lives have sown: for love and laughter we have let
our tears flow, cleansing. For hope and celebration we encounter the
coming dark seasons, knowing spring has always come from the ground
once again. For peace we have moved our anger to be heard.
The release of a counterbalance helps us centre down. The current of
energy from Earth flows into our feet by ocean, rock and river, on forest
floor or plain. It sings in our souls and echoes in our new found voices.
Let us be open to sharing it with the world.

Cynthia Edson

My compost heap

Red cabbage waste with the white bloom still on,
Giant walnut leaves, and foxgloves gone to seed,
Smashed eggshells, poppy pepper pots,
Pineapple tops, and rooty leafless stumps
Of cauliflowers; and dog dirt from the lawn;
Blown roses with the petals hanging on,
And thorny stems, and twigs, to be picked out
Because they never seem to rot at all;
Old peach stones; plums and plums and plums –
Rotten, bruised, bird-pecked or too small to use;
Grass, groundsel, chickweed, dock and Shepherds Purse,
Heartsease, all faces; withered flowers and pods;
Tea leaves and orange rinds and apple cores,
Blue rime on squeezed out yellow lemon skins;
The contents of the vacuum cleaner bag;
Old strawberry plants, and stubborn root of fern
Cast annually from the old heap to the new;
Dead peonies: but not potato peels
Lest they spread scab; nor city rubbish blown
To rest in corners at the front – tinfoil,
Bus tickets, crisp bags, fag ends, shopping lists,
– Bonfire for them, along with all the sticks.
And under things I still can recognise
Are microscopic bugs and musty moulds,
Squashed sodden stuff and muddy soft brown sludge,
And worms – pink, plump and moistly wriggling,
Or clustered, white and tiny; slaters; slugs
Slimy and grey or handsome big and black.
Making my mould for me, my fertile soil,
Being my thrift, turning my season's wheel,
Letting me act my part in nature's play,
Binding me to the world where I belong.

June Bell

A vision

Crosses whiter than bones
Taut to attention
Regimented in death
Numbered precise
Left to right, van to rear
Countless
Ever fewer mourners find a way through hard lines
To one grave identically unique

The mind's eye overlooks this field in Normandy
Blurs the vision into softer shades of white
Swords into ploughshares
Earth flowering to the tree-line.
The newly young make love in the meadows.

Keith Gilley

Hiroshima day Floating lights on St. Alban's lake, August 6th 1984

Our little vessel was the finest of the fleet
Designed with eastern Buddhist skill;
Graceful lotus petals caught the candle's light;
We launched it reverently.
Many ships were launched this day,
Some in Japan by men and women
The Dragon's Claws themselves had touched.

Our frail fleet sets forth
Gleaming, flickering on the dark ripple of the lake
Headed towards a hill that's rich in history.
Upon that hill St. Alban died.
For worship of the True and Living God.
Upon that hill they hanged John Bull:
He asked a question his time could not abide to hear.
"When Adam delved and Eve span who was then the gentleman?"
Upon that hill George Tankerfield was burned
because he would not accommodate his faith
To those with power to burn.
Men killed them, but do not call them losers.

Our small ships sail on.
The sparks of fire in them inspire a hope
That the "Solution" of the men of power,
The solution of the cross, the sword, the hangman's noose,
Faggots, bullets and the Bomb.
The "Solution" of the Holocaust,
Must not and shall not be the "Final" one.

John Knopf

Hiroshima 1984

A mound of ashes, they said it was. All I saw
Was a beautifully rounded grassy tumulus,
A perfectly proportioned, closely mown barrow.
It was a monument, a burial place, a grave, a vast urn.
There had been no choice between burial and cremation,
No time for choice, no thought that a choice had already
been made for them. By others.
'Never again' say the living crowds who gather at Hiroshima
On the unwanted anniversary.
At eight in the morning the heat is already sweltering;
The city's new broad streets are laid out in the sun
And tall buildings – specially constructed to wave with an earthquake –
Stand sentinel in the sudden silence.
At eight-thirty they release a flutter of doves: they fly
Up into the sky, settling on trees, on telegraph wires,
On the Atomic Bomb Museum in the Peace Park.

Peter Sampson

Remembrance

Eternal God,
in whose ways lie the destiny of all peoples,
We remember before thee
the heroism of men and the fortitude of women
in times of trial:
Those who endured with valour
and suffered in patience;
Those who gave all that they had or hoped to be
in anticipation of a better world.
And we remember the folly and the errors,
the unhallowed ambitions
of nations and their leaders
which so wastefully committed the ordinary and the brave
to the horrors and bereavements of war.

Fill again the hearts and wills of all people of this globe
with love and loyalty to each other and to thee.
Give harmony to the councils of nations
and of all concerned with international goodwill;
Give unity of purpose to all who work for peace.
Make all men and women to seek and live for
universal understanding and friendship;
and help us all to establish over all the earth
thy kingdom of righteousness and love. Amen.

Sydney Knight

Peace

(Words for Remembrance Sunday and other Peace Services)

In this age of warring madness
In this century of strife,
Was the face of pity hidden
That we failed to cherish life?

Mercy, were you there at Flanders
Or our bloodbath on the Somme?
Were you there at Nagasaki
When we dropped the atom bomb?

You were there, your gentle pleadings
Fell on ears grown deaf with pride,
Hatred reigned and blood-lust triumphed,
Hearts were stone and pity died.

Love constrain us, guide us, train us,
Purge all hearts until wars cease.
Make us one in true compassion
And compatriots in peace.

John Andrew Storey

Remembrance

War baby I
do not remember
the fatherless hospital ward
and the struggle for life.
Female bodies, faces, hands
and wills proclaiming
rows of regeneration – and me,
while far away at sea
he fought his own watery birthing.

Mothers and grandmothers mine
remember all
their sacrifice of care
that we might live.
Rationing resources and hope
toughly defying
Lines of accumulating dead;
and his child's growing is theirs
as he longs to know his home.

War baby I
may not forget
the separating years'
lost life and livelihood.
Touching tender scars,
fingers fumbling,
a binding sympathy we share
as love grows up from sorrow
and poppies bloom again.

Celia Midgley

Remembrance

We are gathered in solemn remembrance of all who have died in war,
whatever their cause, or race or nation.

As we remember our memories will differ, Some will recall the faces of
friends, comrades and relations, whose lives were lost in war. For those
with painful memories we pray that they be given strength in their sorrow
and be saved from bitterness and hate.

The thoughts of others will be filled with images of war and death, brought
from distant battlefields into our homes by television. May the horror that
we see not harden our hearts, make us indifferent to the pain we see but
cannot feel.

Some will have minds clouded not by wars past, but by the prospect of
wars to come. We pray that their fears be proved unfounded and that we
may be among those who make them so.

Some will remember acts of true courage, of mercy, love and compassion,
performed selflessly in the midst of war. For these we give thanks, and
ask to be reminded that even in the darkness of human conflict the divine
light can still be seen.

United in our differing remembrance, let us pray in silence . . .

. . . May our memorial to the fallen be the ceaseless quest for peace. Amen.

Cliff Reed

A winter butterfly

The church is warm, it is Sunday.
For six days it is cold.

Next year – will it be sold?
An end to eighty years?

The rot is in the wood, the stone, the roof.
But still the people pray
Knowing the price that they must pay.

They must go. But where?
Into the wilderness?
Or the promised land?

The heaters' Sunday warmth filters through
And a butterfly,
A winter butterfly,
Settles on a pew.
In December!

Life goes on, "Look at me, I am here
with you, in December".

It is Advent and we sing Rejoice, Rejoice.
Soon the Christ Child will come.

And then a New Year. But where?
Anywhere; where two or three
are gathered
"He is there".

And a butterfly in December says –
"Look at me, I am here;
Be still and know".

For this brief moment it is Summer,
And we have hope.
Because a butterfly
Came amongst us
In dark December.

Advent: Man of light

'There is light within a man of light, and it lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, he is in darkness'. (*The Gospel of Thomas*)

Within us a light waits to be kindled,
we await the coming of him who will light it,
the morning sun that will shine on those who
live in darkness.

He is a man of light who lights up the whole world.
In him there is no darkness.
May he light the light in each of us,
may we become people of light, bringing
shafts of bright hope to the gloom of
the human soul.

If we do not shine, we are in darkness, lost
ourselves, blind guides to others.
May we awaken to the divine light within;
may we, like him we follow, like him whose
light kindles our own, light up the whole world.
For this he comes. For this we await his coming.

Cliff Reed

Vina Curren

A prayer for advent

Eternal Spirit, at this December time, we think of birth and renewal, affirmation and hope, joy and peace, thanksgiving and praise.

We remember Jesus, a Prince of Peace, and his message of abundant life which while ever being made manifest is also daily crucified in our world.

Evil and hatred are too often to be found in our everyday life. We grasp at the essence of hope and reconciliation contained in the idea of birth to give us a fresh source of change and renewal in our sometimes bitter and divided society. When we see and hear the news of what is happening in the world, of war and rumours of war, of disease and our inhumanity to each other, it is all too easy to lapse into cynicism and despair and forget the indwelling spiritual presence within each of us. But the power and immediacy of the example of Jesus and his arrival into life in a poor stable in Bethlehem reminds us that each new baby has the potential for tremendous spiritual growth that could uplift the human future to a new level.

Help us all we pray, to realise this possibility of hope and spiritual renewal in our lives. To glimpse, even if fleetingly, a vision of the spiritual reality beyond our everyday living. So may the scales of selfishness and hardness fall from our eyes, and may each transcend the narrow range of our living and enter into the larger hope and understanding promised in the message of Jesus and the example of this simple birth. Amen.

Alan Ruston

A winter prayer – anticipating spring

When we think of the turn of the season which we expect to happen soon, we know that, whatever the coming months may bring, we may have great hope for the future.

In all the years we each have lived the spring has faithfully followed the gloomiest of winters.
From that faithfulness we learn to have hope.

Hope for ourselves;

no matter how chill we may feel the winters to be
no matter how hard our lives may be
no matter how dispirited we may become
we can and we do, come to a springtime of light and love and life and growth.

Because we have hope for ourselves, we may have hope for others;

for our family and friends – sometimes relationships can seem chilly and distant.
for our neighbours and acquaintances, colleagues and fellow-workers – sometimes our attempts to understand and move toward another can fail and make us feel as though ice-bound.

for the people of other lands
– sometimes relations between states can seem icy cold,
sometimes the peoples can suffer hardship such as we might if our frozen farmlands never thawed.

Our hope for others is that, in trying to reflect and share the warmth of the love we see and feel in the faithful return of the spring, we can help to thaw the ice of difficult relationships, to ease the hardship caused by the delay of the growing season.

We know that the damp and mists of coming months will be signs that the earth is warming once again.

As our world turns toward the sun, as the days lengthen and fresh, green, growth begins, so we can see that even through tears and sorrows we can turn, in our hearts and minds, toward that which is light and life in all we have. We too can turn, and be warmed.

Jeff Bowes

Of mice and mortality

I've never written a Christmas poem
Nor has Christmas ever written a poem about me –
Everything else under the winter sun,
But keeps on leaving me out of its reckoning.

Too many die at Christmas – as are born.
Too many ache recall of love's terminal.
Too many left out, left over, just left
On shelves like unreclaimable parcels.

It took Jesus, they say, centuries
To get himself type-cast into Christmas,
Time for all that pain to dull.

Just once a year out carolling –
A voice behind a door said who
Will rescue me this field mouse cornered
On the kitchen floor, cats straining
And there so pert and pure,
Eye and limb on the quick,
Yet fooled so easily to well meaning capture,
Released to know again the sharp garden air.

Not again in the time it would take
To piece my life together
Could I make sense of that memory
A brief and tiny miracle of surprised delight.
I'll carry on not writing about Christmas
Till it write me into its scheme of mice and mortality.

Keith Gilley

The mother

(Words for Christmas)

Did shepherds really come?
The magi from afar?
Or was it in her heart alone
That angels sang
And flamed a start?

Forget the song,
The fabled scene;
The grace of heaven
Was gently shown
By her love given.

For her, not Word fulfilled,
The god of creed;
He was her helpless child,
And she – his need.

John Andrew Storey

At Christmas

At Christmas some remember the birth of a baby, some celebrate the turning of the year towards Spring, some pledge themselves to peace and goodwill to humankind, some give glory to God, who became a little child to save us all.

Rekindle in us the warming fires of wondering love that have grown cold and dull. Clear our sight that we may pierce the fogs of pettiness and see the heart of Christmas. Help us to perceive your purpose, that we may know the oneness of our different Christmases.

May we see that your love in Jesus gave birth to a new hope that can bring a Spring of joy and freedom to the long misery of humanity's Winter.

May we know that peace and goodwill can only come to us in truth when that Spring has come.

The greetings of Christmas come lightly to our lips, but give them, Lord, the deep and true foundations that are yours alone to give.

May we know the reality of your presence at this time, and realise the truth of ancient myth – that in your humanity you are born anew, and the hope that shines in Jesus can shine in us also.

Whenever Christmas celebrates the birth of a human baby it tells the truth, but only in part.

Whenever Christmas celebrates the impermanence of Winter's grip it tells the truth, but only in part.

Whenever Christmas celebrates the entry of God into human life it tells the truth, but only in part.

The whole truth may never be ours to know, but may that which we can know open us to your love, your peace, your liberty. May it make us agents of your will to ourselves, our families, our church fellowship; to our friends, our enemies – to the whole of your creation. Amen.

Cliff Reed

Words of address at a funeral

On an occasion such as today's, many words of prayer are spoken. Here, today, you will hear words of prayer, offered by me on your behalf.

But may we remember that the most sacred prayers to be offered here now in this service, are the **unspoken** prayers.

As we gather together to commend . . . to God's Love, there are expressions of our love which are spoken out loud, but there are inevitably others which remain silent, for although there is acknowledgement of the valuable blessings which have come to us from . . . 's life in the social and public context, there is also a more private remembrance in the heart of each one of you, of a very special person, without whom your life would never have been quite the same.

It is these unspoken prayers and recollections which will be held through all eternity in the heart of God, who holds forever those memories and affections for which there are no words good enough!

Do not leave this place, therefore, feeling that the most important prayers of all have been left unsaid. You are saying them in your hearts, and the Spirit of Love from whence we all came and to which we shall all one day return, can hear and understands.

The secrets of the heart, the fears and the regrets, the sorrow and the pain and the sometimes unspeakable joy of a relationship so precious, that it has shown us what God is like, ——— all these things we house in the silence of our soul, can be heard to resound in the heart of the Divine, who already **knows** and **shares** our inmost feelings.

In your sorrow remember this, . . . that your unspoken prayers of love will never be lost . . . God hears; God understands; God holds them as precious; and will preserve them through all Eternity, where nothing is lost, but all is made ONE in that Love which is eternal.

Denise Boyd

Bereavement

Dear friend,
Your absence makes the space
I needed to grow,
And so this ache I feel now at your loss,
Is it nothing but growing pains?
Strange then that though I grow
The space stays just as big.
Perhaps the gap a friend leaves when he goes
There's no amount of growth can fill.

Richard Lovis

For Phillip – A former pupil killed in Ireland

You kicked against the tyrannies of school;
Would not be taught unless you chose it so.
Your scowl heralded defiance of the rule
Of order and imposed learning. No
Authority that we could wield or show
Of force made any difference to you.
"The army will knock it out of him, though"
We thought, surprised to see you in your new
Uniform, so smart – and cheerful too!
And so it did. The knowledge leaves a stale
Taste of failure in the mouth – a true
Failure, on our part and on a larger scale.
Our skills weren't much use that I recall,
But Death is the poorest teacher of them all.

Richard Lovis

Death Bed

And so I sat
Watching her life's slow flowing out
Stroked her hair
Tried to sense behind her eyes
What dreaming might be there.

By the window
The flowers drooped and dying
Keep pace with her and their
Last appointment.

The clock minutes fast ticking ahead
Outpacing a weary heart
And below across the river
The barges slow towards the sea
Lightly I kiss her old smooth forehead,
Take a last leave.

Keith Gilley

Requiem

The eve of my father's funeral
Our hamster died. Head hunched,
Pink palms spread as if in supplication we found him
And clumsy in his nest. Tears flowed then
As my small son first comprehended death
And its emptiness.

Yet I was glad;
Glad that some grief had found its way into our home.
His tears refreshed the arid calm of Dad's passing,
And sharing his sense of loss I was made whole.

We buried Pinky in the woods that afternoon,
The moist earth displaced for that small package
– Handful by handful – filled the pit the child felt,
And laying the smooth stone he carried made him light again.

Next day my father.
Simple offices, both, in dappled sunshine
And with flowers about. And yet I think
I shall remember the time my father died
As the day we buried Pinky.

Richard Lovis

'Little one'

Why, little one?
You came
And stayed for a while – so silent and yet
So long
We thought it had no end . . .

Why, little one?
You made friends with
Fate
And danced with death itself in the
Morning light . . .

And in that tender light we watched
you
With unbelieving eyes
Pushing with all youthful speed the sun across the stretching sky.

Until the darkness quickly
Fell
And you fell fast
Asleep.

Why, little one,
Were you born?
A poem
Of such beauty and sublime
And we could never find music for the
Music of your being.

We held your hand
But
You we could not hold
You loved the 'lonely people' and we,
So lonely,
Wanted to be loved.

Emyr
With his love of nature could not
Keep alive
That twig of heather you gave him
One Sunday afternoon for he forgot
To ask you also for the
Mountain as its home
And for the wind that daily combed its purple hair . . .

Elwyn Davies

'Greyness and sun

Greyness like a shadow
Came, a mist upon my soul.
I cried in anguish
for things that might
have been.

The mist became a fog.
Nobody heard my cries.
Death spoke in my mind;
His blackness seemed
inviting.

But I must not let
his smoky blanket
cover my being.
Cornfields wept
poppy tears of blood
and I wept with them
for things past
and memories
that are cobwebs
in the corners of my mind.

But time will whisper
A wind through the corn
and clean
from all that fog
And peace will come
and surely blossom in my fields
And the kind sun
Shine.

Siân Littlepage

Palm Sunday – cities

The cities of the world have lost their way,
they do not know, on this great day, the way that leads to peace.
It is hidden from their sight.

Their enemies assail them and they strike back with hate.

A time is coming when they will be brought to the ground,
with not one stone left standing on another.

Our faith is in illusions, in the corrupt systems of
sinful humanity, in the false security of wealth and weaponry.

Our hearts are turned away from you, O God,
our city's gates are barred against you,
your temple is filled with thieves;
it is no wonder that you weep!

Ride against us – on a donkey – challenge our pride with
your humility,
our closed hearts with your openness,
our crippling fear with your love.

Break down our city's gates, raze its walls, purge its temple.
Drive out the ghosts and demons that infest our minds,
seize our hearts and wrench them back to you!

All cities are Jerusalem now, all lie under the threat
that we have brought upon ourselves.
Challenge them all!
Enter them all!

Open our eyes that we may see the way that leads to peace!
Bring wholeness to our broken hearts and oneness to our broken
world.
Ride our city streets and we will greet you with Hosannas!

Cliff Reed

March bird

Black etched against the lowering sky,
Bird,
What keeps you?
Cresting the frayed edge of a threadbare tree
Which sieves the Winter light,
Do you see omens of Spring
In the far, bleak horizons that you scan?
And have those twigs buds?

Richard Lovis

Easter

Easter has come at last.
Gone winter's dearth,
The waiting time is past
With life's rebirth.
Her resurrection pledge
Nature fulfils,
Waking each tree and hedge
On plain and hills.

Gone days of anxious care,
Dispelled the gloom;
From earth once coldly bare
Flowers now bloom.
Warmed by the rising sun
Now the birds sing;
We too, our joys begun,
Herald the Spring.

John Andrew Storey

A snowdrop

A snowdrop! What a lovely thing
To speak the joy of coming Spring:
Look how its pointed petals hide
A softly glowing lamp inside.

A little lamp – so small a light
To pierce the depth of winter's night,
To bid the spectr'd fears depart . . .
I catch its gleam, I warm my heart!

Muriel Hilton

The tokens

Here are the tokens: a snowdrop's lamp,
A crocus chalice brimmed with gold,
Already celandines appear
To wake the heart from winter's cold.

Soon underboughs will leaf in green,
And hedgerows quicken down the lane,
The clustered primroses will soon
Be in the quiet woods again.

And when the trees put forth their buds,
And burnished branches mist with green,
Within my bleakened heart, will there
Be wrought such resurrection scene?

Muriel Hilton

A prayer cycle for Maundy Thursday, based on Mark Chapter 14

Mark 14 1-11

What value do we put on you today, Lord?
Where does our world – your world – put its priorities?

We don't anoint you with precious oils,
nor do we give the money to the poor.
We neglect both. It is the instruments
of hatred and destruction that we anoint
with our resources.

Forgive us, Lord. Help us to see that when
you are more precious to us than anything
else, then the hungry will be fed, the naked
clothed, and peace will be all in all.

Mark 14 12-31

We share the warmth and strength of fellowship;
in the breaking of bread we know unity with each other as disciples of
Jesus, doing together what Jesus and his friends did long ago.

But is there betrayal in our hearts?
Will we fail as others did before?
Can our love for Christ surmount the temptations in our path?
Have we the courage to be true when the trial comes?

He will not disown us. May we pray for the strength not to disown him.
May our fellowship be unbroken.

Mark 14 32-52

In Gethsemane, Lord, you came face to face with what you had to do.
There was no escape, the divine will must be done.
We would be with you in Gethsemane, to comfort you in your grief, your
horror and dismay.

Grant us wakefulness, to be with you as you confront the evil
of the world.
Grant us peace, to face your enemies as you faced them.
Grant us loyalty, to stay with you and not to run away.

Above all, Lord, grant us the obedience to do what God has appointed us
to do, and so be your true disciples.

Mark 14 53-72

You were tried and found guilty for testifying to the truth.
The pride and blindness of the powerful could not abide your challenge,
or perceive your purity.
It is still so today.

Where men and women proclaim your universal love,
they are dubbed blasphemers and traitors.
They are reviled and abused, assaulted and spat
upon, fined and imprisoned, tortured and killed.

You know what they are going through, and you are with them
You will never deny them.
May we be with them too, for to disown them would be
to disown you.

Cliff Reed

Easter prayer

Power of Love, source of all that is good and true, liberator of our shackled souls, we give thanks on this joyous day. We give thanks that in your servant, Jesus, you showed us the conquest of death.

His love was your love; his kindness, your kindness; his challenge, your challenge. We see you in him, come to you through him.

We give thanks for the life in which he taught us of you and revealed what you are.

We remember the death, and all that it says about what we must face for love's sake.

We greet the risen Christ, and ask that we may share in his triumphant revelation of what human nature can become when surrendered to you.

As you raised the dead and broken Jesus to become the living ruler of our spirits, the redeemer of our shrivelled souls, raise us from the death-like sleep of the self into the true life of your heavenly and ever-present kingdom. Your liberty strikes off our chains, your love opens the loveless tombs where we have lain so long in darkness.

May the cry, "Christ is risen!" come from our hearts, not as a memory of ancient history, but as a confession of what you have done in us. Amen.

Cliff Reed

Easter: Prayer on the road to Emmaus

With all who have heard the story of Jesus, and been moved by its crucifixion-tragedy, we grieve.

Perhaps, like disciples of old, we trudge sorrowfully towards Emmaus, thinking of what might have been.

But we are not alone. A stranger walks with us, intruding on our introspection.

He explains a tragedy long-foretold, and what must be if life can triumph over death.

He stirs and moves us, Why, we don't quite know.

There is a strange familiarity about him.

We ask the new companion in – into our homes, into our lives.

"Break bread with us", we say.

And now we see! It is the risen Christ!

God's human face revealed anew.

He's with us still, our liberator and our friend, restored to us through death and centuries and doubt.

O God, we give thanks for Jesus: for his life, his teaching, his example. But deeper still, and with consciousness of our shame, we give thanks for his self-sacrifice, his triumph, and what that means for us: your love, his love, with us still to grant us liberty.

Cliff Reed

For Whitsuntide – The festival of light

“Angels are called Gods, yet of them, none are Gods, but by **participation**:
As just men and women are intitled Gods, yet none are Gods, of them,
but by **Adoption**”.

Robert Herrick

Invocation: We stood beside the darkling winter's store
And watched the brooding moon and stars in flight.
What terrors leap from ancient lore
To steal the calm that bore the light?
Infinity is grasped within a second glance;
Deep continents are scanned at every nod
And through our vibrant yearnings dance
Thy golden angels, dearest God.

Reading: The earth was dark; the sun and moon had fled to distant galaxy.
The sky, heavy as iron, cracked with the helpless cries of women, children
and men. Some fought over a last cumb of bread, or maimed their fellows
for a rotten pear or mouldy apple. Milk, like compassion, flowed no longer.
Blood ran in the dismal ravines of human living, crying for justice, crying
for mercy, appealing for meaning and understanding.

The dull metal of ancient war machines, the rusted remains of instruments
of torture, now housed the rotting carcasses of those who had used them.
At length the final scream was hurled in protest at the heavens; the last
word was spoken; the last moan of anguish died away.

A deep, deep silence spread upon the face of the earth; a profound
quietness. Darkness and silence.

It lasted for a long, long time.

And then a light appeared; a faint glimmer or spark of light; hardly a light
at all. But it stayed and it held and it grew – white and golden. It hovered
in the air, creating a warm and delicate glow. The light divided into two
and then again and again, until there were many lights hovering above
the world.

Each light took form, became a shape, a distinct image. From one of them
came a sound – a Word again upon the earth; a Voice speaking: “O angels
of the living God! This time we are too late! It has been too long! What
shall we do?”

Again, silence for a long time.

Another angel, shining more magnificently than the rest, breathed a deep
sigh. The sigh travelled the whole earth from pole to pole and whistled
round the equator:

“We must begin again, brothers and sisters. We must start afresh from
the beginning!”

LESSON: **The Iron Man** by Ted Hughes

HYMN: “Ye holy angels bright” by Richard Baxter

Benediction: May angels guard us whilst we sleep;
May angels beckon as we wake;
May angels guide us whilst we live.

David Doel

Standing still

On this desolate day, on this deserted shore,
the empty sea engulfs me.
I stand: only the echo of crunching pebbles, only the lonely cry of a curlew
somewhere inland, to disturb the quiet.

I need this emptiness, this expanse of sea, to refresh my soul.
I stand and stare without thought letting the sea and the wide grey sky
absorb me.

Why do we build lives so full of fret and anxiety that the innermost parts
of the soul's core are choked with busy-ness?

I had almost got to the point when I did not notice the hand I love touch
mine, to the point when I asked, but did not hear, how my friends lived
their lives.

– Until I stopped by this shore.

I have resolved so often before to stand still.
What is the point of my resolving yet again?
I who believe in inward things neglect my own inwardness.
How can I offer peace to others if my own soul knows none?

But I will not feel guilt or self blame.
I will not destroy this moment.
I know now that here, on a grey day, there is an emptying and a renewal.
I know that this moment has come before: startled by the flame of a flower
caught by a line in a poem my soul's refreshment comes.
I know now that this is prayer.
Stand still and hold it.

Ella Forrester

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