

Service 20140105 at Hull Unitarian Church
Adrian Worsfold

In-piece Jethro Tull *Living in the Past*

[Light the chalice]

Our Chalice indicates something about the past and present and even future. Notice that when lit, it hardly shows a flame. It looks like a fire as if burnt out from the past. It's not: it is rather more like hope for what is to come. In fact, it shows little flame because it is working hard: transferring effort to kinetic energy in drawing oil from below up the wick. But the present moment is represented in the moment it flicks into a fully developed flame. Once the draw is continuous, the oil reaching the top and always presently renewed, the flame will appear, but, like the present, blink and you'll miss the change, the transformation. As for the future, it is in the oil in the bowl. It tells you how long is left. If the present flame keeps burning, the oil will eventually disappear, and unless we plan for the future, in refilling the oil, the flame will go out. So our chalice suggests we attend to the future, to make the present present.

In the Christian Calendar, we have just had the naming of Jesus, when the foreskin is removed, and so we could have had naming as a theme, but we won't; and tomorrow is Epiphany, when there's a sort of back to the past, because the nativity story gets retold for the visit of the wise men following a star that appeared only to them. Fundamentalists, wishing to exclude the use of the reverse gear, say the wise men of any number visited Jesus in a *house* not the stable and the wise men called Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar are only so named by tradition. Indeed, apologies to Reverend Bill Darlison, but the wise men are one of the few times astrology makes any entry into the New Testament narrative, and only then if they are regarded as Persian astrologers. In any case, I don't personally regard any of it as historical, and Jesus will have been born up north say in Capernaum and in complete obscurity. And so, despite these options, for my theme I've gone for the time of year, and the theme for today is *A Little Old and a Lot New*, and of course this is relevant to us because this is the year in which this building will change again after which some serious rebuilding of this church will be necessary. To help, we'll look at how the brand new Sunday Assembly has been attracting its hundreds of attenders.

So on this basis we can nevertheless ourselves revisit the immediate past and nativity with an early first reading that isn't a reading. I've mentioned one Unitarian minister already and there are two more such ministers coming up

now. On Boxing Day BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme was edited by Tim Berners-Lee, the man who started making and finding hyperlinked pages on any Internet and who therefore invented the World Wide Web. He is a Unitarian Universalist and he wanted our Minister Andy Pakula on the programme's 'Thought for the Day' slot. Given Andy Pakula's declaration of being an atheist, the BBC said he couldn't do 'Thought for the Day', as it is reserved for "people of faith", and so he did an 'Alternative Thought for the Day' instead and was then interviewed, as all follows. [Play]

Hymn: So, with twelfth night still to come, we look back a bit and say goodbye to the year gone with a carol isolated from other carols in our hymn book, which is HL 278 to the tune of Nos Galon and assisted by a very special choir.

Now from a past-past we have the past-future in the actual 'Thought for the Day,' also back on Boxing Day, about which the BBC misunderstands the meaning of Unitarian, as if Jim Corrigan is a Unitarian when Andy Pakula is not, plus Framlingham, we notice, gets called Framlington. [Play]

Intention: Can we join our hearts and lives in common purpose to build a better world? [Jonathan Blake]. Can we take what was best from the past, apply it to the present and build for the future? [Worsfold] Can we (also) turn our backs on the arguments and conflicts of the past and join our hands in generating the will to protect, preserve and perpetuate life in all its fullness? [Jonathan Blake] [Pause]

Confession and Absolution: We have offended our neighbours and ourselves; we have wounded love's grace. We have fallen short of our best. We are sorry and ashamed. May we experience forgiveness and may we strive anew to walk as children of the light. [Jonathan Blake] Give appropriate mercy, pardon and strength in goodness back to those you encounter. [Pause]

Now the Gloria as from Archbishop Jonathan Blake: Glory to Love in the purest and peace to all forms of life. We praise, we bless, we adore, we glorify; we give thanks for all that is good: love, justice, truth and peace, kindness and mercy. Good people, from all ages, faiths and cultures - our inspiration and our light - who take away the wrongs of the world, embolden us; who take away the evil of the world, guide us; who are held in the greatest respect, inspire us. For you are to be revered, honoured and remembered: shining lights, urging goodness on through every generation. [Pause]

Hymn: Now we sing SF 036 A Place at the Table choir, as accompanied.

I thought for some content that we might do what happens at the new Sunday

Assemblies, the so-called atheist churches, which is to use the lyrics of some popular songs. So we'll have an early explanatory sermon, do a little of what they do, and then the collection and notices can follow our little time ceremony nearer the end.

A year ago it was that the Sunday Assembly began, and from being nowhere it spread to about thirty cities mainly in Europe and America. When you're struggling with low-attendance Unitarianism, at least in England and Europe, it must be of interest if something new can suddenly spring out of nowhere that is not a million miles from what you have been offering and yet attract hundreds of people to each gathering.

Perhaps there is more clarity in their case, in that it is assumed God does not exist. Each assembly is a gathered self-forming community that uses meaningful and uplifting secular readings and sings along to well known pop and other songs.

The first event was held in a deconsecrated church in Islington in January 2013. Attended by over 300 people, it moved rapidly to Conway Hall, the seat of secularism in Britain, and a one-time Unitarian church. Meeting once a month, one gathering attracted 600 people. It has then, with some success, sought to replicate this event in other locations, the nearest to us being in Leeds.

Andy Pakula has gone online many times to discuss a movement that he obviously sees as close to his views. His church has a relatively healthy congregation, offering a diverse communal experience to Londoners, but of course the religious language is still more forthcoming there, whereas it does not feature in the Sunday Assembly. He nevertheless sees that Sunday Assembly is doing something right, and Unitarianism is doing something wrong, given our inability to significant numbers of participants.

The Sunday Assembly has two founders: Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans - both comedians. People of no religion are supposed to gather for the communal experience. It turns out, however, that some of these people are religious and certainly spiritual. The assemblies do not criticise worshippers or believers in God, but just get on with the secular alternative. So they follow a church model, but clear of all the inherited mythology.

As I understand it, some have even indulged in some selective carol singing.

Now Sunday Assembly has benefited from a lot of publicity, but recently so have we. We have featured more in broadcasting, and one of those events

was BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme on Boxing Day in 2013. There is a sense in which, because its gay and lesbian exclusion, the national Church of England is no longer normative regarding national social practices, and broadcasters are interested in alternatives that are closer to current social norms. So they have been looking at the Quakers, the Liberal Jews and Unitarians. There is an institutional shaking up taking place.

Sunday Assembly has also received attention. It discusses science, and so relates to the likes of scientists and mathematicians Richard Dawkins, Brian Cox, Jim Al Khalili and Marcus de Sautoy, and looks into the wonders of the quantum very small and the cosmic very large. It is from science that it derives its sense of wonder. Recently the thinker Alain De Botton unveiled a *Manifesto for Atheists* in which he has contemplated a religion for atheists. So we might De Botton and the assemblists 'soft atheists' for whom there is some reflection about death and life within the common and dominant scientific and social scientific narrative. People do bow their heads for two minutes' silence and contemplate what is life.

Personally I think Andy Pakula's enthusiasm has got ahead of reality as the new movement has yet to settle down and prove its longevity. Auguste Comte the sociologist had a Religion of Humanity and some atheist churches followed on – and they did not last. In the 1980s and still today I use parts of liturgies from the Liverpool Ethical Church where they rewrote the *Book of Common Prayer* in atheist fashion. But the Ethical Church movement declined faster than the Unitarians. Another secular Church, the Labour Church, hardly made any headway among the church-resistant working class. There was one in Hull that was basically here today and gone tomorrow.

Personally, I don't see enough in the Sunday Assembly beyond its charismatic founders to sustain it. If I am wrong and it gets more organisational, then we should seek to get along with it. Rather, as we had mergers in the past, we might find mergers with a sustained Sunday Assembly. Remember, at one time there were three Unitarian Baptist churches in Hull, and they became just one, and then it merged with our Bowlalley Lane with its Presbyterian origins.

I'm quite convinced that diversity is not the problem for us, as a church that attracts few people, but rather the Puritan shadow and the old model of hymn sandwich and listening to some preacher like me. We have to somehow become more flexible, more colourful, more symbolic, more artistic, freer in manner and more relaxed. It is admittedly very difficult to do this. Puritanism and our inheritance are quite formal. Technology will help, but so must some other deliberate and even subversive changes.

This year ahead this building closes, and then we will go into a kind of private 'we know who we are' mode of holding operation. Then we few will open a revised building which, we hope, will have a new dignified and impressive frontage. But what goes on inside ought to be very different from what would have gone on in such an appearance of a building before. The new has to be much more new, not just to survive but to be relevant and to flourish.

Now we'll do a little of what Sunday Assembly does and have a couple of tracks where you can read the lyrics. We can sing along as and when we like, if we want, staying sat down, and enjoying the meaning we might see in the lyrics on your sheets.

[Song](#): So we go now to the first of two, and I want this one because it is both realistic but hopeful. 2013 was a rotten year for the economy, and there is every reason to believe it remains unbalanced and with fragile over-liquidised finances with, again, illusory property leading the way to apparent recovery. Let's hope the economy improves properly, and this is the sentiment behind Steeleye Span's *Hard Times of Old England*.

Come all brother tradesmen that travel along,
O pray, come and tell me where the trade is all gone;
Long time have I travelled, and I cannot find none,

And sing all the hard times of old England!
In old England, very hard times.

Provisions you buy at the shop, it is true,
But if you've no money, there's none there for you.
So what's a poor man and his family to do?

And all the hard times of old England!
In old England, very hard times.

You must go to the shop and you'll ask for a job,
They'll answer you there with a shake and a nod,
Well that's enough to make a man turn out and rob.

And sing all the hard times of old England!
In old England, very hard times.

You will see the poor tradesmen awalking the street,
From morning to night for employment to seek,

And scarce have they got any shoes to their feet.

And sing all the hard times of old England!
In old England, very hard times.

[music]

Our soldiers and sailors have just come from war,
Been fighting for Queen and country this year;
Come home to be starved, better stayed where they were.

And sing all the hard times of old England!
In old England, very hard times.

And now to conclude, and to finish my song,
Let us hope that these hard times, they will not last long!
I hope soon to have occasion to alter my song, and sing
'Oh, the good times of old England
In old England, jolly good times!'

All the good times of old England!
In old England, jolly good times. [repeat three more]

Credo (Different from Sunday Assembly?)

Believing in God, if we do, is not a statement about existence but about the essence of personal intention and orientation; the shorthand word for active Being in its fullness, the quest to find and embed love over despair. Believing in this God to be in humanity and evolved life is not a different explanation for the cause of things but a statement of worth and value in ourselves and others, and a demand for reciprocal respect. So let us love others as we each would have them love our own self.

But we recognise that this is not necessarily human behaviour, and that the worst can happen to the best, if only for the best example to shine the more persistent light afterwards. Love dies as love is vulnerable, but love will persist.

Believing in the gathered community to affirm love is not to exclude others without but rather to set up a means to welcome others in. Our gathering affirms diversity and says, yet, with our differences that we can come and give worth together. Our effort is made with the hope of a spiritual gift to embrace all.

We now move to a short fibre optic lamp-lighting ceremony that embraces the past, present and future. Whilst I am drawing on the Open Episcopal Church liturgy for communion, this is rewritten for the particular ceremony here made simple.

Thanksgiving Ceremony to the Past, Present and Future

We light the first lamp to the past, with its multiple colours of experience:

Our ancestors and ourselves have been alive. They have all been parents of the earth. They lifted our hearts in thanks and praise. They discovered the grace of Love. They saw acts of kindness and goodness. Our ancestors witnessed and carried out inspiring and heroic actions, and we may have been involved. They played their part in seeking to establish a world of justice and peace. We bow our heads in honour of the brave and the true who came before us. Praise, respect, glory and honour be to those who gave their best and offered their all. We give thanks for every good thing that we have inherited.

We light the second lamp to the present, with its colours of interpretation:

We are alive now. We are people of the earth. We lift our hearts in thanks and praise. For light in seasons of darkness and for comfort in the valleys of suffering we give thanks for those who readily reach out to help and to rescue the lost and the lonely, the poor and the homeless, the broken and the bereaved. We should be prepared to suffer somewhat for the better good. As we are here together in the spirit of friendship and love we pledge ourselves to work tirelessly for a better world.

We light the third lamp to the future, with its colours of different futures:

We and our descendents will be alive in the future. They will be people of the earth. They will lift our hearts in thanks and praise. We are not naïve about the future. Some will have to open wide their hearts and sacrifice their lives again. There will be those who get tortured, imprisoned and murdered for noble ends, whose flesh will be torn and blood spilt that others still might taste a sweeter future and know a brighter end. But let the sweeter future come and let them do it.

As in the Sunday Assembly, we shall pause for some moments to think our own thoughts.

Song: I think the best way we can come from the present to the future is to try to build at least a mind of contentment, and to that end we can sing along as you wish to The Traveling Wilburys singing *End of the Line*.

Well it's all right, riding around in the breeze;
Well it's all right, if you live the life you please;
Well it's all right, doing the best you can;
Well it's all right, as long as you lend a hand.

You can sit around and wait for the phone to ring,
Waiting for someone to tell you everything:
Sit around and wonder what tomorrow will bring -
Maybe a diamond ring.

Well it's all right, even if they say you're wrong;
Well it's all right, sometimes you gotta be strong;
Well it's all right, as long as you got somewhere to lay;
Well it's all right, everyday is judgement day.

Maybe somewhere down the road away
You'll think of me, and wonder where I am these days...
Maybe somewhere down the road when somebody plays
Purple Haze.

Well it's all right, even when push comes to shove;
Well it's all right, if you got someone to love;
Well it's all right, everything'll work out fine;
Well it's all right, we're going to the end of the line.

Don't have to be ashamed of the car I drive;
I'm just glad to be here, happy to be alive;
It don't matter if you're by my side -
I'm satisfied.

Well it's all right, even if you're old and grey;
Well it's all right, you still got something to say;
Well it's all right, remember to live and let live;
Well it's all right, the best you can do is forgive.

Well it's all right, riding around in the breeze;
Well it's all right, if you live the life you please;
Well it's all right, even if the sun don't shine;
Well it's all right, were going to the end of the line.

Take the [Collection](#) now and have the [Notices](#).

I don't know why we don't have the final hymn in any of our books, past or present, and yet it is popular and well known and speaks of future hope. So it is printed out too.

[Hymn](#): NB 010 Slane choir

Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
Whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
Be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,
Your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.

Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
Be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,
Your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.

Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
Whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
Your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

[Jan Struther; © Oxford University Press]

May Love be revered; may unity in diversity come; and surely good can be done that will bring the living nearer heaven. May all receive daily sustenance. Forgive others as you would be forgiven. Don't be tempted, and do the right thing. Believe in and act for justice, truth and peace. Strengthened by our gathering, in the solidarity of the suffering and the friendship of sympathisers in the quest to achieve peace and justice, we can proceed with unlimited reserves of hope, love and forgiveness to make the dream of universal happiness and freedom come true. Every blessings then, from and to us all. [Partly Jonathan Blake]

[Out-piece](#): Traveling Wilburys: *Handle with Care*