

SERVICE FOR THE MORNING (20150125)
(A THEME OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY)

MUSIC: PRELUDE

CHALICE LIGHTING

This hour marks the time when, in small towns and large cities, in small rooms and large churches, many Unitarian congregations are lighting a flaming chalice. What does this action mean to each one of us?

As we light this chalice, we know and are assured that we are part of a wider community of faith.

[Light the chalice]

Let the flame inspire an outlook that affirms one's self and the other person, and seeks love, truth and justice.

HYMN: HL 280 Bunessan

PRAYER

In one's thoughts of God:
Put away duplicities:
For we each know our transgressions.
Against the other we have wronged.
Against our own selves have we wronged!
Instead, look for truth deep within.
Cease all offences,
Create a clean heart,
And renew a right-spirit.
Show mercy, according to loving-kindness,
Wash through and cleanse,
And gather wisdom.
Intend to be pure, and clean, and joyful.
Receive a Holy Spirit within.

Psalm 74:16 and 17 says: The Lord's unfailing love and mercy never

cease, fresh as the morning and sure as the sunrise.

The day comes and the night comes
With all regularity.
The sun shines and the moon guides the earth:
There is winter and there is summer.

Pray into God
Who hears the voice of the morning.
Offer a prayer at sunrise, and wait.
For here you will find
A depth of wealth, wisdom, and knowledge of God!
God's ways are for God;
God is known by 99 names;
Explore into God.
God is kind, God is merciful;
Praise be into God.
Inhabit the present moment:
Offer into God a proper self-sacrifice.

READING: from Bede

In the year of our Lord 705 Wilfred became Bishop of Hexham, and John moved to the bishopric of York. His birth-place, Beverley, fell within the boundaries of his diocese. He decided to found a monastery there; and a short distance away at Watton he founded a convent, installing a woman of exceptional holiness, called Heriberg, as abbess. The whole area is covered in dense woodland...

John encouraged the nobles and squires in his diocese to build churches on their lands, to enable the local people to gather each Sunday for worship. When a church was complete, John visited it, and conducted a service dedicating it to God. About two miles from Beverley a squire called Puch built a magnificent church, which John came to dedicate. After the service Puch invited John to dine with him. At first John refused. But Puch explained that his wife had been seriously ill for forty days, and he wished John to come and heal her. John then took some of the holy water which he had blessed in the church. When they arrived at Puch's house, John instructed Puch's wife to drink half the water, and to apply the rest as a lotion to her body.

John and Puch then went to dine. A few moments after they had sat down at the table Puch's wife appeared, carrying the dishes of food; and throughout the meal she served the food and drink. Puch could hardly believe his eyes. From that time until now Puch's wife has enjoyed perfect health.

Bede, edited by Van de Weyer, R. (1997), *Celtic and Roman Christianity in Britain*, Berkhamsted: Arthur James, 103 & 104.

[HYMN: HL 106 Victory](#)

READING

Chad was a monk at Lindisfarne, who became abbot at Lastingham in the North York Moors after his brother who'd founded it. He led a mission to Mercia, and he features in the mythic history of Barton-on-Humber.

Chad became renowned amongst the Mercian people for the awe and respect in which he held the forces of nature, believing that all natural events contain messages from God. Whenever a violent storm arose, with thunder and lightning, he rushed into the nearest church, and lay prostrate before the altar. When people asked him why he did this, he replied: God stirs the air, makes the lightning flash and prompts thunder to roll. He does these things to make people fear him, reminding them of his final judgement. Thus he shatters their pride and drowns their arrogance, bringing to their minds an image of the Last Day when the earth itself will burst into flames, and the heavens will fill with clouds of pitch black. So when a storm rises, we fall to the ground in prayer, begging forgiveness of our sins, and imploring God in his mercy to cleanse our inmost hearts - and thus make us fit for heaven.

Bede, edited by Van de Weyer, R. (1997), *Celtic and Roman Christianity in Britain*, Berkhamsted: Arthur James, 75.

[MUSIC](#) *Context from the point of view of theology means home, your home community. In my opinion, Bernie Taupin and Elton John's best music was their earliest, and a few pieces ten years or so later, but there is one particular exception in recent material and this is the very*

good song [Home Again](#).

READING

It must be a rare thing to have a reading from a University prospectus. This is from the University of Chester online and, of course, not being a seminary, it cannot be limited any actual faith-tradition of theology:

In the *MA Practical and Contextual Theology*, students can choose to specialize in one or both aspects of the programme. While practical and contextual theologies can use slightly different methods in their approach to the task of theology, they are related disciplines that would largely acknowledge that all theology is both practical and contextual in nature.

In contextual theologies, there are opportunities to study and examine theologies written from, for example, feminist, black, Deaf and disabled perspectives. You can choose modules that focus on contextual approaches to the Bible as well as examining the ways that contextual theologians deconstruct and, at times, reconstruct traditional theologies. You also have the opportunity to develop, through the dissertation, a critical study of an aspect of contextual theology that interests you or, indeed, to develop a piece of contextual theology from your own perspective.

Practical theology takes seriously the relationship between belief and practice both inside and outside of the church. It invites students to interrogate the traditions and ideas that shape the way that individuals, communities, the church, professional organizations, government, institutions etc. operate. It also seeks to develop new ways of thinking theologically in response to lived contemporary practices, where that is needed. Practical theology will appeal to any student interested in the way that belief and practice interact and shape each other. Professionals and volunteers who work inside the church or in any other organization will also find this programme of value in thinking about their own practice in relation to the wider institutions of which they are a part.

<http://www.chester.ac.uk/postgraduate/practical-and-contextual-theology>

Well, we have had all our readings: the contexts of early missionary Christians at a time of very different fundamental cultural beliefs, and then a reading about applying theology in today's contexts. Let us pause for a brief silence for our own reflection.

SILENCE

PRAYER

The dawn that ever comes breaks upon us:
Let all the people lose their enemies.
The dawn that ever comes breaks upon us:
And we see compassion.
The dawn that ever comes breaks upon us:
Let all people be set free,
And show everyone mercy and compassion.
And from the dawn the darkness ends:
To guide our feet into the way of peace.
Let us be free to worship without fear:
For out of worship comes change and the better.

THANKSGIVING and INTERCESSION

The resurrection dawn brings the glory.
In the morning, satisfy us with love,
And we will live this day in joy and praise.
The world is harsh, but look at the beauty that evolves:
Seize the opportunity to heal and to forgive;
Draw upon the sustaining love of friends and family;
Build the fellowship of faith in this meeting place.
In the sharp bright light, renew this weary world.

Let's give praise for the miracle of life and the wonder of living,
particular blessings coming to us in this day, the gifts of creative vision
and skilful craft, the treasure stored in every human life, those who
learn and those who teach, those who work for money and those who
do not.

Let us give thanks for friends and their affection, families when they
give support, the community of faith in our church, the civic community

for its wider purposes, the refugees and homeless, the young and the old.

Let us immerse our wonder in the warmth of sunlight, the wetness of rain and snow, and all that nourishes the earth, our supportive environment, that we can use technology to escape the harsh weather, and that technology gives the means to travel swiftly.

Especially we consider the difficult realities: families suffering separation, people supposedly different from ourselves whom we do not yet know, people we fear and yet become so similar, those becoming isolated by sickness or sorrow, the wounded and injured, and victims of violence.

Give support and praise all who work to help and heal, who sacrifice themselves for our benefit, even facing death, for opportunities towards generous giving in whatever form, who overcome any form of tyranny and oppression

We are grateful for the chance for rest and recreation, the opportunity to regenerate, for mind using and body building activities, for fun, for laughter, for all that makes change and renewal.

And so for this:

We pray for the people of faith and the consequences of misplaced religion: so we think about the violence associated with religion, and those who suffer as a consequence. We affirm liberty in religion, and respect. We pray for the visibility of Unitarian communities and especially for our own future ministry.

We pray for the world. We think of those who govern the nations and gatherings of nations of the world, and think of our own national political and electoral season getting under way. We think of the people still ravaged by strife or warfare, and this time with concern about the ongoing destruction of eastern Ukraine. So in contrast let us consider all who work for peace and international harmony including what is said about northern Nigeria. We think about the environment too, and in particular the fate of our animal cousins the apes and chimpanzees wherever found.

We consider those who are ill and those undergoing life-changing illness and in particular the effect of dementia.

Finally we pray for those who have gone before us, in friends, families and before us within this community.

[HYMN: HL 134 Mit Freuden Zart](#)

ADDRESS

We hear a lot today about Contextual Theology. When Unitarian College attached itself to the University of Chester Theology and Religious Studies programme it did so regarding its contextual theology programme. It is pretty much the same at the University of Manchester, or anywhere else for that matter.

The universities respond to supply and demand, and much of that supply comes from theologians committed to the Christian tradition, and the demand from seminaries and people entering Christian ministry. They seek to apply a body of knowledge, represented in theology, to the relevance of practice.

This is very definitely a Christian concept. Christians believe God to be present and active locally and in both neighbour and stranger, and in the locality. So theology is not just academic analysis but is regulated by practice in the settings of Word and Sacrament, drawing on the Tradition, doing prayer, and working out how to respond to by action in the world.

What this means, therefore, is that there is a given body of inherited and regenerated knowledge that is applied to the local congregation. The given narrative is applied locally in a kind of feedback loop. The student will ask a question like, "How does the local church respond to and realise the given narrative of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, Jesus's life and teachings, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit?" The student asks, "How is the drama of the local congregation, and its relationship with its community, reflective of and working out its given tradition?"

You might see where this is going. I am not convinced that contextual theology is the panacea it is sometimes made out to be: that it becomes 'academic theology made relevant'. I don't like the notion that a church's dramatic output and identity is to be measured from the basis of a given theological base.

I appreciate that one can survey contemporary post-industrial capitalism and the unjust labour market and theologise about it according to various schools of theology. Today the university, unlike the seminary, must be uncommitted. But I am talking about theology as a supposed given, measured by local settings in churches.

First of all, I am suspicious because the reference to local churches is an intentional check by some Christians in authority to the potential liberal extent of critical academic theology. They think that rarified academic theology is useless. Christian churches are almost always more orthodox, evangelical, high church, simplistic even, than the works of academic theologians. What happens here is that theology that is too rarified is no longer relevant. It confirms a divorce between the most critical academic theology and the local community, instead of asking a local community: they discovered this, what do we think?

When I took the theology course we did at St. Mary's in Barton, I said, "They have discovered and argued this and this," and I asked, "What do we think?" We had a subject area of Christianity broad and wide, and no limits, and nothing imposed - just discussion.

Secondly, I am suspicious because I question whether there is this body of knowledge at all that should be normative as the way churches should be understood.

And so I suggest that contextual theology is afraid of experience, afraid of individual variety. It favours text over feeling. It derives from what is called postliberal theology, where a church identity is understood by how it dramatises the given tradition, the given doctrines, the given narrative. It's as if the tradition is a set of objectives and the feedback loop is how these are assessed.

In postliberal theology, primacy is given to the text as a cultural package. It is not about truth, but about identity, and recognition.

'Experience and individualism' give way to 'community and expression'.

Unitarians, then, need to turn this on its head. If we are going to use contextual theology then it has to be about individuals as well as community, about experience as well as expression.

We don't have that pretence towards a coherent, consistent, body of knowledge. We rather, instead, investigate what is still valid and what is not, according to critical engagement. We do not give a prior commitment to a body of knowledge. We also, more simply, live life and experience, and thus we induct from the bottom up, not deduct from the top down, our understandings of what we feel, say and do.

This is not to deny traditions. Of course we draw on traditions, those insights that help and frame what is experienced. It may well be that traditions guide feeling and experience, but there are so many traditions and so much that is just of the Now.

Our contextual theology, if it is that, is therefore to be inducted from below, by a process of relevant cherry-picking from whatever is useful and from wherever it is found. It is without boundary.

Incidentally I do subscribe to the view that Christianity started as a bottom-up movement, where the involved Jews and Gentiles rapidly escalated the status of Jesus to a Christ figure and were rapidly binitarian. They did this in the context of the perceived last days. It was only later that authorities argued whether this was Arian or trinitarian, magical or supernatural. But this was experience of, indeed, prayer and expectation: what people hoped for in the context of their actual lives. Early Christianity was a diverse, charismatic, welling up. This is despite the writings of Paul, who was a clever rudder for thoughts and beliefs relevant particularly in bridging the last days faith to gentiles. I don't agree, for example, with the recent Inquirer article that takes a sort of Bill Dalison view that it's all written up as ancient mythology put onto a Jesus character. No, these were real communities in a fast-shifting charismatic period.

But that's the point. It is an upward, experience-based, movement, and that's what we should be doing within Unitarianism. We now are

responding to the secularity of the age, the critical spirit, the definite change to science and social science, and yet we are positive about religion and religious practice. We worry about the social, political and ethical direction of those within and without. So this is contextual theology, openly drawing on whatever assists us being positive about religion and positive about people in the context of the age in which we live. That's proper contextual theology, generated from the bottom up - if aware of history, including our own - but one that is free to form whatever it forms. The rest is a straight-jacket, and we should see it for what it is. Or at least that's what I think.

[MUSIC: COLLECTION](#) and [NOTICES](#)

[HYMN: HL 287 St. Clement](#)

[BENEDICTION](#)

Come on the journey!
It had a beginning, and it will have an end.
What is important is the journey itself.
Godself is in that journey.
Godself is in our hands and feet,
Godself is in our hearts and minds
We are consciousness that destroys,
And we are consciousness that builds.
See the change!
Go with others in the new life in this world.

Bring the light and dispel all darkness.
Let love and glory show in our deeds,
Peace shine in our words,
And healing emerge in our touch.
Be the well-spring of life.
Take faith to go out with courage,
and go where we will.
Cherish the gifts that surround us,
And share blessings with sisters and brothers,
Experiencing the joy of life.

[MUSIC: POSTLUDE](#)