

Service led by the Rev. David Usher, February 17, 2013

“Love is not quite all you need”

Story for all ages: “The Sky Maiden”

Words of Ingathering

I was at a dinner party a little while ago, and I found myself sitting next to a woman I did not know. So we went through the usual getting-to-know-you pleasantries – what’s your name, where do you live, what do you do. Now let me tell you, I am proud of what I do, and have thoroughly enjoyed doing it for more than thirty years, but in social situations like that, I always rather dread being asked that question, what do I do, because invariably I get one of three reactions. The first is that I can see the instant look of fear in their eyes, and the quick checking of the nearest exit as they obviously think I am about to get all evangelical on them, and then for the rest of the evening they apologise if they happen to say anything even remotely blasphemous or rude, given that as a parson I obviously have such delicate sensibilities. The second is that they spend the rest of the evening interrogating me, as if there is no other subject I could possibly be interested in or capable of talking about. But the third is by far the worst. The third reaction is that they spend the rest of the evening telling me all the reasons why they do not go to church. As far as I am concerned, whether or not they go to church is entirely a matter for them, but they seem to feel the need defiantly to justify the fact that they don’t.

This particular woman fell firmly into that third category. She proceeded to tell me at great length that churches are full of hypocrites (they’re not, by the way. They’re not full. Look around you. There’s room for more). That religion was bunk and nothing but superstitious nonsense and think of all the wars started because of it, blah, blah, blah. I tried to keep my head down. I was a guest after all, and I know it is not good manners to

start an argument at someone else's dinner party, but then she said that anyway, going to church does not make you a better person. I kind of snapped.

That is exactly where you are wrong, I said. Going to church does make me a better person, and that is the whole point. I go to church in order to be a better person. Not a better person than you, a better person than the person I would be if I did not go to church. How could it do otherwise? Going to church reminds me of values the world would otherwise make me forget. Going to church puts me in the company of the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers. Going to church means I learn the stories of everyday folk who have overcome great adversity through the steadfastness of their faith. Going to church means I hear the poetry and music which touch my soul, which comfort and inspire my sometimes tremulous and fainting heart. Going to church helps me to open myself to the possibilities of love and justice, kindness and compassion which I might otherwise ignore. Going to church does not make me a better person than anyone else. It makes me a better person that I would otherwise be. It makes me a person who is trying to be faithful in life, faithful to life.

Welcome to this service. Welcome to this opportunity for you to become a better person; a person who is trying to grow your soul, trying to love more deeply, more openly, more generously; a person who is seeking to be an agent of hope and health in our beautiful but bruised world. May you be a better person for having been here. May you have learned a bit more about how to love, and how to live with largeness of heart.

Sermon: Love is not quite all you need

Do you believe in serendipity? I can't be the only person for whom the serendipitous happens. In fact, I know I am not. Just last weekend, there was a great example of it. I was at FUSE, the Festival of Unitarians in the South East. Your own Don Bailey and Pamela Spurdon were there, and they can tell you more about it. On the Saturday evening, we had two programmes planned. The first was a presentation by Robin Ince, a personality well known on British radio and television for his humorous approach to science and philosophy, and who gave a whirlwind tour de force on all kinds of subjects, in the midst of which he touched on an interview with the British screen writer Dennis Potter, the last he gave before he died of pancreatic cancer in 1994. Immediately afterwards was the service, led by Rev. Bill Darlison. And what did he have as his main reading? You guessed it, the transcript from the interview with Dennis Potter. Woo hoo hoo!

What is happening with such acts of serendipity? Who knows? Who cares? All I know, they sure are fun when they happen.

That was not all. I had another serendipitous experience at FUSE last weekend. I had been asked to give the title of my sermon for this service way in advance, so that it could be included in your February newsletter. I did as I was told. I've found that the best way to stay out of trouble. I had a kind of vague idea what I might preach about when I sent in my sermon title, but not really. I knew it would be the Sunday immediately after Valentine's Day, so I thought I could do something about that. But really, I had only the vaguest idea, and the closer this visit to Paris got, the vaguer the idea became. I mean, I have just had a ten week sabbatical, during which the capacity to think, even to string a coherent sentence together, became more and more a distant memory. Let alone write a sermon. But Friday afternoon, a week ago, the same Bill Darlison was giving a pre-FUSE workshop. And it was while listening to what he was saying it all fell into place, and I

knew what I wanted to say to you this morning. Thank you, Bill. Thank you, mysterious spirits of serendipity, whoever or whatever you are.

The title I had given for the sermon all that while ago was that Love was not quite all you need. It is an obvious steal from the title of the Lennon/McCartney song. The vague idea I had was that love, in the gooey romantic sense, was all very well and lots of fun and let's by all means have more of it. But by its very nature such love is selective in its chosen object. You love this person, not that person. And as falling in love can be a fickle and capricious experience, so can falling out of love. And not only does the world need for its well-being something rather more reliable than our chance falling in and out of love, we ourselves, for the good of our own souls, need a more dependable bedrock of faithfulness. That was the vague idea of what I wanted to say, but how to say it?

The other day I came across a definition of faith I had not encountered before. But before I tell you this definition, let me ask you a question. How would you define faith? If you worked at the Oxford English Dictionary and were responsible for words beginning with the letter F, what would you say about faith? I was once at a dinner party – and yes, my life does consist of nothing but dinner parties - where another guest did work at the Oxford English Dictionary, and he was an expert in words beginning with the letter P.

How would you define faith as an objective phenomenon in human life? And perhaps more interestingly, how would you describe faith as a subjective phenomenon in your life? What is the basis and reality and significance of faith to you?

Well, the definition I recently encountered was that Faith is believing things you know are not true. Believing things you know are not true. A rather cynical definition, it has to be said, but then it was Mark Twain who coined it. His rationale was the if you know something is true, then believing it does not require faith. Therefore, faith is believing what you know is not true. What do you think? Do you agree?

In the early part of the third century, the Church Father Tertullian wrote a vast tome on the doctrine of the trinity, trying to make sense of how three could be one and one could be three, and each was separate but they were all the same, and though Jesus was the son of God he was as old as God even though ordinarily a father does come before the son. Thousands of pages, going around and around and around. Poor old Tertullian got himself into a terrible tangle, and the more he tried to explain it, the more of a tangle he got himself into. Until finally, in exasperation, he threw up his hands and declared, “It is absurd! That is why I believe it.”

When I look critically at some of the details of what some churches expect you to believe, I too throw up my hands and exclaim, “It is absurd!” The difference is, that is why I don’t believe it. But, for all that some things that some people believe as articles of faith might be completely unreasonable, faith itself is not unreasonable. Not only is having faith not unreasonable, having faith is essential. And a cornerstone of faith is the loving beyond the immediate, the particular, the exclusively chosen. Faith is what empowers us to see beyond what we would otherwise see.

The presentation that Bill Darlison was giving, which serendipitously opened my mind to what I wanted to say to you this morning, was about his thesis that Mark’s Gospel is actually based on the zodiac. Bill has written a book about it “The Gospel and the Zodiac, The Celestial Journey of the Soul”, and in it he claims that far from being an attempt to write a history of the life and ministry of Jesus, Mark’s Gospel is a mythic story based on astrology.

I want to say two things here, very clearly. The first is that I am very content in the possibility, even the probability, that absolutely nothing that is recorded in Mark’s gospel actually happened. In particular, the miracle stories. They never happened. Their point is not that they happened. Their point is far more significant than that. And the second thing for me to say here is that I am naturally very sceptical about astrology. But whatever you or I might think about astrology today, particularly in the crude populist form as it appears

in the daily newspapers, is irrelevant. The salient point is that, at the time Mark's Gospel was written, probably around the year 60 CE, astrology suffused everything – philosophy, science, mathematics, everything – in the then known ancient world. So we should approach the possibility that Mark's Gospel is an astrological text not with our present day sensibilities or scepticism, but recognising the intellectual realities of the time in which it was written. A time when everyone understood everything in astrological terms, when the study of the stars was what everyone did.

A term which Mark frequently uses as a way of Jesus referring to himself is Son of Man. It is important to understand that this does not refer to Jesus specifically. It is a generic reference not about Jesus exclusively, but about all of us. Jesus is an archetype, We are all the sons and daughters of humanity. Mark is not really talking about that man, Jesus, he is talking about you and me. Jesus is the representative archetype for all of us.

So....

The thesis that Bill Darlison was propounding is that the gospel of Mark charts the journey through the twelve zodiacal signs, and chapters seven and eight come under the sign of Cancer. They are chapters which deal largely with miracles, many of them healing miracles, something we rational Unitarians usually feel very uncomfortable with. How might those miracles be re-interpreted? And what might they have to do with love? Let's look at them. You will find three included in your printed order of service.

What is the sign of cancer? It is the crab. What is a prevalent feature of a crab? It has a hard but brittle outer shell, protecting its soft and vulnerable inner self.

Almost at once a woman whose young daughter was possessed of an unclean spirit heard of him, came in, and fell at his feet. (She was a Gentile, a Phoenician of Syria by nationality.) She begged him to drive the spirit out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be satisfied first: it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." "Sir," she answered, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps."

He said to her, "For saying that, you may go home content; the unclean spirit has gone out of your daughter." And when she returned home, she found her child lying in bed, the spirit had left her. (Mark, chapter 7, vv 25 - 30)

What could this possibly mean? This woman, a gentile, comes to Jesus hoping he might heal her troubled daughter. And how does Jesus respond? With a really quite horrible and gratuitous insult. He likens her to a dog. This does not exactly sit well with the Sunday School image of Jesus, gentle Jesus meek and mild. If you or I were to say something like that today, we would be had up on charges of an ugly non-PC racism, and rightly so. But then after the woman has come back with a witty rejoinder, Jesus relents and agrees that the woman's daughter can be made clean. Is it just her quick wit which changes Jesus' mind? Would he have remained unmoved otherwise?

Let's not take that single healing miracle in isolation. Let's look at another.

"They brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, with the request that he would lay his hand on him. He took the man aside, away from the crowd, put his fingers into his ears, spat, and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him "Ephphatha", which means "Be opened". With that his ears were opened, and at the same time the impediment was removed and he spoke plainly. (Mark, chapter 7, vv 32 - 35)

What to make of this? Let's not indulge in thinking that it actually happened. Let's not try to offer any naturalistic explanation. Let's have the insight to understand the significant point – that the man used not only to be unable to hear, but to speak plainly. He is deaf to what others are saying to him, and incapable of expressing clearly what he wants to say to them. He cannot communicate. He is shut off from others. Isolated. Alone. Surrounded by a hard shell of silence and incomprehension.

And the third miracle story.

“They arrived at Bethsaida. There the people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him away out of the village. Then he spat on his eyes, laid his hands upon him, and asked whether he could see anything. The man's sight began to come back, and he said, "I can see men; they look like trees, but they are walking about." Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; he looked hard, and now he was cured so that he saw everything clearly.” (Mark, chapter 8, vv 22 - 26)

Note that, as with the deaf man with the speech impediment, Jesus leads the blind man to a place of quiet seclusion before the healing is accomplished. And there he asks if he can see anything. At first he can see a little but shadows. He can make out the figures of men, but cannot see them clearly. They look like trees moving. It is only after further intervention that the man can see clearly. He can see the other people for who they really are, people. Not just shadowy figures moving in the periphery of vision, barely noted, barely acknowledged.

Here is the point. Here is how we can understand what those three miracles are collectively saying, and how they relate to the business of love.

Under the sign of Cancer, the crab, Jesus at first rejects the appeal of the Phoenician woman. Jesus, Son of Man, you and me, has a hard shell which rebuffs the woman because she is not one of his own. She is a stranger, a foreigner, not one of the elect, not someone to whom he owes allegiance or pity. She is not of his family, his tribe, his country, his faith, therefore Jesus, we, may turn to her the hardness of our outer shell. We protect ourselves from allowing her in, until her words penetrate that shell and we recognise the humanity she shares with us.

Phoenician? Perhaps it is a term which means little to us today. What about Afghani, Iraqi, illegal immigrant, gypsy, asylum seeker, Communist, Moslem fundamentalist – are

they terms which might mean more to us today? Are they the people we rebuff if they appeal to our kindness, our compassion, our desire for their wholeness? Are they not worthy of even the crumbs of our comfort?

The deaf man who can neither hear nor speak clearly with those around him, is healed of his affliction, so that he can truly be in communication with all around him. And the blind man can see others for who they are.

You and I are Jesus, the sons and daughters of humanity. You and I hide behind our hard shell and reject another's plea for compassion. You and I are the deaf man, unable to hear the words of others, unable to speak our own words clearly in reply. You and I are the blind man, unable to see others for who they really are. When you are walking down a busy street in Paris, and there are people all around you, do you really see them? Do you really acknowledge their humanity? Or are they just moving shapes, perhaps not moving fast enough and holding you up in the hurry to get on with the importance of your own life; they are just background to your own self-absorption.

It is the business of faith, it is the business of awakening to the spirit, to crack open our own shell, to open our ears and our eyes to the world around us and the people in it. Those who have ears to hear and eyes to see... says Jesus time and time again. Wake up, says the Buddha. The only time it is important to be awake is right now, the present moment.

And the object of our love is not the immediate circle of our chosen few, those we deem worthy because they are of our tribe or our country or our congregation, far less because they use the right shampoo and their hair therefore makes them romantically irresistible,

The task for our spirits is to learn to love more openly, more generously, with less judgment. It is not an easy task. It takes work. It takes practice. It takes faith.

When he was fifty three years old, Ed Guiton, an Englishman, went on a rock climbing holiday in Bolivia. He was a very fit man. He had always been very active in strenuous

outdoor sports. One evening, after a satisfying but tiring day of climbing, he was back in his hotel room when a combination of low blood pressure and high altitude made him do something he had never done before. He fainted. As he fell, he hit his head on the bedpost, and broke his neck. A freak, meaningless accident, and now Ed Guiton is a quadriplegic.

In an essay he wrote about his experience, Guiton says this.

“There is still immense pain and frustration. But I am heartened, if by nothing else, then by a change of direction in my dreams. There is one recurring dream, in which I’ve got two walking sticks and I’m hobbling painfully down the road, jerking about a bit, and people are walking past and I can hear them muttering “Poor old sod”. And I’m saying, “No! you don’t realise. This is me, getting better!”

Having faith is what enables you to open up the hard shell of indifference, to hear what others are saying and to speak clearly in reply, to *see* the world, and others in it for who they are in their own full humanity. And coming to church is a way of being reminded that this is our task and our calling. It is to be in the company of all who have seen the world and all in it as something wondrous and holy, and have centred their lives on that vision, and that vision has sustained them, inspired them, nourished them.

And if there are people who look at us as we gather here, in church, and say with pity in their voices, “Poor old sods”, we can reply, “No, don’t you see, this is us, and we are getting better!”