

NATIONAL UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP
Established 1945

Issue 212

Aug 2010

VIEWPOINT



Three Unitarian Sermons

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& Rev Linda Hart

Three Unitarian Sermons

Forward

This edition of the ViewPoint contains three sermons by Unitarian Ministers. They are presented more or less as they were presented. Each of the ministers comes from different backgrounds and have different spiritual bases from which they preach. A sermon is often a one sided open dialogue between the preacher and the congregation. Unitarian preachers do not tell you what to believe nor do they expound scripture as a way of convincing you of the validity of their faith. They are best seen as a challenge to your own views and opinions and they can be informative and entertaining. Unitarians do not follow a lectionary which dictates what subject must be preached on what date, rather the inspiration for a sermon or the theme of a service comes from personal experience or what might be on top of the preacher's mind when they sit down to write it.

The three sermons below were preached for festival times of the year.

Richard Boeke is a retired minister who lives in Horsham. He served the congregation there until his retirement. He has also been the Secretary of the International Council of Unitarian Universalists and he is active in the Inter faith Movement.

Open unto me – finding faith in the forest

“And after they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” - Matthew 26:30

Did you know Jesus was a singer? In Matthew, at the end of the story of the Last Supper, we read: “After they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

The heart of religion is in singing, and stories, and silent awe. This morning, we shared the words of Howard Thurman,

“Open unto me – courage for my fear.

Open unto me – hope for my despair.”

Howard's father died when Howard was only six years old. As his mother worked as a maid, Howard read the Bible to his grandmother who had been a slave. But aside from the “Faith, Hope and Love” of First Corinthians, she requested no readings from the Apostle Paul. Howard asked her “why?” She replied,

“When I was a slave, the Slavemaster's minister would come to preach to us several times a year, and he would always preach from the Apostle Paul. His favourite text was, Slaves, obey your masters. I promised myself that if I were ever free, I would not have to listen to the Apostle Paul again.”

To renew his soul, Howard would walk at night along Daytona Beach. He told us,

“As a boy, in Florida, I walked along the beach of the Atlantic Ocean in the quiet stillness that can only be completely felt, when the murmur of the ocean is stilled and the tide moves stealthily along the shore. I hold my breath against the night, and watch the stars etch their brightness on the darkened canopy of the heavens. I had the sense that all things – the sand, the sea, the stars, the night, and I -- were one lung through which all of life was breathing. Not only was I aware of a vast rhythm enveloping all, but I was part of that rhythm, and the rhythm was a part of me.

Many years later ... I recognized the experience as being in itself religious, even ... as being mystical.”

Open unto me – peace for my turmoil

Open unto me – joy for my despair

In “The Peace of Wild Things,” Wendell Berry writes,

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Is this prayer? Unitarian Poet Mary Oliver gives her answer: *"I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down / into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed/ This is what I have been doing all day./ Tell me What I should have done?/ Doesn't everything die at last and too soon?/ Tell me, what is it you plan to do/ With your own wild and wonderful life?"*

Paying attention is her form of prayer within the realm of God called nature. She defines prayer from this perspective in her poem entitled "Praying"

[*Praying, Thirst*, p 37

Just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but a doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak. "A doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak. ...Just play attention."

She tells us, "You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on. ...

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting over and over announcing your place in the family of things.[1]" Spiritual soul-work—the same call that came to Moses out of the burning bush.. comes also to each of us.

And I am the pale lily who believes in God,
Though she has no word for it,
And I am the hunter, and I am the hounds,
And I am the fox, and I am the weeds of the field,
And I am the tunnel and the coolness under the earth,
And I am the paw print in the dust,
I am a woman sixty years old, and glory is my work. ...

Open unto me – strength for my weakness, *Open unto me – wisdom for my confusion*

"And after they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives ...Then Jesus came with them to the Garden of Gethsemane. He said to his disciples, Sit ye here while I go and pray. He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. He said unto them, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. ..." (Mark 30, 36-38).

As at other times in his ministry starting with the temptation in the wilderness, he goes out in nature to pray. The trees and the sky are his temple. Of the anguish in the garden, the Southern Poet, Sidney Lanier writes, "[2]

*Into the woods my Master went,
Clean forspent, forspent.
Into the woods my Master came,
Forspent with love and shame.
But the olives they were not blind to Him,
The little gray leaves were kind to Him:
The thorn-tree had a mind to Him*

When into the woods He came.

To me the time in Gethsemane is the most important part of Jesus at Easter. If you visit the Coptic Churches in Egypt, they are full of smiling faces of Jesus. There are no statues of stations of the cross. There are no bloody paintings of the Crucifixion. In Egypt and in Asia Minor, the most ancient churches celebrate a shining paradise. In Orthodox Churches at Midnight, as Easter Sunday begins, the resurrection is celebrated people hug and kiss with joy. Eager boys stand near the girl they want to kiss and take the opportunity.

Open unto me – forgiveness for my sins *Open unto me – tenderness for my toughness.*

How do we create a culture of forgiveness? Jesus is asked, "How many times shall I forgive – Seven times?" Jesus answers, "Until seventy times seven." Yet millions are unforgiving. Many of us have a hard time even forgiving ourselves.

To help build a culture of mutual respect and forgiveness, Muslim Eboo Patel has organized the Interfaith Youth Core. It brings young people of many faiths to work together on projects. I confess, I have mixed feelings about it, because the Tony Blair foundation has given it a large donation. I like to think of it as Blair seeking forgiveness for tragedy he caused by following George Bush into Iraq. But I support Eboo Patel, who is doing good work. He writes:

The greatest problem facing the 21st Century is the problem of the FAITH DIVIDE. The faith divide does not separate Muslims from Christians, Gentile from Jew, or believer from non-believer. THE FAITH DIVIDE separates people who want to live together as brothers from people who want to perish together as fools.[3]

On Holy Week I watched a procession from the Anglican Church following a man with a great cross on his shoulder. They were joining the Good Friday Service of Horsham Churches Together. Unitarians cannot participate in Horsham Churches Together. Some think that we are eternally damned because we do not affirm the Trinity. As in millions of towns on this earth, they keep up the faith divide. They insist that their belief has divine sanction and others do not.

Lord, help me to forgive others even as I seek to be forgiven.

Open unto me – love for my hates *Open unto me – light for my darkness*

This Spring,

"What shall you do with your wild and wonderful life?" Shall you revere the Jesus of love and forgiveness? Or shall you revere what many churches have made of him: CHRIST, the judge who divides us between heaven and hell.

On April 3rd in the Review Section of the Guardian, there was a thoughtful review of Philip Pullman's new book, THE GOOD MAN JESUS AND THE SCOUNDREL CHRIST.

The reviewer is Archbishop Rowan Williams. He draws on his own study of Dostoevsky to link THE GRAND INQUISITOR to Pullman's story of the "twin brother" of Jesus, who is the "**Scoundrel Christ.**" It is the argument that "... Jesus was too radical for ordinary human consumption, and for his memory to survive at all, you will have to lie about him ..."

The book is "a very bold and outrageous fable, ... Pullman's ... passionate fury at corrupt religious systems of control. ... but also introducing a voice of genuine spiritual authority. But that is what Pullman's Jesus undoubtedly is."

Like Albert Schweitzer and Howard Thurman, the new book opens us to a Jesus of love and forgiveness. As Rev. Ashley Hills told us in a recent sermon in Horsham, Jesus never asked anyone

- 1) To become a Christian
- 2) To believe in the Virgin Birth
- 3) To believe in the Trinity. The word is not even in the Bible.

Jesus never taught us to believe in the right creed. With stories and parables he taught us "to love

God and love neighbour.” *The rest is commentary.*

**May each of find time to follow the example of Jesus:
Walk into the woods.
Under the trees find the Oneness to bring back into the world.
*We cannot bring peace to the world
unless we first have it ourselves.***

[1] Wild Geese
from *Dream Work* by Mary Oliver
published by Atlantic Monthly Press
© Mary Oliver

[2] Sidney Lanier, “A Ballad of the Trees and the Master.”
[3] Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith*. Beacon Press, Boston

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Bill Darlison is the minister of the Dublin Unitarian Church on St Stephen’s Green. Most of his sermons can be found on the church web site. Bill also has a keen interest in astrology

Procrustes is alive and well!

Story: *Feeding his Clothes*

One day, Nasruddin saw a procession of well dressed people entering the grounds of the Sultan’s palace, and from the delicious smell of cooking that pervaded the atmosphere, he guessed that all these rich people were attending some sort of open air banquet. Nasruddin was very hungry, and the exotic aromas made his stomach rumble and his mouth water. ‘I’ll try to sneak inside,’ he thought. ‘Perhaps no one will notice that I haven’t got an invitation if I look nonchalant.’ But when the guards saw his tatty clothes, and his unkempt appearance, they knew at once that Nasruddin was a gate-crasher, and they barred his entry. ‘This banquet is for the Sultan’s special guests,’ said one burly guard in a threatening tone. ‘It’s not for beggars like you!’

Nasruddin went to the house of a rich friend, and explained what had just happened. ‘May I borrow a good suit of clothes?’ he asked. His friend gave him some beautiful silken robes, and a fine turban. ‘They’re a little old fashioned, and I don’t use them any more,’ said his friend. ‘You can keep them if you like.’

Dressed in his new costume, Nasruddin presented himself once more at the Sultan’s palace, but, since he looked like a rich man, the guards fell over themselves to be gracious to him. They didn’t ask to see his invitation, and one of them escorted him to the very top of the table, where all the dignitaries were sitting. No sooner had Nasruddin sat down, than plates of the most delicious food and flagons of fine wine were placed before him. But he didn’t eat any of it. He took some of the curry and smeared it on the sleeves of his robe; then he poured some wine over his turban, and stuffed vegetables into his pockets. ‘What on earth are you doing?’ asked Nasruddin’s bewildered neighbour. ‘Why are you rubbing food into your beautiful clothes?’

‘It’s these clothes that brought me all this fine food. It’s only right that they should be fed first!’

Nasruddin replied.

When I came to Dublin in 1996 I inherited the 'children's story' section of the service. It had been the tradition here to have a special slot for a children's item, but in Wakefield, where I had been minister, it was never customary. Principally, no doubt, because there were rarely any children present. So, I inherited a custom which was quite onerous, and regularly the children's story would give me more trouble to prepare than the sermon.

However, over the years I came to realise that this element of the service was among the most important; not only did it make the children feel that they were a part of things, but it also provided an opportunity to tell some of the most profound and meaningful spiritual stories, some of which have application way beyond childhood. What's more, since these stories could be found in all the traditions telling them was a very easy way of teaching us all that insight is found throughout the world and throughout history.

One of the most important stories, I think, is the story of Procrustes, which comes from Greek mythology. I have told it to the children, but it's not that easy to make either humorous or exciting, and it is a little too bloodthirsty for a Sunday morning, so I generally choose something else, as I did today. But I can remind you of it. Procrustes, whose name means 'the stretcher', was a blacksmith who invited travellers to spend the night in his special bed. And he had a way of ensuring that everyone fitted the bed exactly. If his guests were too short, he would stretch them; if they were too tall, and their limbs extended beyond the bed, he would go to work with his axe and chop off any protruding bits. Eventually he came to grief when he was fitted to his own bed by the Greek hero Theseus.

Just another piece of charming and primitive Greek mythology, you might think. But there's more to it than that. As the 20th century mythologist Joseph Campbell said, the people who inhabit the great myths are walking around today. These stories are relevant because they tell us something very important about what it means to be a human being, something that hasn't altered in the thousands of years we humans have been around. Theseus may have killed the mythological Procrustes of old, but the spirit of the tyrant lives wherever we try to fit people into an arbitrary standard to which exact conformity is required. And that is just about everywhere.

We saw a trivial but pertinent example of it in our reading from John Betjeman this morning. We send Christmas cards, he says, because people send cards to us:

Last year I sent out twenty yards,
Laid end to end, of Christmas cards
To people that I scarcely know –
They'd sent a card to me, and so
I had to send one back.

There you have it. A simple procrustean obligation: this is what you do; this is how you celebrate Christmas; these things are expected of you. Fit in, or you'll suffer for it. Indeed, much of what passes for Christmas preparation and celebration is just conforming to some inherited arbitrary standard of behaviour. And it's so widespread and so predictable that statisticians have been able to determine our collective behaviour patterns; they told us last week, for example, that the first argument of Christmas Day occurs – on average, of course – at 9.58 a.m. Children get their first telling off at 11.07, and parents sip their first alcoholic drink at 11.49. I have to admit a kind of sneaking regard for those people – men usually – who defy convention by playing 'Christmas Chicken' – waiting to buy all their presents on Christmas Eve and seeing how late the very last purchase can be made! Although, it's been talked about so much that it is no doubt becoming something of a custom in itself. I also heard last week that as we all count the days to Christmas, we should remember that the only other group of people who count days so feverishly are prisoners! Are we prisoners of Christmas? If so, then the spirit of Procrustes is indeed alive and well.

There's another area of modern life over which he reigns – the curious desire we all seem to

have to fit our bodies into an arbitrary pattern of someone else's making. Stretching and chopping parts of our anatomy so that we can be considered conventionally attractive is almost a perfect example of procrustean activity. Your breasts aren't big enough? Have them expanded by surgery. Your tummy is too big? Have it reduced by liposuction. The whole of the cosmetics and diet industries – worth billions and billions of dollars world-wide – is testimony to the feverish desire we all have to obey the instructions of the advertisers and the fashion gurus who present to us ridiculously untypical models for us to envy and to emulate. But what is even more sinister, we choose to undergo the cutting and the stretching ourselves; we volunteer to have our bodies pumped and prodded, and even pay money for the privilege. At least Procrustes had to tie his victims down, or drug them.

But there are other, more serious ways, or at least, more dangerous ways, in which we feel his malign influence. The political world, both historically and currently, furnishes countless examples. The most notorious example is, of course, Adolf Hitler. His agenda was entirely procrustean. He wanted to eliminate every group of people he found troublesome. Jewish people, he thought, were responsible for all the world's financial problems and the simplest way to deal with them was to kill them all. Similarly with homosexuals, Gypsies, people suffering from mental illness, people of limited mental development or of impaired physical development. Get rid of them all, so that you can produce a super race of blond haired, blue eyed supermen and superwomen. It is ironic, of course, that Hitler himself hardly fitted into this category, nor did any of his closest henchmen, but consistency and logic are not to be expected from people who think like he did. 'Ethnic cleansing', which we've heard so much about in the past few years, is as old as the human race, is a contemporary manifestation of the same idea, and we have witnessed its horrors in the last decade in Bosnia

Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Tse Tung all believed that the best way to deal with your problems is to eliminate them. Between them, these men were responsible for the deaths of countless millions of people, all in the name of some twisted ideology or another. According to a new biography of Trotsky, Stalin ordered Trotsky's assassination because, he said, 'No person, no problem'. It was Stalin, too, who is said to have remarked, 'One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is just a statistic.' Anyone who doesn't fit into your neat little political or economic scheme is best eliminated. Criminals, too, say some, should simply be disposed of. Why bother with rehabilitation, with trying to understand them, or trying to correct the disadvantages which have undoubtedly been responsible for their anti-social behaviour? Hang them all. It's simple; it's efficient; it's effective; it's cheap.

I'm no expert in political affairs, but I sometimes feel that the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are being conducted, partly at least, in an attempt to impose the western idea of democracy on people for whom it is alien. What right do we have to oblige others to govern themselves as we do? The stretching and cutting involved is costing thousands of innocent lives, and is destined to continue until the attempt is ultimately perceived as forlorn.

Procrustes lives in the field of religion. I've just been reading the biography of John Charles McQuaid, the notorious archbishop of Dublin whose procrustean agenda was behind his attempt to make all the citizens of Ireland conform to the social and moral teachings of the Catholic Church. I was astonished to read that the Irish Constitution, drafted under McQuaid's influence, begins:

In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and states, must be referred. We the people of Eire, humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord Jesus Christ, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial..

(John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland, by John Cooney. (1999) The O'Brien Press, Dublin.)

I would be interested to find out what the people worshipping in this church in 1937 thought of the Constitution's Trinitarian invocation, but if the Unitarians felt themselves to be excluded, how much more so would the non-believers, the humanists and the Jews? Last Thursday night, the Humanist speaker in the series on *The Search for the Divine* told us of his disquiet concerning the Constitution, and how he felt excluded by it. But this exclusion is not just theoretical. The bans on contraception and divorce, which caused untold misery for thousands of people were part of a scheme whereby everyone, Catholic or not,

was forced to live their lives according to a narrow interpretation of the Catholic teaching on the function and purpose of sexuality. Fit into it or suffer; fit into it or leave; fit into it or be punished for all eternity. Reading this biography, I found myself, for the very first time, feeling some kind of fleeting sympathy for Ian Paisley and his cronies, although I have no doubt that he had a procrustean agenda of his own.

Religious notions about sexuality have influenced – and are still influencing – our attitudes to homosexuality. When the pope tells us that according to ‘natural law’ homosexual acts are sinful, he is assuming that the primary function of sexuality is procreation, and since homosexual acts are by their very nature incapable of procreation they are ‘inherently disordered’. The Anglican Church is experiencing problems because of this quite arbitrary assumption. Meanwhile, millions of people who find that their sexuality does not fit in with this conjecture are condemned to live even in liberal regimes as second class citizens; in less tolerant countries, they live in fear for their lives.

What lies behind all these manifestations of the spirit of Procrustes is an unwillingness to accept what is genuinely a ‘natural law’: namely, that people are different. It is the plainest, most obvious law of the human species. We are various; male and female; short and tall; heavy and light; black, yellow, white, brown; intelligent and dim; heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual; Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, and the rest. And this variety is not to be deplored but to be celebrated. A world in which we all looked, thought, and acted the same – an homogenised world – would be an appalling place.

Even the Bible – which has been and still is the source of much procrustean thinking – contains celebrations of diversity. The concept of the twelve tribes of Israel is, I believe, a metaphor, for human variety rather than a historical reality. Each tribe has its separate function; each its own history; each has its individual characteristics. And the Bible is clear that the elimination of any one of these groups would be disastrous to the whole. At the end of the Book of Judges, the tribe of Benjamin is in danger of being wiped out until plans are devised to reincorporate it. ‘O Lord, the God of Israel,’ they cried, ‘why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel this day?’ (Judges 21:3)

Procrustes lives. Theseus may have dealt with the mythological figure, but his spirit persists. So here’s a suggestion for a New Year’s Resolution: in 2010, try to identify the continuing work of Procrustes. Whenever you feel yourself obliged to conform in ways that you find uncongenial, recognise that Procrustes is stretching and cutting you. But, more importantly, try to identify his operation in your own psyche, because, make no mistake, no matter how liberal and tolerant you think you are, he’s living in you; he’s there whenever you find yourself suggesting facile solutions to complex problems; whenever you want to stretch or compress others to fit your own narrow view of the world; whenever you find yourself judging others on the basis of trivial externals – like the guards in the story I told the children earlier.

Antony de Mello tells the story of woman who founded a religion whose only adherents were herself and her housemaid, Mary. ‘Do you mean to say that only you and Mary will get to heaven?’ asked a curious newspaper reporter. ‘Well, I’m not too sure about Mary,’ replied the woman. Whenever you think like this – and we all do – you are manifesting the spirit of Procrustes. When you find yourself doing it, call upon your inner Theseus and subdue him. You can do it by saying to yourself what ordinary people have said to themselves throughout the ages, but which philosophers, religious leaders, politicians and sociologists often seem to forget: ‘It wouldn’t do for us all to be the same’, ‘live and let live’, ‘It takes all kinds to make a world’. These sentiments struck Ludwig Wittgenstein as ‘most beautiful and kindly’. Such beautiful, kindly and simple sentiments can help put Procrustes in his place.

December 6th 2009

Linda Hart trained for the ministry in the United States and is currently serving the congregation in

Richmond, Surrey

Which Story? Easter 2010

Every year it comes back to me. Easter is a strange holiday. Growing up in a household in which the Christian story was uncomfortable background noise to a day that was about new clothes (down to the knickers!), bunnies and chicks, egg hunts and candy, I have never quite escaped my sense that this is an odd sort of celebration.

It is widely understood as the critical event in the Christian calendar, the event upon which faith is most deeply founded: that God's son was born into the world, was brutally executed and then rose from the dead as a substitute sacrifice for the sins of the world. In the context of the ancient world in which this story arose, this story wasn't anything unusual. There were plenty of stories of gods who were murdered and whose blood was a sacrifice for the people. To modern ears, though, it sounds gruesome, perhaps even vampire-like. In spite of this, through this week people have been in prayer and worship and this morning, all around the world, people are going into churches to celebrate Easter, affirming their faith that the death and resurrection of Jesus two millennia ago have saved them from the sin that would commit them to an eternity of damnation.

When I am able to come to this story open to what it might offer, and when I can entertain this interpretation, I find that there is something deeply moving and comforting about it. That the powers that rule the universe came together to bring to birth a special one, who came into the world in order to redeem all the wrong that I have done, to redeem the wrong that is somehow threaded through human existence – well, it allows my shoulders to relax, allows me to faint down in thanks that it might be so. It make me catch my breath to simply imagine that the hate and anger that have lived in me, that the failings – some of them so deep, some so deep – are somehow forgiven, made whole. It makes me catch my breath.

And yet it is not – and likely never will be – my story, the one that I turn to when I need to know something about the world and my place in it.

It is fascinating to consider here on this Easter day what has come down the ages as the central story for Christianity. In any story, there are details that one can include or exclude. What colour was the dress that the fairy princess was wearing, and was there any rust on the armour that the prince wore whilst slaying the dragon? Were the dragon scales iridescent or a single colour? How did the lemon smell when the old woman squeezed it into the potion that she gave to the prince to give him courage before he left the village. In any story, there are thousands of details that can be told or not, that can be lifted up or left unsaid. So why were these particular details included, and why have they come to have the prominence that they do? Why is it that we stop in this season on this day to remember these particular events?

We know some of those reasons. The Christians took over some of the ancient pagan rituals that occurred at this time of year, rituals that celebrated the rebirth of the earth in spring, rituals of fertility and fecundity. That's why we have rabbits and eggs all over. Some of the decisions for inclusion of this bit or that had to do with the various agendas of the people who put together the Gospels, the editors who very often relied upon other, older texts, themselves adopting or leaving out some of what happened. And there's the political realities of the times when the canon, the officially sanctioned works were agreed.

However it has come about, this holiday – and indeed Christianity as it is most widely understood here and around the world – lifts up the religion that is about Jesus. When the creed is recited it doesn't direct the faithful to loving each other and loving God who is one, as Jesus taught in our reading this morning, but instead claims belief in the events of his miracle birth, his brutal death, and his resurrection. In a similar way, fundamentalism as it is understood in the United States (and increasingly around the world) affirm 5 proclamations that centre on the same ideas: the virgin birth, inerrancy of the bible, substitutionary atonement, the deity of Jesus and his literal resurrection and the

historical reality of the miracles he performed. The religion at its centre isn't about the radical things he said, it isn't about his works of mercy and calls to justice, it isn't about his announcement that the kingdom of God is here among us. It is about a belief in a God who makes extraordinary things happen.

While I do find that I am moved by that story as I said at the beginning, and moved deeply by the image of the resurrection and the resonances it can have in our own lives – who among us hasn't known at some moment that feeling of a stone being moved away and life being reborn in our own hearts? – while I am, indeed, deeply moved by the story and the image of the resurrection, it is not for me what is most important about Jesus.

Last week, a tweet by an American comedian called John Fugelsang went viral over both Twitter and Facebook, at least it did among people I know. He said: "Obama is not a brown-skinned anti-war socialist who gives away free healthcare. You're thinking of Jesus." That short phrase lifts up what for me is the true centre of Christianity: the religion OF Jesus. The focus, it seems to me, should always be not upon what was supernatural – how he went outside the natural world – but on the stunning, fresh, world changing ideas that he preached. The focus should be what he told the people around him. The focus should be on the ministry he offered, not on his birth and death.

Antonio Machado describes this in a poem. He says:

I love Jesus, who said to us:

heaven and earth will pass away.

When heaven and earth have passed away,
my word will still remain.

What was your word, Jesus?

Love? Forgiveness? Affection?

All your words were

one word: Wakeup.

What it comes down to in the end, I think, is a question of what it is that we have to do to be saved. What do we have to do to be saved? One answer, the one offered by more orthodox Christians is to believe in this Jesus as God who was born and executed and rose from the dead in order to give us all eternal life in heaven.

Another answer is that the salvation that is most meaningful isn't the promise of eternal life, but a salvation that comes from living a life that is worthy. It is the salvation that comes from seeking, too, to embody the religion that Jesus lived: loving God with heart and mind and spirit, loving others in this world, practising kindness, tending to those who are excluded, helping the oppressed. The single prayer that Jesus taught speaks of honouring the powers of the universe, asking for what is most needful, and offering forgiveness. We could do a whole lot worse than trying to live into that prayer.

In my own selection of the details of the story of Jesus, I am most drawn to this manner of salvation: salvation that arrives not at the end with the trumpeting of angels and the welcome into God's presence, but salvation that is a life long enterprise. I look for it everywhere: salvation that lives within the cloth of my daily life; salvation that comes from an awareness of ultimate things, salvation in the attention I pay to the small moments, salvation in the offering of forgiveness, salvation in the creation of peace, for myself or for my world. salvation that comes from the living of a life that is worthy, that embodies compassion, that seeks the good, that loves without end.

And lest this salvation seem too big to accomplish – as it indeed is – then the final salvation will be remembering that finally we are saved not by what we are able to do, not saved by our works, but by our faithfulness to what we believe most deeply to be true. The poet reminds us that we will never be able to do it entirely:

And if the world were black and white entirely

And all the charts were plain

Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,

A prism of delight and pain,

We might be surer where we wished to go

Or again we might be merely
Bored but in brute reality there is no
Road that is right entirely. (Louis MacNeice)

So today in the midst of this holiday, this day of new life being born, of resurrections and fertility, let us say our own alleluia, praising the promise that life holds for us, and committing again to our own rebirth as it comes in the days we live, each morning a new start, each moment an opportunity to offer our love, each breath a chance for peace, each step that carries us along a path worth following. Let us say an alleluia.

Amen.