

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



Three Sermons

Rev Celia Cartwright, Rev Nicky Jenkins and Rev Jo James

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Introduction

Ministers with a congregation must dedicate part of their week to writing a Sunday service for their congregation. The Unitarians do not have a missal or a lectionary that dictates what the subject of each Sunday should be and what readings should be used. The Unitarian minister starts preparation with a blank piece of paper or more likely a blank document on the computer and must build up the service from there. Sometimes events of the week have inspired a thought to be developed and shared, sometimes it might be something to do with the season or maybe just a random thought that has led them down a path. I used to think that the minister found their worship time in the preparation of the service rather than in the delivery of it.

In this Viewpoint we have three sermons. Rev Celia Cartwright is the minister at our Kendal chapel, Rev Nicky Jenkins is at Chorlton in Manchester and the Rev Jo James is at Mill Hill, Leeds.

I hope you enjoy the variety and that these sermons will speak to you as you read them

Tony McNeile

Rev Celia Cartwright — LIBERTY?

‘The principle of liberty is part of our Unitarian ethos but it only becomes real when people know it as a living reality in their hearts and lives. Let us hope and pray that the people of the world will draw together in common unity against all forms of terrorism and oppression.’

These fine words, with which I and I am sure you all, agree with wholeheartedly, were in response to the killing of a group of cartoonists from the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo just over a week ago, by what the media are wont to describe as Islamists or

Islamist terrorists, and which it must be stressed, no moderate Moslem supports. But the principle of 'liberty' is not just about the current outrages, not only in France, but in, Nigeria and Pakistan, to name but two areas where the innocent have been killed precisely because the notion of 'liberty' did not include their liberty.

The response to the killing by armed gunmen who opened fire on chosen individuals around a board table in the offices of the magazine Charlie Hebdo and the later hostage taking resulting in the lives of four Jewish men losing their lives and the death of two police officers one of whom, ironically, was Muslim, was something in the order of one million people gathering in Paris in solidarity with the ideals of 'Liberty'. Not only this but in private and public media there was much attention given to the dreadful situation here and in the United States of America. There was a great deal of talk about 'liberty'.

I support the ideal of liberty, but I believe it is a conditional ideal. I believe that liberty is conditional on our responsibility for others.

Thomas Jefferson – a Unitarian, founding father of America, author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States of America, wrote:

'Rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.' He went on to qualify this with: '**I do not** add 'within the limits of the law' because the law is often but the tyrant's will, and always so when it violates the rights of the individual.'

Let me repeat what he said once again, '**Rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.**' I could not agree more with Jefferson's ideal of liberty.

We have heard much about 'liberty' in the last week or so, the liberty

of the cartoonists to create satirical cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed, but what of the liberty of Muslim people to have their prophet respected? Then again, what made the gunmen, supposedly acting on behalf of Islam believe they had the right to take the life of a group of artists? All sides striking a blow for yet, both not staying within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.

There is a very thin line between 'liberty' and 'self-aggrandisement' between 'liberty' and 'bullying', between 'liberty' and 'high-handedness' between liberty and idealism, between one man's liberty and another man's desire for anarchy. I have sympathy with those feel the need to stand together, to uphold the principle of liberty, but when we are moved to stand up for our own liberty, do we also have in mind the liberty of the other? Sometimes it seems we paint a very black and white picture to embrace our notion of liberty, when in truth the pictures are always many shades of grey.

I was saddened, but not surprised to learn that in response, or perhaps the word 'backlash' would be more accurate, to the gunmen who killed the cartoonists, was the attaching of many mosques across France, and the injuring of innocent Moslems. Also while so many were prepared to march for the liberty of satirists and others, no one, it seemed was fired by the right to liberty for the 2000 plus killed in Nigeria, nor the more than 100 children in an ambush on a school in Pakistan. Why? Surely if we believe in liberty, we believe in liberty? But then it is always easier to defend our own liberty, than that of people whose culture, faith, colour, status, are different. And we are most likely to rally behind the banner of 'liberty' when there is real or perceived threat to it.

Right now, we feel the threat of the kind of attack in Paris happening here in our own country, it feels a very new and scary. But is it? Paddy Ashdown, military man and politician, wrote in an article in the 'I' newspaper on Monday last, 'The 'Charlie Hebdo' atrocities of last

week are many things; frightening, terrifying, atrocious, a horror. But as a phenomenon they are not new. It has always been possible down the ages to persuade young men (and a very few young women) of all faiths and none to believe that it is noble to kill innocent people. As far back as the first century, the Jewish Zealots did it against Roman rule. In the 11th century the Shia Muslim Hashashin added another word – assassin – to our vocabulary.’

It’s not new. If its not new, have we learned from the past? George Santayana the 19th century Spanish philosopher wrote: ‘They say that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it’. I wonder if humanity will ever learn that violence in the face of violence should never, ever, be a first response.

What do our reactions to atrocities perpetrated by one set of people on another in the name of some ideology say about our understanding of liberty - as a country and as Unitarians who have traditionally claimed to stand for ‘Civil and Religious Liberty for all, the world over’? Do we stand up for liberty or stand up for **our** liberty? The cartoonists from Charlie Hebdo knew what they were doing, they asked for and accepted police protection. The fact that they felt the need for protection speaks volumes for the understanding that some would not judge them from a vantage point of ‘liberty’ as they saw it. The fact that they continued to work as they did, using the pen rather than the sword was to be both brave and foolish; for their cartoons upset not only the mass of liberal Islam, but also the extremes of fundamentalist ideology. In one sense we may see the cartoonists running the risk of being silenced **because** they were, in their own way, striving for the freedom of all. In another their actions could be seen as deliberately provocative, standing on the toes of someone else’s liberty. However if we do not engage in a little provocation, are we not engaging in a massive dumbing down on humanity? Sometimes we have to stretch boundaries, to use humour of all kinds to test the willingness of others to stretch their ideas of liberty.

John Stuart Mill, perhaps the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the 19th century, wrote at length during the middle of the 19th century on the subject of Liberty, and had this to say about the silencing of expression:

‘The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion, is that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth.’

We cannot, in conscience silence a truth simply because it is unpalatable, even when the opinion or truth is not one we agree with. George Bush’s ‘War on Terrorism’ was in some ways a war on Liberty. Not only did he feel ‘an eye for an eye’ was the right approach, he also sought to silence just one kind of opinion, one kind of truth. Worse he claimed he did so with ‘God’s blessing’. Which is ironic when you think about it, because Jesus’ entire mission was about challenging not with violence but love and healing, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ he said, ‘love your enemy, turn the other cheek’. To declare war on terrorism, is to seek an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and as Ghandi is reputed to have said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth makes the whole world blind and toothless’.

It is easy to see the actions of those we call ‘terrorist’ as an act against ‘liberty’. But we often have only a personal and local idea of what ‘liberty’ actually is. For most of us it is simply the freedom to go about our own lives in peace as we wish to, and to keep the peace with those with whom we share a house, a street perhaps, maybe our liberty stretches to our village or town, but by the time we stretch the ideology to embrace a city a county a country we are less clear of where ‘liberty’ begins and ends and we begin to judge those who do not wish to live our kind of liberty.

Liberty is a wriggling snake, just when think we have it summed up, it slips out of our grasp and becomes something different. We like to think it is the freedom to live, act speak, do as we wish to. But that freedom is dependent on our understanding that such liberty, such freedoms must be universal if we are not to become despots. Liberty is also the accepting that we may not agree with the definitions of others who also claim the virtue of liberty, that by listening to and talking to and experiencing with these others we may come to either understand the inaccuracy of our idea of the truth or have our ideas confirmed. Liberty is also the freedom not to learn from our past mistakes, to go on making the same mistakes. I quoted Thomas Jefferson earlier on the reality of freedom but its interesting to know that he had much to say about liberty and clearly understood the idea of liberty when given to human beings. He sais also 'The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.' And that's maybe what we are seeing now and have seen throughout the decades and the centuries. Perhaps Liberty is still in its in fancy, and like any child must learn by its errors, and be helped by those who think clearly enough to speak the language of peace that the patriots and tyrants will hear and so cease their bloodshed. I urge all who seek to create a world of liberty to hold its hand gently. Let us not despair when it is threatened, but keep a wise head and look to all aspects of its being. Let us hold the ideal of liberality, but be cautious when we claim it. Let us know that the spirit of liberty is not only in claiming the right to speak and act as one pleases, but also in the necessary care to make sure our liberty does not infringe another's. There is much forgiveness in achieving liberty. Let liberty not lead us to pride and indifference, let it bring us to understand the needs of our fellow humans, whatever their race, colour, creed, sexuality or politics. Let the divine spirit of love flow through that noble ideal and make it real. The Unitarian vision of Civil and Religious Liberty for all, is worth holding safely.

Celia Cartwright - 2015

Rev Nicky Jenkins—You need hands

Hands to care for a little baby; Hands to wipe away a tear. When someone says, " Give him a big hand " we applaud. Like those ones you see at football matches- Huge foam hands.

Hands are not appreciated for all that they do. And hands can tell us a lot about a person .What did you find during your meditation. Maybe your hands are like your mother or fathers. Are you like them? Maybe you don't want to be like they were. We inherit some of our physical traits and there is not much we can do about it but it doesn't mean we have to be like them in all respects. We have choice and understanding about how we behave. When you look at your hands do you like them or loathe them?

My hands are square and my fingers are short. The skin is wrinkled and slack and brown age spots are starting to appear. I can't say I hate my hands- it's just that they look like someone else's. Someone who is much older than I am. I remember sitting behind two attractive young women in a theatre in New Zealand. They were chatting animatedly and waving their hands about. Suddenly I saw the women's hands.

Their hands were elderly - their skin was wrinkled. It was a shock! Then I realised it was an effect of the New Zealand sun. They had carefully applied sunscreen to their faces and worn hats to protect themselves from the strong ultra violet but their hands had not been so fortunate.

Indeed our hands (women's hands) in many ways stand in as a metaphor for our souls. They are working away, exposed to all that goes on around them, dipped in chemicals, washed too often, grubbing in the earth, doing some really dirty jobs and at the same time expected to be pure and saintly –hands that pray; hands that embroider; hands that paint or write .Hands that cook, hands that clean, hands that repair and carry. Hands that soothe and calm; Hands that hold the despairing.

Our hands deserve to be pampered. Soak your fingertips in olive oil. Rub in some nourishing hand cream and give your hands a massage, Take an emery board to the rough edges of your nails; perhaps push back the cuticles. Then put on a pair of plain cotton gloves and do nothing while it all sinks in. That's the really difficult part- doing nothing while it all sinks in. And maybe that's why the manicure set my sister gave me is sitting unused in my bathroom cabinet. I really don't have the time for hand pampering. It does sound rather self-indulgent. But if we leave our hands exposed and unsoothed the skin will crack and our hands will become sore. Little cuts will become worse and we will not be able to carry on doing the things we need to or choose to do.

So too our souls need to have time set aside for them. We need to make a quiet space in the day-a time for reading, praying, listening to music, meditating or simply being silent. We need time for our own nourishment to sink in. This time need not be stationary. We can take a little time to walk in the park or just down the street looking at nature. As W. H. Davies said in his poem 'Leisure'

"What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare?"

Our souls need refreshment and nourishing. If we don't pour life and love into our selves how can we expect to go on pouring it out for others. We need to top up our reserves.

And just like a manicure, once a year really isn't enough. If we are to feel the benefits, it needs to be a regular commitment to ourselves, to our spiritual selves.

And believe me I know this isn't easy. It is not in my nature to be disciplined and I struggle to have a regular spiritual practice. But the idea is not to burden yourself with some impossibly difficult demand that you cannot possibly fit in to your lifestyle. It is to start small and when you fall off the routine just start again or adjust to fit. The key is to choose

something that you find rewarding, because you won't want to do it regularly if it's like eating brussel sprouts and like me you hate brussel sprouts.

There are other ways to nurture your soul. Some people find keeping a daily spiritual journal is a wonderful way of setting aside some time for that still small voice. Others resolve to make an annual retreat. This is different from a holiday as it involves distancing yourself from your everyday activities and going to a special quiet place to be alone with your thoughts. There are a range of retreat centres throughout the UK where you can either go and be alone or have the help of a trained facilitator or spiritual director. Retreats are also helpful when we are going through a time of transition; when our lives are changing or have been changed against our will. Sometimes we need a time alone where we can find ourselves again. Modern life has lost touch with the need for down time, time to process, time to heal, time to find ourselves again. We are often expected to return to our daily duties, to pick up the reins as though nothing has happened and to carry on.

One of the difficulties we might have with this idea of nurturing our souls is that we may have been brought up to think that it was selfish to do anything for ourselves but in the book of the Bible attributed to St Matthew, Jesus says 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. That is to say, you should be loving yourself first and spread that love out into the world.

One practice I have managed to keep to is a nightly Gratitude practice. Simply recalling the gifts of the day helps to put things in perspective and leaves me ready to sleep with a thankful heart. Prayer has grown since I was young. It is no longer restricted to confessing our sins and asking for blessings on our relatives. There are so many different ways to engage in prayer that don't involve putting your hands together. Now I am no religious scholar but I am going to attempt to widen the definition of prayer- to my mind it is an intentional opening of our-

selves to the Divine, to that which is the Ground of our being, the great oneness of life. An intentional opening- We have nothing to fear in that place. We are accepted and loved unconditionally there. We are forgiven our mistakes and wrongdoings. It is a place of peace.

Christina Baldwin says,

"Spiritual love is a position of standing with one hand extended into the universe and one hand extended into the world, letting ourselves be a conduit for passing energy."

Let us recharge ourselves with the energy of the loving universe and pass that loving energy on to our family, friends, community and the world.

Rev Nicky Jenkins

Rev Jo James — LENT

“Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody’s business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbours worthy.” Thomas Merton

The word Lent derives from the word lengthen and my guess is that this refers to the lengthening daylight we enjoy at this time of year brightening towards the eventual coming of spring, the annual miracle of re-birth as the sleeping world re-awakens again.

Lent is a strange phenomenon in the church year; everyone knows what it is but almost nobody knows what it means – why it is so persuasive to our hearts, to our pre conscious or un rational selves.

As our anthem illustrated; Lent is a time when in the Christian calendar we remember Jesus renunciation of the devil and, seeking to replicate that heroic struggle against evil, tradition dictates that we, like Jesus, turn our faces against those temptations of the flesh. We give up our guiltiest pleasures – well supposedly.

Shrove Tuesday, pancake day is our thin western approximation of the carnival – the great blow out before the fast; carne vale farewell to meat. And on Ash Wednesday we know that all good people go to mass and receive the cross marked in ash on their foreheads.

I consider it as a strangeness beyond strange that Christianity choses to ignore so many of the things that Jesus is reported specifically to have spoken against, and wearing ashes as a sign of fasting is one such, recorded in that extraordinarily brilliant and far reaching chapter of Matthew that I read earlier (a passage that also contains of course the great prayer of Jesus). That same passage also says dont disfigure your faces as hypocrites do but wash and let only God be aware of your piety...

Lent is the remembrance of the time in the wilderness. The temptation of Christ by 'the devil' – a power I don't personally believe in and which is certainly alien to the Judaism Jesus knew – but I leave this to one side for a moment, to consider the wilderness – the motif which recurs in the Hebrew Bible the Old testament, the void – the great waters over which the spirit broods, and across which Noah sails, the wilderness into which Abraham and Sarah must wander, and Hagar and Ishmael are cast, the wilderness into which the people of Israel must suffer for their forty years of coming to terms with the reality of God, years which we are told In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old, the valley of bones into which the spirit breathes new life; all visions of wilderness which we must be prepared to wander if we are to

undergo that transformation which is our spiritual right and need. For as Meno wrote “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” except by leaving home, the comforts of the known for the wildness of the unknown, and that is I think what is at the hearty of the concept of giving up we are expected to undergo at Lent.

Letting our habits fade, letting go of the ropes of our confinement by habit and trying something unknown... “That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost... The things we want are transformative, and we don’t know, or only think we know, what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration — how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?” Writes Rebecca Solnit and makes me wonder if perhaps Lent has something other than lengthening and more like longing at its heart? Longing for transformation, for grace, for God.

I once stopped a visitor as she was leaving my home church at Brixton. Se was upset because the visiting minister had been disappointingly droning on about some outmoded and boring aspect of conformist orthodoxy, some ‘Churchianity’, we spoke, in a desolate fashion, as you do.

She said she wasn’t sure that she believed in God – she said that what she experienced was more ‘a kind of longing’.

I’m sure that she was closer at that moment to God than most comfortable believers ever get.

If giving up some small pleasure can release you from the tyranny of the known. Good luck to you. If giving up smoking or drinking for forty days serves as a springboard to better long term health, well that’s a great

thing (although I can't exactly see how it coincides with religion or spirituality, but perhaps that's my failure). And by the way I'm not saying that abstinence or resisting temptation is not worth trying or that it can't be spiritually valid – I just wonder if it might not be braver to try, what was the phrase: 'love, grace, wisdom, inspiration.'

Why not take something up during Lent? What about the 'loving kindness' practice we tried today? where by you consciously practice loving; first your self, then a loved one, then a stranger – then someone you don't like. They say something repeated twenty times becomes a new habit.

Thomas Merton said "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbours worthy." Thomas Merton.

Rev Jo James

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

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