

## **“Good News”**

**Main theme from a worship service led on 5 December 2010 at the Glasgow Unitarian Church on 5 December 2010 by Barry Bell.**

“Good News” is of course anything which uplifts us, and is something we all enjoy passing on. A particularly good special offer in a shop, landing a better job, the safe birth of a baby, the end of a war – all qualify as good news.

### **The “Good News” of Christianity**

The primary reason why Christmas is a special time is because it incorporates the date chosen by the Christian church to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The “Good News” which Christians pass on relates directly to what they believe was brought to us by Jesus.

Most Unitarians, whether or not they think of themselves as Christians, value what they believe to be the authentic actions and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and incorporate them into their personal faith and practice. Along with most Christians, they are selective about which parts of Christian creed and dogma they incorporate into their personal faith and practice.

Mainstream Christians are however united by a shared faith in certain crucial parts of creedal Christianity, most of which relate to the Christian interpretation of events after Jesus’ death.

**These make up are the “Good News” which is central to Christianity. The news that Jesus Christ, the human incarnation of the divine son of the one creator father God, has died for our sins and through his resurrection has provided a path to the Kingdom of Heaven - to everlasting life – Salvation, but only for those who believe in him.**

We Unitarians, amongst others, have always found ourselves struggling with the downside of this, which is the divisive certainty of an eternity in hell for all unbelievers. Many of us also struggle with the validity of any of this supernatural speculation.

It is however very powerful stuff. Who would wish to risk an eternity in hell as an unbeliever? And who would not wish both to rise above their own human frailty and mortality **and** to be the saviour of others from theirs by spreading this good news?

The spreading of this form of “Good News” has undoubtedly been the key to the growth and survival of Christianity for two millennia.

It comes as no surprise to me then that it is the evangelical wings of **all** religions which are actually growing in times of generally declining support for organised religions in the modernised and increasingly secular West. The evangelical wings which spread their various differing pieces of “Good News” - their religious answers to the big questions our human spirituality forces us to ask - which often include similarly powerful rewards and threats.

They actively reach out to the disillusioned and the spiritually lost, providing not only their religious answers but also their practical support, often awakening people to their own spirituality. However much we may be challenged by their “answers”, we have to envy the positive difference they make to real people’s lives.

There is most certainly real power in such spreading of “Good News”.

## The “Good News” of Unitarianism

I believe that we have our own “Good News”.

**The “Good News” which is central to Unitarianism is the radically different way our Unitarian spiritual communities are united internally.**

**They are not united through a shared personal faith - although the personal faith of virtually all Unitarians will include elements which can be found within Christianity - but are instead united by the shared desire to enable and support themselves and others in the pursuance of answers to our spiritual questions and in the pursuance of spiritual growth.**

Communities which encourage the use of both reason **and** spirituality, and which seek to share, without any creedal requirement of shared faith, everything in life which may be found to be of value and meaning.

Communities whose object is to help all to find their own answers to the big spiritual questions – to hold their own personal faith – and by so doing to find happiness within themselves and to bring happiness to others.

Communities whose unity does not come from all members channelling their spirituality solely and divisively through the answers provided by one particular religion or movement, but whose unity comes instead from a shared willingness to **learn** from the actions and teachings of Jesus and every other spiritual and secular leader rather than from shared faith in the actions and teachings of only one.

Communities whose unity comes from a shared **approach** to human reason and human spirituality, an approach which frees all Unitarians to find answers to their spiritual questions from within **all** human experience and knowledge.

It is news of a way of seeking spiritual growth – of becoming better human beings - which is open to all and accepting of all knowledge and experience rather than one open only to those with a shared faith in one particular set of answers to our spiritual questions.

It is truly “Good News”.

### **A recap**

Good news is anything which uplifts us, and it is a very human thing to want to share any good news we receive by passing it on to others.

The primary “good news” of mainstream Christianity is much less about what Jesus said and did than about its interpretation of events after his death which holds out victory over death for those (and only those) who take up Christianity.

Spreading this good news is primarily what has kept Christianity going for two millennia, that other religions will have similarly spread their own good news – their answers to the big spiritual questions which everyone asks, and that these often contain powerful rewards and threats.

It is the more evangelical wings of all religions which tend to grow best, and such spreading of good news – whatever challenges we may have with the “answers” contained within - can have a very positive effect upon the spiritual awareness of the listener.

We’ve covered - both in earlier statements and in readings from three Unitarian Ministers – some good things about Unitarians and about Unitarian communities.

We've identified that the Unitarian movement has its own "Good News". Good news about communities which encourage and support a wider, more open approach to the relationships between religion, spirituality, and life. Communities whose unity is found in this approach which empowers personal spiritual growth, and not in communal faith in any one of the numerous sets of answers to our spiritual questions which are provided by religions, spiritual movements, and secular movements.

### **Why are we not spreading our "Good News"?**

Let's start by looking at our history, and at our relationship with Christianity.

Unitarianism started out as a fairly liberal non-Trinitarian non-Conformist Protestant form of Christianity. The very fact that this is such a mouthful gives an immediate indication of just how small a part of Christianity this is. If you are in any doubt however, just visit the Wikipedia web-site and find out for yourselves how Unitarians are identified as fitting into the spectrum of Christianity. It's a very sobering experience, since it completely hides the strengths we all find within Unitarianism.

Despite this, it punched well above its weight for a while during its first evangelical phase.

Part of the problem is that the term "non-Trinitarian" can be interpreted in two very different ways. This is bad enough when it comes to establishing a coherent identity from which to pass on "Good News", but it gets even worse when you realise that unfortunately neither of them present our relationship with Christianity in a particularly helpful light – at least not if the movement wishes to represent itself as a part of Christianity.

In the first interpretation, a “non-trinitarian” is a person who finds no support in scripture for God being split into Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This defines Unitarians as being little more than a small Christian sect whose separation from the mainstream is based upon a scriptural point of order.

In the second interpretation, a “non-trinitarian” is someone who sees Jesus not as the literal Son of God but as fully human, a spiritual leader to be learned from but not worshipped. Sadly much of mainstream Christianity, understandably in my view, regards such non-trinitarians as falling outside of the Christian church altogether and will have no truck with us.

The fact is that Unitarians have moved on.

Unitarians are of course not simply Christians arguing over the fine detail of scripture. Many consider themselves to be Christians despite having little or no personal faith in any of the central Christian “Good News” defined earlier. Many not only see themselves as other than simply Christian but also see continuing to represent ourselves solely as a Christian denomination to be unsupportable.

I would respectfully suggest to you that with an identity crisis of this magnitude, it is really no surprise that we all too often shout only in whispers.

**What could happen to our communities if we did?**

This is something I am very positive about, though not without awareness of the challenges. I ask you to have the courage to consider it now. It could transform our communities from failing into being vibrant, and more successfully bringing something of real value to others.

**What could we bring to others if we did?**

We could bring something wonderful, something which is absolutely right for our time, to many more people. We could bring a welcoming and radically different way of obtaining answers to their spiritual questions and to enabling their spiritual growth.