

Sermon:

Elizabeth Gaskell was born in Chelsea, London. Her father was William Stephenson who had intended on going into the Dissenting Ministry but after some preaching as a Unitarian in the Manchester area he decided that a paid ministry was wrong. (I wonder if decisions like this had any effect on the generally low stipends that our ministers receive.) He served for a short time as a minister in Failsworth before turning to farming (unsuccessfully) and then moved to London where he obtained a position as keeper of records in the Treasury. Elizabeth's mother, also Elizabeth, came from a large family and had family connections with the Darwins, Turners, and the Wedgewoods, great intellectuals of the day. Unfortunately she died when Elizabeth was only one and her older brother was 13. Her father sent her to live with her aunt in Cheshire. Her father remarried when she was four but she continued to spend more time with her aunt than her father, who died in 1829.

Elizabeth studied briefly at a school in Stratford-upon-Avon and it is believed that she was impressed by the beautiful countryside and this later provided her with inspiration when writing some of her books.

In 1832 she married William Gaskell, the junior Unitarian minister at Manchester's Cross Street Chapel. They eventually had 5 children, their only son sadly died in infancy of scarlet fever and one daughter was stillborn. Throughout her marriage Elizabeth made her home a vital centre, where William carried out his religious and educational duties, where Sunday Schools met and where famous people were welcomed -- raising her children amidst this environment. As a minister's wife, Elizabeth met many of the middle class families in the fast growing city, and became involved in cultural affairs and even the cholera outbreak of 1832. Her life revolved around her roles as wife to her minister-husband and as a mother. She did find time to write prose and poems, that her husband corrected grammatically. Religion was, naturally, a constant factor in the life of the household, and while there is no mention of Unitarianism in any of her novels, a sensitive reader would suspect her connection to Dissent in some form.

She enjoyed writing short stories about places she had visited. She kept a diary of her experiences as a mother, which, as mentioned, included a fair share of tragedy and sadness. In 1837 her first item to appear in print was a poem, "Sketches among the poor", which she wrote jointly with William, focusing on the experiences and wisdom of an elderly single woman. During her grief over the loss of her son in 1844, William encouraged her to start writing a book as a means to divert her energy from her grief. Over the next five years, several short stories and her first novel, *Mary Barton*, were published. This novel opened many doors for Elizabeth -- she visited London and met many writers and celebrities -- and also caused controversy in Manchester where mill

owners, many of them Unitarians, felt criticised. She continued writing, however, about the plight of the urban poor. One of her books, *Ruth*, was burnt by two (male) members of Cross Street Chapel as a protest about its impropriety in allowing an unwed mother to find happiness.

She enjoyed a friendship with Charlotte Brontë. When Charlotte died in 1855, her father, Patrick Brontë asked her to write her biography. She did, but on its publication, Patrick was unhappy with some of the revelations and revisions were made.

During the 'cotton famine' starting in 1861, the embargo on slave-produced cotton from America during its Civil War forced many Manchester mills to close. Elizabeth and her daughters worked long hours providing relief and training to the women out of work. It is believed that the stress and overwork of this period took too much of a toll on her health and she died suddenly in November, 1865.

Her obituary in the Manchester Guardian suggested that Mrs Gaskell would be remembered more for her biography of Charlotte Brontë than for her fiction. She is buried at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford (the setting for her novel *Cranford*). Elizabeth remains one of the few British Unitarians to be honoured on a British postage stamp, a 1980 stamp showing a scene from *North and South*. Her writings made use of local dialect and stressed the role of women from all strata of industrialised society. As the Wikipedia article on Gaskell says, "Unitarianism urges comprehension and tolerance toward all religions and, even though Gaskell tried to keep her own beliefs hidden, she felt strongly about these values, which permeated her works—as in *North and South*, where "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm."

Rev Dr Ann Peart writes about Elizabeth Gaskell as a Unitarian as follows (slightly edited):

“During Elizabeth’s lifetime (1810-1865) British Unitarianism developed and changed considerably. The law declaring denial of the trinity illegal was repealed in 1813, and by 1850 many of the old Presbyterian, General Baptist and other rational dissenting congregations declared themselves to be Unitarian. The Dissenters’ Chapels Act of 1844 ensured that congregations which had been Unitarian for over 25 years could keep their buildings and trust funds. Some Unitarians followed James Martineau and others to develop a faith where authority is based on internal conscience rather than scripture, and with two colleges, at least two publications, and various national bodies, the movement was in danger of splitting. Elizabeth had been brought up in an undogmatic Presbyterian style, tutored by William Turner of Newcastle, and much influenced by the theology of Joseph Priestley. John Gooch Robberds, the senior minister at Cross Street Chapel, considered that too much emphasis on doctrine tended to divide congregations, and he

had an irenic style of ministry.

“Elizabeth declared that she had little interest in theology, though clearly she was more knowledgeable than she admitted. Her works of fiction do not include any mention of Unitarianism by name, though its values permeate both her life and her writing. She kept out of denominational controversies, but her letters indicate that she favoured the more traditional Unitarianism of Priestley rather than the ‘anti- supernaturalism’ of Martineau; she did not enjoy the company of the Martineau family, finding their conversation too solemn and full of ‘sense by the yard’. Elizabeth much preferred the company of the ‘old school’ Unitarians.

“She declared herself to be an Arian with regard to the person of Jesus, that is, Jesus is not God but is in some way more than human. In common with many other Unitarian women of her day, she preferred sermons to be spiritually uplifting rather than about doctrine, and wrote to a friend ‘oh, for some really spiritual devotional preaching instead of controversy about doctrines, - about which I am more and more certain *we can never be certain* in this world.’

“When away from home she, with her daughters, often attended the local Anglican church (as she had done at boarding school). On these occasions she wrestled with the competing demands of spiritual satisfaction and reverence for truth, and advised her daughters not to go to the Anglican service too often. It would be wrong, she told them, to deaden one’s ‘sense of its serious error by hearing it too often’; they should go preferably to the evening service, when only the Doxology could offend against ‘one’s sense of truth’. This stress on the importance of truth in the everyday events of daily life as well as in theological questions is an important element of Elizabeth’s Unitarianism. Her refusal to oversimplify matters sometimes made her appear inconsistent or indecisive, but this would be to do her an injustice. She considered that she had to study and seek to understand before she could reach an opinion. This went with a typically Unitarian valuing of education and intellectual growth. Her trust in a benevolent God showed itself in many ways; she wrote in a letter of her sense of God ‘being above all in His great sense of peace and wisdom, yet loving me with an individual love tenderer than any mother’s.’ She took care to introduce this loving image of God to her children at an early age, and not, as did many Victorian parents, talk of a God who punishes sins. Elizabeth did indeed think that evil deeds brought about consequences, and in this she followed the teaching of Joseph Priestley; but she had a very strong sense of the importance of conscience and duty.”

Turning to Elizabeth Gaskell's novels and her message for today, Rev Jim Robinson, minister of our Hampstead Unitarian Chapel in London writes (again, slightly edited):

“*Mary Barton* was her first major novel. It is set in Manchester. The story revolves

around a poor working class family headed by John Barton. His wife dies, and he is left to raise his daughter Mary. Mary takes up work as a dressmaker. She is courted by hard working but poor Jem Wilson, and rich Henry Carson, son of a wealthy mill owner. Mary loves Jem, but thinks she should marry Henry to secure a good life for her father. Meanwhile, father John Barton is becoming active in a trade union attached to the factory where he works.

“The plot becomes a murder mystery when the rich Henry is murdered. The poor suitor, Jem Wilson, is accused of the crime. However, in the end it is discovered that Mary’s father, John, is the murderer, murdering to protect his daughter against sexual advances made by the wealthy Henry. One can imagine how explosive such a plot would have been in the mid 1800’s: a poor trade unionist murdering the son of the wealthy mill owner. Through this plot Gaskell explores the deep injustices contained in class privilege, wealth, and poverty. She obviously sides with the poor.

“She again sides with the oppressed in her novel *Ruth*. The book is about sexual morality – a nearly taboo subject for its time. The heroine, Ruth, is a woman who mothers a child out of wedlock, but does not suffer the fate of a ‘fallen woman’. Instead, she is a character of high morals and hopes. She works out her own redemption through effort and decent values. Criticism fell upon Gaskell with the publication of this novel. Fathers burned the book lest it should fall into the hands of their daughters. Gaskell was shunned by some of her friends and social acquaintances. As she wrote to a friend: ‘The only comparison I can find for myself is to Saint Sebastian, tied to a tree to be shot with arrows. But I have spoken out my mind as best I can, and I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly must do some good.’

“It must have been a relief for Elizabeth that her novel *Cranford* was received with great popularity and little controversy. *Cranford*, which was recently shown as a BBC film series, is a delightful portrayal of village life in 19th century England. Women dominate the book, with their strength, eccentricities, and social values: Whether it is the narrator Mary Smith, the loving, sweet, and shy Miss Matty, her formidable sister Miss Deborah, the fiery Miss Pole, or the eccentric Miss Barker (who put her cow into a flannel waistcoat), the women of *Cranford* (like the women of Gaskell’s childhood) rule the town. The men, with their businesses and railroad, may think they rule the town, but they are mistaken.

“Gaskell returns to more overt social issues and themes in her novel *North and South*. Elizabeth worked among the poor in Manchester, and had first-hand knowledge of the terrible effects on workers of industrialization. She was actively concerned with creating better working conditions. She also saw the need for creative reconciliation between the classes, for everyone’s benefit. The best in the workers and the best in the mill owners must be coaxed out of them for a stable, healthy society to emerge.

“These are the themes of her novel *North and South*. The novel describes the emerging industrial North, as seen through the eyes of a sensitive woman from the South, Margaret Hale. Margaret is raised by wealthy relatives in London and by her humble, hard working parents in a lovely English village in the South. Her father leaves the Anglican Ministry, out of conscience, and moves north to Milton (a fictional town modelled after Manchester), to become a tutor.

“Margaret is a character of courage and empathy. She meets and mingles with the poor and the rich: Mr. Thornton, owner of the local mill; Nicholas Higgins, a poor worker at the mill; Mrs. Thornton, jealous and ambitious mother of the mill owner; Bessy, a poor woman who dies from inhuman living conditions; Margaret’s parents, who make the difficult move from south to north; other family relations, who have the class privilege of wealth; other Milton poor who cannot rub two coins together. Through these characters Gaskell raises issues of social justice and the work of reconciliation in society. This quest for reconciliation is symbolized in the growing love between Margaret Hale and the mill owner John Thornton. Only when John can see his class privilege and feel empathy for his workers, does a marriage between Margaret and John become possible.

“Her final works, the biography of Charlotte Brontë, another novel entitled *Sylvia’s Lovers*, and her nearly finished work *Wives and Daughters*, display the skill of a mature and accomplished author. Indeed, a number of critics consider her novel *Wives and Daughters* to be her finest. One critic writes: ‘In its wit and observation, *Wives and Daughters* is a worthy successor to the novels of Jane Austen. Gaskell draws more widely and delves deeper into the social scale. She portrays a changing society, in which achievement will soon count more than social position.’

“Elizabeth Gaskell is a great English novelist whose message is still relevant today. She challenges us on a number of fronts.

“First, Gaskell challenges us on the topic of **class privilege and poverty**. At the current time, around a quarter of children in the United Kingdom are raised in poverty. In the larger world, a third of humanity still lives on the knife-edge of malnutrition. Gaskell would have us look at the privilege we carry as middle class westerners, and how our social institutions favour the well-to-do at the expense of the hard-working poor of the world. Can we learn to share our resources more fairly and compassionately, for the sake of our human family and for the sake of the environment? We might learn that having fewer things, but more love will make us happier human beings. That is certainly what the mill owner, John Thornton, discovered in the novel *North and South*.

“Second, Gaskell challenges us on the topic of **women’s rights**. We have certainly come

a long ways since the time when Harriet Martineau (a contemporary of Gaskell) observed that women were like slaves, only treated with patronizing niceness. But there is still much work to be done. Women deserve more support in their choices around mothering and working. Women need full access to education. Studies demonstrate that educating women is one of the keys to raising a nation or people out of poverty. And women must have the right to control their own bodies and sexuality. Many of the women in Gaskell's novels are role models of what it means to be a strong and decent human being.

“Thirdly, for Unitarians, Gaskell challenges us to **take our faith more seriously**. Modern Unitarians have become ‘user friendly’. That means, if we like a Unitarian chapel we might join, but if it changes a bit (not to our liking) we will leave it quickly. We celebrate our freedom of thought and our passion for authenticity, but we take for granted the nature of community. Someone else will do the work of building and maintaining community – we want just the fun parts of it.

“For Gaskell, her Unitarian faith was not a hobby. Spiritual community, in her childhood Knutsford and her adult Manchester, was very important to her. Her Unitarian values were central to her life. Her faith inspired her to confront social injustice and to work for genuine reconciliation. Her Unitarian values gave her characters like Margaret Hale the strength to face the storms of life and make decisions that led towards human dignity and a better society.

“Elizabeth Gaskell leaves us with these three challenges: to end poverty in the world, to champion the rights of women, and to be grateful for our spiritual faith and community. May each of us, in our own way, respond to these challenges. May her vision of human dignity for everyone become the reality in our world.”

I close with thanks to Mhairi for her music and thanks to Revs Ann Peart and Jim Robinson for all the work they put into today's service.

Barbra Clifford