

Glasgow Unitarians

14 September 2014, 31 present

Leading worship: Barbara Clifford Music: Lyanne Mitchell

This sermon was shared the Sunday before The Referendum in Scotland and the period of worship included two readings about choices,

“Each New Morning” by Penny Quest in *Waiting to be Discovered*

and

“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost

SERMON “WHAT IF....”

Choices and Chance are mixed in all areas of life but today I'll limit my thoughts to my own family history as a possible pointer for others and then briefly to next week's Referendum, one of the choices that has been demanding our attention for over a year.

For me, IF opens up a part of my life that I had never had the opportunity to experience. I never knew my father or my grandfather. IF this was not the Centenary commemorating the start of the First World War from 1914 to 1918, I may not have had the initiative to pursue my paternal genealogy, the very common family name of Morgan not making it a straightforward search. For the past few years I have intended to search records of my deceased grandfather, whom I never met. All I knew was that he had been killed in the First World War and family stories were that he had died on the last day of the war - i.e. on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918. Unfortunately, it was not just my sisters and myself that did not know him but also our father, who was only a few months old when his father died. IF it hadn't been for the internet, discovering that he died a few months before the end of the war and even getting a photo of the cemetery in France where he is buried would have been too expensive and time consuming for us.

I have always felt sadness about the waste of lives in war, but my research has led to a greater awareness of similarities that both my father and grandfather died because of the First and Second World Wars, leaving a child/children they didn't get to know.

What a waste of life, the loss of life through war that impacted the futures of whole families, not just those who died. My father fought in World War 2 and died as a consequence of his poor health shortly after the war when I was a baby. This left my mother to raise 3 small girls on her own. IF the government widows allowance had been more generous in those days, this would have alleviated some of the poverty and ill health we had to endure, but not the trauma of our changed situation which required us to move from London back to Wales where my mother had family support. The situation today for widows has improved but not by what is needed.

I am not a pacifist like my husband, John, and a few members of this congregation, but my awareness of the horrors of war has grown, not declined, as the years pass, and we seem to make the same political decisions time after time.

IF we consider the reasons for the start of the first World War, which was sparked off by the assassination of Arch-Duke Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie of Serbia, we see many things. As in all fights, there is always a brewing up of underlying issues waiting to explode. Depending on how far back we go, we can see the policies of Bismark's Germany upsetting many of the countries surrounding Germany, notably France, with the creation of a network of secret treaties of mutual support. Germany had missed out on the Colonial Expansion of the 17th and 18th Centuries and tried to catch up with its European rivals in Africa, which further raised ill-feelings towards it. Because of secret treaty alliances, when the match was lit, the fire exploded, spreading further and faster than anyone had expected. After 4 horrendous years, both the Allies and Germany agreed to a truce (n.b. not a surrender). IF ONLY the Germans had been treated fairly at the end of the First World War, Hitler would not have had deep German resentment to fuel his rise to power. The hatred and fear he was able to channel onto the Jews and the terrible suffering of the 2nd World War might well not have happened.

We have seen pictures and heard stories of how our patriotic soldiers

fought from trenches, deep with water and lined with sandbag barricades, with poor supplies and clothing for the harsh winters. Patriotism did not fill either their bellies or their guns. Churches of the time largely lined up with this insane war, urging men to fight for King and Country and I wonder how many fundamental changes have come since then in our churches. It was at the time of the 1914 - 1918 War that our Unitarian Peace Fellowship was formed, about the time of the founding of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a Christian peace organisation that proclaimed the priority of compassion and trust over national boundaries and disputes.

George Bernard Shaw once remarked that “Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it.” and in a recent article in the Golders Green Unitarian Newsletter, Rev Feargus O'Connor wrote, “It was mainly patriotism that caused millions of otherwise rational and well meaning people, including Unitarians, to support a murderous and calamitous war which directly caused the deaths of over 8,500,000 soldiers, over 20,000,000 were severely wounded. What of the incalculable damage not only to property and the environment but to the health and psychological well-being of many millions more in all the nations affected?”

If the horrors of war cause so much loss and suffering, why do our governments send our soldiers to fight in them? The American businessman Henry Ford was once asked how to stop war and he is reported to have said that if you could show him who made money from wars, he could tell you how to stop wars.

At the recent Conference of the International Association of Liberal Religious Women, which I attended in Birmingham, the theme, “*Raising our voices for change towards a sustainable world*”, Dr Loretta Navarro Castro from the Philippines and a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, spoke about working for peace - it is a long term process. Current and recent conflicts were mentioned, and we were told by the President of IALRW, Kathy Matsui, of the horrors of Hiroshima. Learning from our mistakes is so difficult yet so necessary. IF religions can help to

counter (a) excessive patriotism, (b) extreme distrust of those who are different, and (c) indifference to human suffering at home and abroad; IF religions are able to inspire (d) greater compassion and understanding, (e) greater determination to promote equality and justice and (f) greater awareness of the needs of the vulnerable; IF religions can keep to the tasks long-term and not be diverted, THEN the future can be different from the past. Patience and perseverance and hope, especially hope, are needed for change in the right direction.

WHAT-IF is a kind of dreaming of how things could be different. Yearnings, regrets, perhaps even triumphs, are expressed as alternatives to our current world. WHAT IF something had been different? The result would have been different! Of course --- this is logical enough. But WHAT would have had to change for us to be in a better place? WHAT-IF statements are meaningless dreams unless we clarify WHAT needed to change and unless we look to the future to harness the lessons we learn in our dreams and reflections.

And this brings me to the hot topic of the Referendum - all of us in Scotland have been bombarded with literature; the telly and radio seem to have nothing else to talk about; and local debates/ panels/ and speeches have been on offer for over a year. Even the community organisations I support in East Kilbride have had this on their agendas and programmes. In a few days we finally vote Yes or No and our grandchildren will look back at this time with their own WHAT IF questions. The alternatives have been pictured as paths down roads with time markers rather than milestones and we are like Robert Frost, peering in the woods as far as we can see wondering which path to take. Each of us has a choice to make about the future of Scotland, whether we want to be strong by standing and being responsible on our own or remaining part of a unity where we have strength and responsibilities with others. Either way there will be changes and dangers - Choice and Chance are inevitable every minute of our lives.

As a religious community of equals, it is useful even in worship for

everyone to be able to make respectful and loving contributions to our worship, so we will now have a few minutes in which to do this briefly. [some contributions were made, following which]:

Thank you, everyone, for your contributions and for your respectful and caring listening.

In my mind, what we have to remember is that we are friends, neighbours, and family and we are not going to change this whichever way we vote. In spite of some jeering and even some minor violence, in Scotland we are making a choice by argument rather than by violence. The news Friday carried stories about the death of Ian Paisley of Northern Island; how this long-time firebrand became firm friends with Martin McGuinness, his one-time enemy. This in itself is encouraging and I am hopeful that one of the WHAT IF questions our grandchildren will **NOT** be asking is “WHAT IF our grandparents had settled this by hating and killing each other in a civil war?”

Amen