

GLASGOW UNITARIANS

19 December 2010

Sermon by Rev John Clifford

CHRISTMAS HOMILY

Many religious communities over the ages have taken the opportunity of the seasonal lengthening nights to hold festivals of light. This is a special time of year for Christians, Jews, Muslims, Pagans, Nature worshippers. Peace and Hope and Joy are candles defiantly held up in the darkness of war, despair, and suffering. This should not be taken as denial of the reality of darkness, rather a confirmation that Nature has a built-in process which will see the return of the sun and by analogy, we have faith that goodness will not disappear from human experience in spite of present dark images.

Unitarian Faith at Christmas is based on both our philosophy/theology/anthropology and on our observations. In our Unitarian tradition, Faith and Deeds are inextricably linked. As an aside, it is interesting that we are actually closer to Catholics than we are to our Protestant origins in this. As the letter of James from the Christian Scripture puts it, show me your Faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. No wonder some Protestant leaders cursed the decision of the early Church Council which decided to include the letter of James in official Scripture, for the essence of Calvinism is that Salvation has everything to do with Faith and nothing to do with Deeds. But we **observe** that while we don't really know what the potential of the present for the future is, everyone, man or woman, who has contributed to our human progress started out as a baby. New life is built into the process because as we age and make our specific contributions we get more settled in our ways and eventually, for each of us, the Good gets in the way of the Better. We can fight this, and Christmas is one of these opportunities to gird up our loins for this battle, but eventually most of us find that the effort to stay open to the spirit requires greater reserves and greater resolve than we can muster. But for the sake of those who still have the energy and will, we still hold these celebrations of Hope.

Our secular society, with its secular theology based on physical comforts and its reliance on the spirit of economic forces to shape lives, becomes more dominant with the passing years. Many of its results have been good. Political systems that protect minorities or the weak can stand as bulwarks against intolerance. But many other results, based on exploitation of other people or our natural environment, have been demonic. The secular Faith that the invisible hand of market forces can bring Salvation has loosed political and economic theories (i.e. secular theologies) fighting for control of our resources and our very lives. Justification replaces justice; exploitation replaces equality; comfort replaces fulfillment. The allure of clever marketing leads us away from fundamental values by inducing comparative discontents – your neighbours are enjoying 3d tv and so should you! Can't afford it? Who says? We can lend you the means, all you have to do is sell us your future – sign here on the dotted line..... Christmas, it's the season that balances the books for many businesses. If you don't buy, you endanger the economic safety of your neighbours and yourself. The sacrifice of Jesus and his message that love is justice and will involve pain and sacrifice is changed into a call to the joy of giving –

providing that what you give has been bought at our stores and the giving involves a large contribution to the 'economy'.

This increasing secularized world with ever-more effective economic and propaganda tools to contextualise the Christmas values of Hope, Love, and Peace in monetary terms is in serious danger of changing the joy of giving into the basis for keeping the economy going; the joy of love gets trivialized into competitive and comparative presents; the hope for world peace is declared naïve and squeezed into a special "idealist" framework divorced from the "real" work of enforcing peace with armies and weapons sales. The breaking of the link between action and consequence is one of these secular distortions that the true Christmas spirit stands against, calling us to love, and hope, and peace because our faith teaches that human nature is more than being a good little economic unit – it is a complex process of learning, sharing, and growing in identity and community. May the spirit of Christmas underline the rituals of the season and bring the true message of new hope, love, and peace to a world that needs these values. May remembrance of the birth of Jesus and the world-changing message that he lived, break through our protective layers and make us more loving, joyous, hopeful, and peaceful, now and in the future.