

# Glasgow Unitarians

MEETING FOR WORSHIP

20 April 2014 (Easter)

Leading worship: Rev John Clifford

Music: Lyanne Mitchell

**READINGS:** Luke 20:20-26 and Luke 22:63 - 23:25

## **REFLECTIONS on “Personal Integrity and Group Decisions”**

*by Rev John Clifford*

*Today is Easter in the parts of the world where the Western Christian traditions dominate rather than the Eastern Orthodox traditions and I will speak to this in a minute, but first a note that our Unitarian Annual Meetings have just finished. Several of us from Scotland attended this year's “GA”, including Glasgow's voting representatives Alastair Moodie and Iain Brown and the SUA Secretary, Barbara Clifford, and myself as a member of the national Executive Committee. There will presumably be reports of this gathering over the next few weeks so I will not dwell on it today. It was, however, the annual occasion when the elected Executive had to face collective scrutiny and I hope that the reports of the event take this aspect into account and don't just report on the great improvement in accommodation this year or the difficulties of actually getting to the venue. When I chose the sermon title for today I had in mind both the fact that this was the first Sunday following our “GA” and that it would be Easter Sunday.*

*Unconnected with the “GA” but still important for us, the Daily Mail this past week has had a serialised book about Cyril Smith, MP, that makes several damaging allegations about him and a pattern of child abuse. For those who may not know, Cyril Smith was a prominent Unitarian during his lifetime, particularly in his home area of Rochdale. It is important for today's Unitarians to know the truth about these allegations and to know whether any of the alleged incidents occurred as a result of his Unitarian role and activities. So far, none of the*

*allegations connect him with our buildings or events, but that may change in the future. Concern for his victims must be a top priority for us as a loving and truth-seeking community, whether the abuse had any connection with us or not. Too often in the recent past greater sympathy has been extended to prominent people accused of abuse than to victims of abuse.*

*Easter is not an obvious holiday for Unitarians. Most of us accept that Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived, and died and that the Christian scriptures contain something of use in understanding his life and teachings, but very few of us indeed would make the stories of his resurrection central to our personal understandings of how we should live. The logic of our faith is to celebrate his birth in some fashion, as we would the birth of Buddha/ Martin Luther King/ Gandhi/ Francis of Assisi/ Helen Keller – i.e. a great person whose example we do not want to lose. So I personally try to use Christmas to remind myself of the importance of that part of me that still identifies with the essential Christian story.*

*But Easter? Stories of Jesus's resurrection do not fit our best understandings of how the world actually works – worse, these stories can lead us down a path that devalues the struggles of this life in the face of death by pushing a view that divine intervention not only happened as an historic event but that it was necessary as a part of a cosmic plan from the beginning of time, some 6,000 years ago.*

*So, our largely secular culture is increasingly bending the message of Christianity to squeeze into a materialistic pattern and part of this is the renewed nature festival of Spring that preceded Easter and with its motifs of New Life after the fallow period of Winter. As we are part of this secular culture, many of us with some relief turn away from the impossible stories of the unique physical resurrection of a particular Jewish rabbi to impossible stories of baby chicks and bunnies carrying and hiding coloured eggs.*

*I'm a firm believer in the importance symbols and also of interfaith understanding, both the theory and the practise of other faiths. It is hard in the extreme to be caring and thoughtful towards our neighbours if we know nothing*

*of why they think and act differently to the dominant secular/quasiChristian culture that we take for granted. But there are three occasions a year when my Unitarianism would focus on some aspect of the Christian faith: Christmas, Easter, and Trinity Sunday.*

*I've spoken before of my interpretation that there are two kinds of Christians: Palm Sunday Christians and Easter Christians (i.e. those who focus on Jesus message and his courageous willingness to sacrifice vs those who focus on miracles and divine intervention) so I'll not spend time on that today. Rather I'd like to lead us in reflecting on an aspect of Jesus's life that is a contemporary problem within our Unitarian community the balance point between personal integrity and group authority.*

*As Unitarians we have a model of religion/ faith/ spirituality [and I do not imply that these words mean the same thing because they are being used in the same sentence] that is not tied to specific shared beliefs, although if you do value-studies of lots of Unitarians you find that we are surprisingly homogeneous in our values. This makes it hard for us to describe ourselves to others, who insist on belief-based categories. The sad thing is that it also makes it harder for us to be clear to our selves what our religious community is all about. So today I hold up the central areas of authority and covenant and reflect on how the Easter story might provide some helpful insights even for us hard-headed and sometimes hard-hearted Unitarians.*

*We have a two-fold basis of our authority: the individual conscience and the group. In both cases, individual and group, there are processes that provide the authority – i.e. while personal choices are not lightly to be trampled upon, conscientious decisions based on an open reflective approach are of inestimable value. Whether you prefer strawberries or bananas is of little consequence to me compared to whether you believe and act on your belief that strawberry pickers should be respected and paid a decent wage. Another example from our GA: I'm a vegetarian and at one of our meals sat opposite another vegetarian. No options on the menu – you either got the vegetarian meal or a meat meal. But the vegetarian opposite from me didn't like what was put on my plate*

*(canneloni) so he asked for just vegetables. They duly came and he had a huge plate of green cooked vegetable, which he also asked the waiter to take away. He went hungry that lunch and after I asked him what was the matter with the offered plates he replied that he just didn't like cooked greens. My sympathy was limited. Liking is different from reflective choice.*

*Similarly for groups – moral authority does not come from decisions based on nepotism or other biased -isms but on a disciplined process of observation, reflection, consultation, and testing. The best anchor that holds these two authorities in harmony is the covenanted community, the community committed to the welfare of its members and the members committed to proper treatment of other members.*

*We all know the story of Jesus running around the countryside preaching love and the end of the world; we all know that he decided to go to the political centre of his time and culture: Jerusalem; we all know that he knew this was dangerous; we have read or heard about his betrayal and arrest and appearance before both the religious and secular authorities of his day.*

*So here we are: we have a man of conscience and a rabble-rouser. And we have authorities who sat in judgement. The Sanhedron, the Jewish religious court was clear: they felt threatened by Jesus's populist message and they felt threatened in their security vis-a-vis the Roman occupation. They wanted rid of Jesus. He was trouble and he wouldn't conform. They didn't like his prophetic approach to things --- but then religious authority generally doesn't like prophets, even though the Old Testament prophets got their authority by calling people back to values that had been abandoned. We have Jesus proclaiming that God was more important than money, even more important than occupying military might; we have a religious court that heard his message that the spirit was more important than the rules and was frightened.*

*The Jewish authorities wanted rid of him – permanently. They didn't have the power to execute him – only the occupying Romans did, so they charged him and took him to the secular authorities. Herod and Pilate dithered but found the case unproven. Herod was able to duck his responsibility but Pilate had to do*

something. He tried to compromise, offer a guilty verdict on a lesser charge. But ultimately he found it easier to convict to keep the peace than to follow his own judgments. He broke his own integrity, publicly washing his hands of the affair, but did he break his covenant – indeed what was his covenant with the occupied Jewish population? We can't know in detail, of course, because the record is so sparse and sometimes gives conflicting evidence, but Pilate's job was to administer Roman justice and Rome was surprisingly tolerant of the religious beliefs of its occupied territories as long as these beliefs did not threaten Roman control. Pilate's covenant was based on conformity to Roman procedures rather than to the welfare of the occupied peoples. In this sense, his decision was understandable. And that is a key lesson in our age, too. Do our church governments, our civil authorities, various social institutions have at their hearts the welfare of their members and the behaviour agreements for proper relationships? Jesus's willingness to face death rather than dilute his message stands in stark contrast to Pilate's desire for an easy life. Now we know that this episode in the Gospel accounts contains some inaccuracies, but the story is told not for its moral example, not its historicity.

To return to our Annual Meetings: we believe in democracy; this belief by itself will not solve difficult problems, but developing and using democratic procedures that are respectful of persons and of truth is part of the covenant we have with each other and want to build into our world. Debates this year were conducted not just with civility, but generally with caring. Questioning of authority was open and most responses were also open and respectful. The classical virtues of Love and Truth are at the heart of the authority of both individual and community. Procedures need to be judged and improved with this covenanted relationship constantly in mind.

And to return to Cyril Smith. I remember his attendance at some past GAs and his hosting of a Council Meeting at the Liberal Club in London but I never heard any rumours during his life that connected his eccentricity with inappropriate activities with children. These current stories might be true and, if so, are sad at many levels. If any connections are found to his Unitarian activities then we must be faithful to our covenant of Truth and Love by not hiding either the

*activities or the connections.*

*To say that our conscience has limits and that the group has limits and that both sets of limits are tied up with the relationship between individual and group doesn't, of course, clearly describe the whole process – but perhaps that is enough to get us thinking of its local applicability today. Amen.*