One time when I was working at Unitarian Headquarters – probably around the late 1990s – I received a letter from a freelance writer saying he was going to include a chapter about our movement in a book he was writing, to be called “Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions”.

I was distinctly nervous about this, but thought “If I don’t co-operate, he’ll just write whatever he likes, so I’d better give him the information he’s looking for”. The chapter on Unitarians when it appeared was generally very positive, painting us in a very favourable light compared with some of the other bizarre groups that were featured in the book, so I felt vindicated in the help I had given him. There was one teeny drawback. The first paragraph was devoted to an explanation of why Unitarians venerate Attila the Hun! I was gobsmacked to say the least, and rang up the author to ask what he was playing at. “Oh, Attila the Hun was one of those heretical Arian Christians. I assumed since Arianism is closely linked to theological Unitarianism that he must be one of your heroes”. Now Arianism is the belief that Jesus is divine but not equal to God, and it is therefore in some ways a stepping stone to Unitarians ideas. However, while Arianism was a belief widely held among the barbarian tribes of the period, not much is known about Attila’s beliefs, so the author’s claim was even more questionable, in that he was probably wrong on two counts. I had to politely and firmly request him to remove the offending paragraph in the next edition of the book – which he duly did.

This somewhat comic episode serves to highlight the fact that image-conscious Unitarians like me get nervous about the thought that we might be associated with some notorious tribe from one of the more turbulent periods of history. Let’s be honest – so called barbarians never get a good press. We’ve been taught to think of the Greeks and then the Romans as the guardians of culture and civilisation, and that what lay outside their domains was all mud, woad, wattle and daub.

I was surprised therefore when I watched a series presented by ex-Python Terry Jones on BBC a few years back, making the case that the barbarians have been much maligned – that they were far more cultured and civilised than the Romans would have us believe; that their main weakness was simply not having well-drilled standing armies to resist the imperialistic and aggrandising escapades of Julius Caesar, Augustus and the like.

When we think of the advent of the so-called Dark Ages, we may have a picture in our minds of a walled city surrounded by Gothic hordes intent on destruction. But so-called civilised cultures have proved themselves every bit as adept at wreaking aggression and destruction over the centuries – if not rather more so. If we just look at the history of the last one hundred years, we simply can’t claim that so-called advanced cultures are immune from descent into brutality.
So what’s really going on with all this stuff about “barbarians”? And what’s the relevance for today? Earlier in this service we heard Constantine Cavafy’s poem ‘Waiting For the Barbarians’. [Full text at http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/texts/cavafy.html] It seems to me that Cavafy might be trying to say something about fear of “the other” – and how human beings often have sought to bolster a kind of narrow group identity at all costs, but have allowed themselves to be disempowered and duped by their leaders and lost touch with reality in the process.

Most of the picture that this poem portrays is of a society cowering before an ill-defined external threat. All that the masses want to know is what the senators, the emperor, the orators – the important people – what are THEY going to do about the situation? There is no sense that people have any control over their own lives. But ultimately a realisation dawns at the end of the poem – ironically as night falls:

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
Everyone going home so lost in thought?
Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come,
And some who have just returned from the border say
There are no barbarians any longer.
And now what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Surely we can all recognise in this description of barbarians a suggestion of all “those people” whom middle-class types – you and I maybe – might feel uneasy about (even hostile), but who in reality have seldom if ever done us any direct harm at all: asylum seekers, economic migrants, people of a different skin colour or different religion, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, adolescents, the unemployed, people living on benefits, the Roma, the chavs, the people who are “other” – whichever group of scapegoats is undesired flavour of the month and whom those in power are often able to persuade us to blame. Besides, it distracts attention wonderfully from our own shortcomings.

For too much of human history, the notion of barbarians has been, in Cafavy’s words, “a kind of solution” enabling an IN crowd to bolster egos, hoard wealth and privilege, and define themselves at the expense of some other group. But what an unimaginable price we have paid and continue to pay for propping up our puny sense of self in this divisive and ultimately dishonest way. A price paid not only in uncountable millions of lives lost in futile wars, but also in the loss of personal growth and clear thinking that occurs when individuals allow their thinking and behaviour to be defined entirely by the expectations and prejudices
of an unthinking peer group. Folks, It’s the twenty-first century – things really can’t be allowed to go on like this!

Let’s look at it more at the interpersonal level. Picture two men taking part in something akin to a strange annual ritual – mending a stone wall that divides their two properties. From what I can tell, there is no real animosity between them, but Robert Frost in his poem “Mending Wall” [full text at http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/frost-mending.html] is unable to shake the inherited conviction of his farmer neighbour that “Good fences make good neighbours”. This is really another way of saying: “What’s yours is yours ... but what’s mine is definitely mine”. If the two men kept livestock, one could more easily understand the reason for the re-erection and diligent maintenance of this physical boundary; but, as Frost says, “He is all pine and I am apple orchard”.

All the while the poet is conscious that “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall / That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, and spills the upper boulders in the sun.” Frost struggles to articulate what this “something” is.

I could say ‘elves’ to him,
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
He said it for himself.

In other words, Frost is earnestly but hamfistledy trying to lead his neighbour to a new truth – to make a leap in understanding – but Frost is ultimately frustrated. The poet is keenly aware that the wall is quite literally against nature – a monument, or folly you might say, to human possessiveness and stubbornness.

A few months ago I wrote a very short wry verse of my own which in no way matches the beauty and clarity of Frost’s work but perhaps echoes or shadows it in some feeble way.

LEYLANDII

Immense conifer –
Your shady controversy
Separates neighbours.
We were wise enough
As our green wall thrust skywards
To ensure pruning.
Private contentment,
Secured by slow varied trees,
Needs no green-black spires.

I value the shade given by trees in our back garden, but I hope that I don’t see the trees as primarily a way to mark out my territory. We inherited leylandii at the bottom of our
property. They increase the privacy of the house, but we keep them trimmed not only because they block out the evening sun for us but because we’re concerned that they would obstruct morning light for our neighbours in the road behind. I prefer the ash tree, the holly, and the plum tree there to the side— they give shade but are not dense and implacable in the way that the leylandii are.

We’re in the season of Lent, leading up to Holy Week, which begins with Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, that proud citadel of holiness and culture, on Palm Sunday. As an Aramaic-speaking Galilean who mixed with the rough end of society, making a tumultuous entry into a city that probably had little understanding of what he was all about, he must have seemed to some of the respectable citizens as a bit of a “barbarian”. Yet not for him a military conquest driving the Roman occupiers from Israel. He was seeking to tear down the walls in people’s hearts. He talked with prostitutes and Samaritans, simple working men, lepers and outcasts of every kind. He had no real use for walls.

I invite you now to take a moment to think of all the strangers you meet in your own life in a typical week: folk working in shops, in libraries, the garage attendant, strangers on trains, or people standing with you at the bus stop. Some of these people will be obviously very different from us – perhaps because of the colour of their skin or the way they dress. Others will be older or younger – belonging to some age group that we rarely converse with, perhaps. How would it be each of us took a couple of minutes this week to chat to someone we meet and just listen to what they have to say? Just listen. A very modest notion – but who knows how much good it might do that person to be listened to, and how much good it might do us?

When contemplating walls and divisions, I turn to another poet for some hopeful words of wisdom that each of us can put into practice in ways large or small. I’m sure many of you know this very short piece by Edwin Markham but I make no apology for sharing it again here:

OUTWITTED

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

May our lives be filled not with the fortifications of paralysis, fear and mistrust, but with enabling circles of love and understanding that bring us into ever closer understanding and harmony with all we meet.

Amen