

Oscailt



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Oscailt

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Front Cover: Detail from the Good Samaritan Window.
(photo P. Spain)

CONTENTS

Sunday Rota for July 2021 3

THE TRIUMPH OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

Andy Pollak 4

Just Say Yes
Will O'Connell 10

Keeping up Appearances
Rev. Maud Robinson 16

Oscailt

Our magazine title, *Oscailt*, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

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THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.

TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE

TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM

TO SERVE MANKIND IN FELLOWSHIP

TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL GROW IN HARMONY
WITH THE DIVINE

THIS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH GOD.

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THE TRIUMPH OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

A month ago in this church I attended the funeral of my friend Jim Jamison. Some of you may remember Jim because he used a wheelchair and in latter years used our rather unreliable lift to attend services, sitting over in the back left hand corner there.

In his eulogy, Jim's friend Stuart McDonell described him as follows: "You were utterly fearless, totally indomitable, fun loving, loyal friend, inveterate traveller, mischief maker, rugby supporter, eclectic reader, ferocious contrarian, global analyst and above all caring life partner and husband to Kathleen. Jim - you were all of these and more, in a rich and fulfilling life."

I first met Jim Jamison in 2000 when I was director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh and he was the director of the Health and Social Care Research Unit at Queen's University Belfast. Before coming to Queen's he had been the Chief Statistician at the Northern Ireland Department of Health, a man known for the thoroughness of his knowledge of the Northern health system, the brilliance of his mind, and an inability to suffer fools gladly. He was leading a high-powered group of researchers from Belfast, Dublin and London in a research project for my Centre entitled 'Cross-border Cooperation in Health Services in Ireland.' This path-finding project recommended, among many other things, all-Ireland health promotion campaigns to prevent communicable and non-communicable diseases which, if they had happened, could have gone some considerable way towards minimising the impact of Covid-19 on the island.

As I said, he was also paralysed from the waist down, and therefore had to use a wheelchair at all times. This was the result of a teenage accident a few months before he was due to go to study at Oxford University on a rare open scholarship at the unusually young age of 17. Jim had been an academically outstanding – if mischievous – pupil at one of Belfast's most prestigious schools, the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, where he gained a lifelong healthy disrespect for authority. After a year of hospital treatment it was decided that his physical condition meant it made more

sense for him to study in his home city, and he went to Queen's. He went on to do a BSc and PhD in Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics, attaining distinctions throughout.

Jim never let his so-called 'disability' prevent him from achieving any target he set himself or from experiencing life to the fullest. His courage, discipline and sheer determination to overcome all the great obstacles that life had put in his path were inspirational. He had been a fine young rugby player, but when that sport was denied him, he turned to table tennis. In a tournament in Dublin in the early 1970s he met the beautiful and equally intelligent Kathleen McBride, also a wheelchair user. "It was love at first sight across a room of wheelchairs", Jim used to say. It was a match made in disability heaven. They shared, in particular, a love of travel, and were regular visitors to France and the US. Kathleen had died nine months before Jim, and I can't help thinking in those final months that the bright light of his life had gone out.

In her address at the funeral, Bridget quoted from 'Man's Search for Meaning', the world bestseller by the Austrian Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, based on his experiences of unspeakable horror in the Nazi concentration camps, where he lost his father, mother, wife and brother. Jim Jamison's story was for me another small example of how to live a life rich in personal fulfilment and public service in the face of suffering and difficulty. So I was inspired to re-read 'Man's Search for Meaning' and share some of its wise insights with you this morning (excuse the occasional non-gendered language – this book was first published in 1946).

In his book, Frankl recounts how a human being reacts in an appalling situation like a Nazi death camp when he has "nothing to lose except his so ridiculously naked life." Firstly there are coping strategies to preserve a few remnants of one's life, even though the chances of surviving are slight. Daily degradation, humiliation and cruelty from the camp guards (so that prisoners felt – and sometimes behaved – like animals), fear of death that might happen at any moment, hunger and cold and misery to an almost unthinkable degree, were rendered tolerable by closely guarded images of beloved persons, by religion, by a grim sense of humour, and even by glimpses of the healing beauties of nature – a tree or a sunset.

But these fragile moments of comfort did not establish the will to live unless they helped the prisoner to make larger sense out

of his apparently senseless suffering. This is Frankl's central thesis: to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and dying. But no human being can tell another what this purpose is. Each must find out for her or himself, and must accept the responsibility for taking the life-affirming action that this answer prescribes. If she or he succeeds in this, they will continue to grow in spite of all the suffering. Frankl quotes Nietzsche: "He who has a *why* to live, can bear with almost any *how*." **"He or she who has a *why* to live, can bear with almost any *how*."**

In the concentration camps, every circumstance conspired to make people despair, to give up on life and hope. Frankl watched that happening to people in Auschwitz and other camps: shattered, skeletal inmates literally turning their faces to the wall in their rotting, typhus-ridden bunks and dying a few hours or days later. What alone remains in such a hopeless situation is what he calls "the last of human freedoms" - the capacity to "choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances." This ultimate freedom, recognised by the ancient Stoics as well as by modern existentialists, takes on a huge significance in Frankl's story. The concentration camp inmates were only average men and women, but some, at least, by choosing to be "worthy of their suffering," proved human beings' capacity to rise above their outward fate, however terrible. The hopelessness of their struggle did not detract from its dignity and meaning.

This is the main argument of this short book: that "if there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete. The way in which a human being accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity - even under the most difficult circumstances - to add a deeper meaning to his life."

Frankl says this lesson from the concentration camps also applies to the far smaller sufferings that people experience in everyday life. "It is true that only a few people are capable of reaching such high moral standards. Of the [concentration camp] prisoners only a few kept their full inner liberty and obtained those values which their suffering afforded, but even one such example is suffi-

cient proof that a human being's inner strength may raise him above his outward fate. Such people are not only in concentration camps. Everywhere human beings are confronted with fate, with the chance of achieving something through their own suffering."

He then takes the case of an incurably ill person, quoting a letter from a young invalid who had been told he had not long to live. "He wrote that he remembered a film he had seen in which a man was portrayed who waited for death in a courageous and dignified way. The boy had thought it a great accomplishment to meet death so well. Now – he wrote – fate was offering him a similar chance." This young person was accepting that it was his destiny to suffer an early death, and this was his unique task in life. "No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden." Frankl found that in the concentration camps this constant thought kept him from despair.

Frankl then writes about two prisoners who had talked of their intention to commit suicide. "Both used the typical argument – they had nothing more to expect from life. In both cases it was a question of getting them to realise that *life was still expecting something from them*; something in the future was expected from them. We found, in fact, that for the one it was his child whom he adored and who was waiting for him in a foreign country. For the other it was a thing, not a person. This man was a scientist and had written a series of books which still needed to be finished. His work could not be done by anyone else, any more than another person could ever take the place of the father in his child's affections...A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears towards a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the 'why' of his existence, and will be able to bear any 'how'.

Frankl then quoted a post-war French opinion poll which showed that "89% of people admitted that human beings need 'something' for the sake of which to live. Moreover, 61% conceded that there was something, or someone, in their own lives for whose sake they were even ready to die."

Turning to his theory of psychotherapy which he called 'logotherapy', Frankl warned that it was "a dangerous miscon-

ception of mental hygiene to assume that what a human being needs in the first place is equilibrium, i.e. a tensionless state (what we might call today the removal of stress). What he or she actually needs is not a tensionless state, but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task.”

He went on: “One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment...Everyone’s task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it...Ultimately, a man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognise that it is *he* who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. Thus logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.

“By declaring that a man or woman is responsible and must actualise the potential meaning of his or her life, I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche...It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualises himself.”

“According to logotherapy, we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: firstly, by creating a work or doing a deed; secondly, by experiencing love; and thirdly (and this, he stresses, is the most important) by the attitude we take towards suffering” ... “Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself.”

“What matters is to make the best of any given situation. ‘The best’, however, is that which in Latin is called *optimum* – hence the reason I speak of tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for: firstly, turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; secondly, deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and thirdly, deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.”

I have suffered very little in my life. But I identify strongly with the arguments of this wisest of men, a man who suffered in – and survived with his human values intact and strengthened - the worst hell created by the modern world. Both his story and his psychological wisdom are for me a real triumph of the human spirit.

Andy Pollak
Dublin Unitarian Church

Sunday 30th May 2021

Just Say Yes

Lately, I have found myself saying no to things more often. It's like an automatic response. Before I've really even considered the question or the possibilities of the offer, some part of my brain has come up with a reason why it is not a good idea and rejects the proposal out of hand. I did it last week. Someone said to me, "Simon and I are going for coffee if you'd like to join us." Out of nowhere I began to panic and my brain started working instantly on a convincing excuse as to why I would simply love to but it's just quite impossible with everything I have to accomplish in the next hour. I felt a hot flush as I scurried off hoping that my excuse had seemed convincing. Did I sound appropriately appreciative of the offer? Was that rude of me? Will they see through me? I don't really know why I said no but the closest I can get to the reason is that I was probably worried about feeling vulnerable. I was worried about being in their company and feeling as though they might regret having asked me along. I wasn't interesting enough company. I might feel awkward and wouldn't know what to say. Of course I know in my rational brain that *it's just coffee!* I'm every bit as capable of talking about the weather as anyone else! Why couldn't I say yes? Just say yes? What's the worst that could happen?

It's become apparent to me that this reflex response of **no** could be a growing problem in my life. Am I blocking myself from new opportunities for no good reason other than fear of the unknown? When we were all locked away during the pandemic, I thought at the time that I couldn't wait to do all those things (like socialising) again but now I think I've become a little too comfortable isolating.

It is a commonly held view that as we grow older we become less adventurous, less inclined to take risks or step out of our comfort zone. Is this true though? I know plenty of people, many of you in this congregation who are full of a sense of adventure and would definitely be open to trying new things... you would have said yes to coffee. Is it just me? Or did any of you find yourself in a period in your life where you had begun to say no and did you correct your-

selves?

To address the issue of whether we are less inclined to take more risks as we age, a little research tells me that apparently that is not exactly true. As we age, the dopamine levels in our brains decline by around ten percent per decade and as a result, we don't get the same rush by taking risks that we used to get when we younger. We still take risks, but we don't quite get the same dopamine hit out of them.

So I set about examining why I had begun to become a no person and trying to work out what that was saying about me on a deeper level. The first thing I realised was that I had to start saying yes to things more often. Someone asks you to do something, you say yes. And what was the first request that came my way after making this resolution? An email from Bridget looking for volunteers to take a service. The universe wasn't messing about.

Our lives are built upon yeses and nos. They're the first words we learn as children; the first words we learn in a foreign language. They're the oldest words and the shortest sentences and they can have a huge bearing on the direction of our lives. Sometimes the smallest of yeses or nos, the ones that we think are entirely inconsequential are the ones that end up mapping out the rest of our lives. 11 years ago I was on my way home from work one evening when I asked myself whether I should go straight home or drop in to my local on the way. I can picture the moment of decision clearly. It was the winter of the big freeze, the ground was icy underfoot, I was crossing Capel Street bridge, my house was to the left, and my local was on the right. Go home... or go out? I pondered the question for maybe no more than a few seconds and then the voice of opportunity in my head spoke up and I took the path to the right. That night I met the love of my life, the person I'm still with today, still going strong. A seemingly inconsequential yes or no mapped out the rest of my life until today. I'm sure you all have those similar moments in your own lives.

And there's a whole branch of the self-help industry dedicated to this philosophy of saying yes. Shonda Rhimes, the hugely successful producer of television drama such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Bridgerton* wrote a book called *Year of Yes*. The book came about when some time ago, Rhimes was sharing about her successes with her sister and she was talking about some of the amazing events that

she had been invited to. Parties, performances, lunches, lavish dinners and other industry events. When her sister asked her whether she was going to attend any of them, she replied, “God no.” Her sister put it up to her that she never says yes to anything. She always made excuses that she was too busy or she had family commitments but actually, when she examined it more deeply, she realised that she was just too fearful. So she decided that she would start saying yes to everything and would commit to doing so for a year.

What transpired over the course of that year, she describes as a complete transformation. She grew in confidence, although she had already been a hugely successful woman, her success grew and she became happier and healthier and her friends noticed the huge change that came over her. She had never anticipated the extent of the benefits that just saying yes would have on her life. Saying Yes, she came to see, opened up unimagined possibility and opportunity and she became the very best version of herself, simply by saying yes.

In a recent article in the Huffington Post, author Susie Moore identifies seven reasons why she believes saying yes can transform our lives.

1. You block the miracle if you don't:

Opportunity sometimes knocks gently and does not wait for perfect timing. The truth is, there is no perfect timing! Start before you are ready. We need to trust that the universe has a bigger plan for us; one that we can only understand with hindsight. When we say no, we reject more than the opportunity; we reject the fun it brings, what it teaches us and the further gifts that can unfold.

2. Someone believes you can:

To have the option of saying yes, someone or something believes you can do or achieve something. Take the opportunity as a compliment and harness the confidence other people have in you.

3. Yes leads to more doors (no is often closing the door):

What would have happened if I had gone home that night 11 years ago?

4. Opportunities do not always arise again -- or at least the same ones:

Life and luck favour the bold. Sometimes when making a decision and considering both outcomes, the "no" outcome is connected to regret somehow. Regret is sometimes the biggest risk of all.

5. Life is richer, fuller, more vibrant:

When we say yes, we do more, create more, live more.

6. It attracts positivity:

The word itself is inviting and empowering. Stretch yourself:

Why are we all here if not to live the highest, fullest version of our lives? By saying yes, we invite possibility into our lives and the ability to learn what we are capable of and just how far we can go.

7. Life is short. Ask not why, but why not?

Steve Jobs said, "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life." A little perspective helps us abandon our fears.

Ask yourself for a change: What is the best that could happen? Think upon it. How does it feel? What is the best that could happen? Ponder that for a while. A *yes* might be your magical answer.

But how can we learn to overcome the impulse to say no? Another motivational speaker and author Mel Robbins offers some insight into why we often say no when we should say yes and she gives some helpful advice on how to overcome that negativity.

One of her first bits of advice is to remember that we are never going to feel like doing it. She says we are all so busy waiting for this magical moment to come when we will feel like doing that thing that we naturally don't want to do. It never comes. She says we have to force ourselves out of our head, past our feelings, out of our comfort zone and into a space she calls deliberate thinking. Where you take control of your mind and you impose a different answer. You apply force.

Robbins argues that our minds mostly operate in two modes – one is autopilot and the other is what she calls the emergency break. As soon as something arises which is outside our brain's sphere of familiarity, we automatically apply the emergency break. She says

that anything that is a diversion from our routine is going to require deliberate thinking. Is going to require force. If we start weighing up the pros and cons of any situation which is unfamiliar, we will rarely win the argument for doing it, our brain will always pull the emergency break and the only way to overcome it is to apply the force of deliberate thinking.

And Robbins believes that we have a 5 second window in which to apply that force and if we don't do it in 5 seconds, we lose the battle. So she recommends counting backwards from 5 to 1 and then just doing it. It's the only way to block the emergency break and puts us in contact with our deeper selves, our intuition.

There is an interesting demonstration of the power of yes in the field of improvisation.

If you have ever been involved in any drama class you might have taken part in an improvisation game. Well, the first rule of improvisation is to always say yes; never block a suggestion. So for example, if your scene partner says, "I love what you've done with your kitchen", you don't respond with, "what are you talking about? We are in the supermarket". That scene is going to run aground pretty quickly. To make the improvisation work, you must always accept the offer. So in response to "I love what you've done with your kitchen" You might say "Why thank you!

We thought the gold taps might have been a bit of an overstatement but they go well with the Italian marble." You've now opened up the possibilities of this imaginary world and are ready to grow the story.

These drama exercises can have a unexpected effect in other areas too. In the business world, for example, people are seeing the huge value of improvisation in the corporate setting. If you must always say yes to people's offers, then team building and morale is strengthened and people feel more confident about bringing their ideas to the table knowing they're not going to be rejected. They are more inclined to think outside the box and not be limited to their own safe suggestions that are less likely to come up against resistance. What's so interesting about this improvisation game in the workplace is that it's only when the number one rule is to always say yes that you realise how often our natural inclination is to say no. We always seem to be focusing on the reason why something won't work. If we have to accept that it will work, we build on sug-

gestions and often arrive at a point we could never have achieved had we rejected one of those initial ideas.

Obviously there are times in our lives when we need to say no. What strikes me as so puzzling is that so often I say yes to the things that I should say no to (people pleasing) and no to the things I should say yes to (fear of the unknown).

And saying yes is hard, breaking old habits and stepping out of familiar territory is hard.

But by starting to interrogate these decisions, perhaps we can listen to ourselves on a deeper more intuitive level and make more deliberate choices, choices that might lead us on a more contented and rewarding path.

“After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the future world depends.” (Wallace Stephens)

Will O’Connell
Dublin Unitarian Church

Sunday 13th June 2021

Keeping up Appearances

These readings and sermon were delivered at Underbank Chapel in Sheffield by Rev.Maud Robinson on Sunday 13th June 2021, just before she had all her hair shaved off to be sent to *The Princess Trust*, which makes wigs and provides them free of charge to children who have lost their hair to cancer or other illnesses. It costs about £550 to make each wig and the charity is solely supported by charitable fundraising. A call for sponsorship for Maud's Big-Hair-Chop brought in an amazing £1,338.68 + £174.00 Gift Aid. Many thanks to Dublin Unitarians who contributed to that total. (picture Backcover)

I was having dinner with Bill and Morag (Rev.Bill Darlison, formerly of this parish) the week before the Big Chop and idly asked him if he could think of any suitable biblical readings about hair and baldness. Without skipping a beat he said "well, there are those very curious verses at the end of the 2nd chapter of the, 2nd Book of Kings . . . Ah, what it is to have a pal with such command of biblical scholarship !!

Song of Solomon Ch4: v1;16

1 Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead.

16 Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.

2 Kings Ch2: v11-12;23-24

11 And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

12 And Elisha saw it and he cried, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw him no more . . .

23 [Elisha] went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!"

24 And he turned round, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.

Gospel of John Ch7: v23-24 Jesus is speaking:

23 If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?

24 Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement.

Sermon

The Song of Solomon reading: it's easy to interpret - a celebration of beauty and sensual pleasure. I've not got much to say about it, except that it's a terrible shame that this aspect of a full and rich spiritual life has been so sidelined by some religious people, in favour of the more austere or downright punitive aspects of the Good Book.

The passage from 2 Kings is much more problematic, but it took me on a rollicking good ride through some attempts at interpreting it. Among other things, I read a scholarly article from *The Journal of Biblical Literature*.

Random aside - Academia constantly both fascinates and repels me. The forensic, minutely detailed study of obscure and arcane matters sometimes seems admirable to me, and sometimes seems utterly absurd. The more I learn about the politics, and oftentimes pressure to 'follow the party line,' within academia the more it sometimes seems repellent to me. A case in point - Karen Armstrong, the highly respected writer on world religions, was denied her PhD by Oxford University. Her whole PhD thesis was debunked by one of her examiners, who disagreed with her interpretation of her subject. She was failed, without the opportunity to resubmit. She appealed this decision, and several other academics agreed that she had made a well-argued case for her point of view, so the thesis should not have been failed. However, the powers-that-be at Oxford University ruled that it would call into question the academic authority of the University if a PhD decision was later overruled, and so she was not permitted to resubmit the thesis. She was not awarded a PhD. She went on to write dozens of academically acclaimed works on world religions and is a recognised authority on her subject. Anyway back to my arcane article from *The Journal of Biblical Literature* about the two she bears mauling 42 small boys, because they had hurled insults at the bald-headed Elisha. This incident occurs at the end of Chapter 2 of 2 Kings, Here's a bit of context:

In Chapter 1, Elijah gives a prophecy about the death of the king of Samaria.

The king sends first one and then another troop of 50 men to tell Elijah to “Come down” to Samaria to fill him in on this prophecy. Each time, Elijah responds to the men “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you fifty.” Each time the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed the fifty. When a third troop is sent to him, he finally does go down to the king. He tells the king he’s going to die. And the king does die.

Then comes Chapter 2, where our reading came from. Elijah is taken up into heaven by a whirlwind of fiery horses and chariots. Some other things happen in the chapter; and then come the closing verses about the baldy insults and the mauling of the 42 young boys.

So what on earth is that all about ? ? I’m going to tell you right now that I still haven’t got a clue what it’s all about, but here’s what some others think.

My scholarly article was by Joel Burnett, PhD (he did get his PhD!!) Professor of Hebrew Bible & Semitic Languages at a University in Texas. The main thrust of his long scholarly article is to demonstrate that the story of Elisha (junior prophet) corresponds to the story of Elijah (senior prophet) in a mirror-like fashion. And Burnett PhD reckons that this mirror-like correspondence confirms Elisha’s succession to his master, as a prophet.

Chapters 1 & 2 describe various journeys taken by Elijah and Elisha, and this mirror-like correspondence between the stories of the two men is shown in several ways.

- Elijah **Goes Down** to Bethel, then goes to Jericho, then crosses the Jordan; then he’s taken up by the fiery whirlwind. Then the mirroring starts, as Elisha recrosses the Jordan, goes to Jericho, and then at Bethel he is told by his tormentors to Go Up.

“Go Up Baldy, Go Up Baldy” is said twice, and this corresponds to Elijah being told twice to “Go Down” to the king of Samaria.

The two bears of Elisha correspond to the two troops of men destroyed by fire at Elijah’s instigation.

In addressing Elisha as baldhead it contrasts to the description of Elijah as hairy. This contrast suggests a challenge to Elisha’s authority, and that’s apparently why these boys deserve to be mauled by bears.

Burnett PhD goes into great detail about the geography of the area and takes issue with Elijah and Elisha “going down to Bethel.” Apparently “going

down to Bethel” is geographically incorrect and can, according to Burnett, be seen as part of a subtle yet significant **anti-Bethel polemic** in the passage. Bethel is seen as uniquely emblematic of disobedience to Israel’s God. Burnett suggests that this reference to **going down to Bethel** brings prophetic authority to the certain demise which is in store for the hated city of Bethel; and this destruction of Bethel is eventually carried out by the Hebrew king, Josiah.

Then there’s a whole other line of argumentation, which I read from several commentators. Most translations speak about a group of small boys or children hurling abuse at Elisha. One commentator says that at Sunday school it was used as a scare story to let them know what might happen to them if they didn’t respect their elders. But now he knows better, it wasn’t children who were mauled. This is corroborated by our friend, Burnett PhD (with several pages of linguistic proofs). He writes “the group of males who confront Elisha, far from being little children, are actually young men of the royal - and perhaps priestly - establishment of Bethel.”

Several biblical apologists contend that people who are uncomfortable with this story because of 42 children being mauled are all wrong. In fact, it’s 42 young **men** who are mauled and they were insulting God’s prophet, so they had it coming to them.

Furthermore, the number 42 figures regularly in the Hebrew Bible (and of course in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*) as a symbolic number of potential blessing or curse, confirming that this event was the result **neither** of a natural coincidence **nor** the prophet’s own caprice **but of divine intent**. Here endeth my findings about 2 Kings 2:23-34.

There are biblical apologists who insist that every word of the bible is not only true, but literally true. What can I say?? I don’t agree.

The bible consists of a series of stories: some simple and wise and spiritually insightful; others deeply symbolic and esoteric and much more difficult to interpret. Interpretation of stories can be a rich a rewarding vein of spiritual study. I contend that not all biblical stories are of equal merit, or at least not by any interpretation which is readily available to us.

An old testament scholar for whom I have great respect is Walter Brueggemann. He writes: “I have come to the rather simplistic notion that imagination is the capacity **to image a world beyond what is obviously given**. That’s the work of poets and novelists and artists—and that’s what biblical writers mostly do. I think that’s why people show up at church. They want to know whether there is any other world available than the one that we can see, which we can hardly bear.”

There are many stories in the bible which respond well to this work of imaginative interpretation and some which just don't.

To bring things to a close with a more salutary passage, in our final reading Jesus counsels: "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement." This is not an easy thing to do, but it's the task which we humans have, here in this crazy mixed-up life: to look for sources of good judgement and not to make instant judgements on the basis of appearances. This is hard work and often take several circles around the block before we get it right, but it's what we're here to do.

I brought the service to a close - before going out to face the clippers - by regaling the congregation with a recording of the song *Hair* from the 1979 film version of the anti-war comedy musical *Hair*.

Rev. Maud Robinson

Underbank Chapel

Keeping up Appearances

Rev Maud Robinson before and after she had all her hair shaved off to be sent to *The Princess Trust*, which makes wigs and provides them free of charge to children who have lost their hair to cancer or other illnesses. (Article page 16)

