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112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23.

Minister: Rev. Bridget Spain  
e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com  
Rev. Bill Darlison *Minister Emeritus*.

hello@dublinunitarianchurch.org  
www.dublinunitarianchurch.org  
www.unitarianchurchcork.com  
www.oscailtmagazine.com

**Cork Unitarian Church**  
Princes Street, Cork.  
Minister: Rev. Mike O'Sullivan

Editor: Paul Spain

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**Front Cover:** The Christmas tree in the church 2019.  
(photo P. Spain)

WE WISH ALL OUR READERS

## Happy Christmas

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# 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 man's 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.



# A very Different Christmas?

By any standards the year 2020 has been exceptional. In normal times the St.Patrick's Day parade kicks off the National social calendar. This year mid March initiated the first lockdown. The Parade was just the first major event to be cancelled; like dominos almost every festival and celebration met the same fate.

Who would have believed that at Christmas 2020 Irish pubs would have been closed for almost ten months? Not only are the pubs closed so too were churches. Weddings and baptisms are postponed and attendance at funerals is limited to just a handful of mourners.

As the winter drew closer Covid was spreading again and we entered a second lockdown. Covid fatigue was now very real and during that lockdown the conversation was dominated by talk of Christmas. Surely Christmas – the most cherished celebration in Irish life - could not be stolen from us?

Covid and lockdown has made us focus only on the things that are really important. People - the people we love; family, friends and community. We don't really miss shopping, we manage without pubs and restaurants some people may even be relieved that the Christmas party is cancelled - but at this the darkest time of the year we know to the marrow of our bones that we need to feel connected with people we love.

This need for community at the darkest times is primal. Five thousand years ago to mark the darkest days and to celebrate the return of light our ancestors built Newgrange. The size of the tumulus and the complexity of its construction is testament to how important the Winter Solstice was for them. On the darkest day of the year, when the sun is at its weakest; the sunlight travels the length of the passageway and fills the chamber with golden light.

In contrast at the Summer solstice we need a bonfire to increase light. But on the darkest days the faintest light transforms everything. In these dark days of pandemic small things upset us equally small kindnesses can transform our Christmas celebration.

The Christian story of the birth of Jesus is crafted to compli-

ment the ancient celebration of light and we have adopted elements from Victorian times. This Christmas is different; of necessity it is stripped of the some of the unnecessary elements that have grown around Christmas. Stripped of inessentials we are left with wonder, hopeful expectation and joy.

Wonder, hope and joy. We are brought to awe and wonder at the complexity of the Universe. The knowledge that light will always triumph over darkness brings hope and joy.

Since the 21<sup>st</sup> June the tilt of the earths axes has revolved to give us the illusion that we are moving away from the sun. Each day the hours of daylight have decreased; as the sun appears to sink further and further in the sky. Darkness has increased, the days have become colder. During last week, 19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> December. the laws of gravity ensured that earth has not escaped into the darkness of outer space. Our earth has now begun its journey back to warmer brighter days. We know with certainty that spring and summer are right now travelling towards us.

The movement of the earth creates these dark cold days we must live through; it also brings us the wonder of life reborn in spring. It brings us the delight of long summer evenings when light gives us visible until 11.00 p.m. It brings us the glorious colours of autumn and it brings us the miracle of light reborn in December. Covid has not dimmed this miracle.

Telescopes and space travel allow us to see some of the countless galaxies there are; we have not yet found a single star that has life yet our Earth is filled with the teeming life. The miracle of life calls us to wonder and give gratitude, it brings us hope for life ever renewed and joy that we are alive to witness these miracles.

In addition to all this wonder; we have inherited the story of the birth of Jesus. Like all worthwhile stories this didn't happened exactly as it is recorded in the Bible. However the story is one hundred per cent true.

We know the essential points of the story. A child was born to simple parents who lived at a time of political upheaval. The child's birth was welcomed by the parents and some humble shepherds. A few wealthy, wise individuals recognised the child's potential and acted to protect his life.

One politician, who held dubious political authority was

willing to kill the child to hold on to political power. For a while the family lived as refugees in a foreign land. Difficult childhood experiences can make a hard hearted adult. The child grew up to become wise beyond expectation.

He lived a life of integrity and went around “doing good”. His mantra to his followers was to “love one another.” He brought a fresh perspective to the practice of his religion; he taught that true religion is not about keeping a series of rules; religion is about love. He was a pacifist who probably became caught in politics and his life ended in apparent failure.

This story didn't **only** happen two thousand years ago; it repeats itself over and over. Democracy is based the concept of “birthrights”; it maintains the equality of every human being as a birthright. Equality is the first principle of the Unitarian Universalists.

Last night many children were born. Yet with the first breath inequality became a reality for some. Children were born in the some of the hundreds of refugee camps throughout the world. These children were born into poverty that may well last their entire lives. Their existence depends on handouts of food from the World Health Programme. These children are homeless and stateless they may never hold a passport with an attractive logo on the front cover. Many children were born to live under unjust political systems. They may never see justice prevail. In our country children are being born into homeless. Every child born last night will be challenged by how we adults are destroying the planet. Just maybe this year's paired back Christmas will give the planet a small respite.

And yet the story of Jesus gives us hope. His message of love didn't die, it survived and spread. During the past two thousand years at times the message has become twisted and warped. But there is something about Christmas that uncovers the simplicity of the original message. It is simple love one another – all the rest is unnecessary commentary.

Celebrating Christmas is to experience hope in action. Christmas is dedicated to spreading goodwill and generosity. It is the only time of the year that we feel sympathy for the homeless; we really care that everyone should have a celebratory meal today. It matters to us that some people may be lonely. We want every

child to experience the magic of receiving just the right gift from Father Christmas. At Christmas with few exceptions we try to follow the example of Jesus.

So long live Christmas may we celebrate it well. May we experience its peace and joy particularly during this pandemic. We can take heart that light is returning, spring will come and Covid will be gone. So today let's put expectations aside and enjoy this day as it is.

*Rev. Bridget Spain*

Minister Dublin Unitarian Church

25<sup>th</sup> December 2020





# Jingle Bells



This annual pre-Christmas Day address will, as in previous years, include a mix of some Christmas verse and some useful and useless information about the church all combined with a good dash of historical trivia about Dublin and hung very loosely around the subject of the address title.

It was a bit presumptuous on my part, but in the few days after last year's address I was musing on what great subject I'd tackle in 2020. Then, last Christmas Eve as the carol service in St Patrick's Cathedral concluded and we made our way towards the great west door the glorious sound the of cathedral bells rang out in harmony to announce that Christmas was here. I knew I had the subject matter for this address.

There is a huge canon of prose, poetry, carols, and popular songs associated with Christmas and it includes many references to the ringing of bells. In Alfred Tennyson's *Ring Out Wild Bells* he starts out rather gloomily but concludes in the final verses with the hopeful message announced by the bells of Christmas.

*Ring out old shapes of foul disease, Ring out the narrowing lust of gold  
Ring out the thousand wars of old, Ring in the thousand years of peace.  
Ring in the valiant man and free, The larger heart, the kindlier hand  
Ring out the darkness of the land, Ring in the Christ that is to be.*

Just a few weeks ago I had expected to be emphasising the need to keep hoping ... but the wonderful work of scientists all around the globe has produced a number of vaccines that will yet turn our hopes into a reality and that we will indeed '*Ring out old shapes of foul disease*'. But there are still very testing days, weeks, and months ahead of us. And, while we can look to a brighter future, we can't forget the losses of the last year. The loss of normal human contact and interaction, the loss of employment and business, and, above all, the loss of lives.

To date the consequences of the pandemic for me have, thankfully, just been a lot of inconvenience and some disappointments at the cancellations of holidays and events. What I did miss

during the church year though was an anniversary service address I had planned to give here during the summer and of course leading our two annual summer walks around town. So today, as a real Christmas bargain, I give you two for the price of one, an address and a virtual walking tour combined!

We are sometimes asked by visitors to our church ‘what denomination did this building belong to before it was owned by Unitarians’? It’s a reasonable question. The building is unusually ornate for a congregation from the dissenting tradition that had worshipped in Meeting Houses for the previous two hundred years. This congregation descends directly from two congregations, Strand Street and Eustace Street. A mid -19<sup>th</sup> century visitor to the city wrote - *Eustace Street Meeting House is not so spacious as that in Strand Street, nor is its congregation more than half as numerous. As the members of this religious sect study and cultivate the absence of ornament, their places of worship afford nothing for the eye of curiosity to rest upon.*

The repeal of restrictive religious laws in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century had paved the way for a huge programme of church building to meet the needs of a growing city. Congregations of Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters of all descriptions moved out of their Chapels and Meeting Houses in side streets and back lanes into splendid new churches built in a riot of different styles on main thoroughfares. Some examples of these styles can be seen here on Stephen’ Green. This church which opened in 1863 was built in the neo-gothic style that seems to have been in favour with unitarians at that time. Although the interior of this building is ornate, a reasonably trained eye will be able to read the interior and, through the presence or absence of certain features, conclude that the church was built for dissenters. The exterior of the church however is not so easy to read.

Viewed from across the street we will see that there are three crosses positioned on the church - one at the top of the lower roof, one on the top of the upper roof and, the highest one, at the top of the spire. The crosses tell us that church was built for a Christian community but there are no obvious clues as to which of the many

branches of Christianity the community belonged to. Looking for clues we will note the belfry under the spire. But, our belfry is 'bell free'. It holds... a water tank! This tells us quite a lot. We'll return to the matter later.

We will leave the parish of St Peter's and enter the parish of St Ann's at the top of Grafton Street, Strolling down to the bottom of the Street we turn left towards St Andrew's Street and the parish church of St Andrew's, a church with some connections to our congregation. When St Andrews was being rebuilt in 1797 their services were held in our Eustace Street meeting house and a letter of gratitude from the Rector of St Andrew's is held in our church records. The current (1862) building was designed by Lanyon Lynn & Lanyon, the architects of our abode here on Stephen's Green. There are a lot of similarities in the design of the two buildings but there is one important difference. As a parish church, St Andrew's did have a bell in its belfry.

From St Andrew's Street via Dame Street we make our way to a stop in Christ Church Place opposite The Cathedral of The Holy Trinity. Road widening schemes have greatly damaged this area and it's hard to visualise it as the bustling centre of the medieval city of Dublin. The narrow streets that made up this area would have buzzed with all the sounds of medieval city life and the loudest of all these old city sounds was the sound of ringing bells, and not just the cathedral bells but the parish bells too.

Inside the city walls were the parish churches of St John, St Werburgh, St Nicholas, St Michael and St Audoen. The parishes were small but densely populated. A connecting line between these churches would enclose an area smaller than modern day St Stephens Green. In the Liberties, outside the city walls, but with their bells within earshot, were the parish churches of St Bridget, St Peter, St Stephen, St Kevin, St Catherine, St James, St Luke, and also of course, St Patrick's Cathedral.

So back to the question 'why is our belfry bell free'? 'The Church', whether Pre-Reformation or Post Reformation, was an arm of state power and there could only be one recognised official church. The recognised church changed a few times but whichever church had the official franchise (and for a brief period in 1650's

ancestors of this church had it) their role as official church came with civic powers and responsibilities. The parish was a basic unit of government. Parish Vestries had responsibilities that included making provision for the poor of the parish, cleaning and lighting of parish streets, keeping law and order in the parish, and the burials of the dead of the parish. Official state and civic occasions were announced by the ringing of parish bells – the official bells of the official church. Quite simply, it was illegal for dissenters to ring bells.

We can only wonder why, never having had the right or the intention of ringing a church bell, our predecessors saw no irony in including a belfry as a feature of this church! But, if we did have a bell, I think that today, on the last Sunday before Christmas, we would be ringing it out loudly in whatever sound transmitted a message of hope.

The bell is simple instrument, but when bells of different sizes are rung in a pattern with timing and skill, they create a sound that is hard to equal. The best place to hear them in Dublin is back where the idea for this address started, St Patrick's Cathedral. One of the big musical losses during 2020 has been the silencing of the cathedral bells. William Morton, the Dean of St Patrick's, reflected on this loss in an article written for the winter edition of *St Patrick's People*, the magazine of the *Friends of St Patrick's Cathedral*.

*The bells of St Patrick's Cathedral have been ringing out over Dublin for hundreds of years. They have marked time for successive generations, especially with the invitation to worship, but also, with suitable adjustment as required, for weddings and funerals, times of national gladness, or sorrow, and, in more historic times, to indicate danger of invasion. Distinctive sounds characterise a place, like the sound of the old tram system, traffic on Grafton Street, or the old Docklands – all now a phenomenon of the past. Thankfully, however, the sound of the bells of St Patrick's is still with us, despite serious incidents in earlier centuries. Often, when I walk along St Patrick's Close to divine service in the cathedral, I always find the sound of the bells - the call to worship- very emotive, and very powerful. The invisible waves of sound energy are sent out for all to hear. It is a sound which links heaven and earth, and claims our attention, from far beyond us. The bells call us to*

*something greater than ourselves. The evocative call resonates deep within in us because our hearts recognise that it is a call from God, who although beyond us, is also with us at the heart of our communities and lives, calling us to respond.*

*The bells remind us that we are called by God as members of the worshipping community in this place. In these days however, due to the current restrictions as a result of Covid 19, the congregation's engagement with worship has been forced to take on a different dimension. At the time of writing it is not possible to have a congregation in the cathedral and the bells which call us to worship, unfailingly, have fallen silent. As St Paul wrote to the early Christians at Corinth however, 'we do not lose heart'. There is a sense in which we are called, in fact, to become like bells, that our lives speak clearly and in harmony with others.*

A poet who almost did lose heart was Henry Longfellow. His poem *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* was written at the height of the American Civil War at a time when it seemed that the power of hatred would overwhelm any prospects for peace and goodwill. But the power of good prevails.

The poem appears as hymn 240 in our hymn book where, as goes without saying, the words have been edited. I intended to include the full poem in this address but it appeared on All Souls Belfast Facebook page earlier in the December and then it was read during our joint online service last week by one of our friends from Prince's Street Cork. So we won't overdo it. But I'd like to conclude with the last few lines,

*And in despair I bowed my head;*

*"There is no peace on earth," I said;*

*"For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth,  
good-will to men!"*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:*

*"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;*

*The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,*

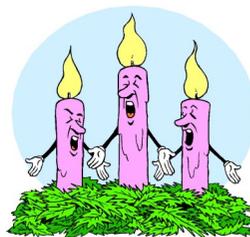
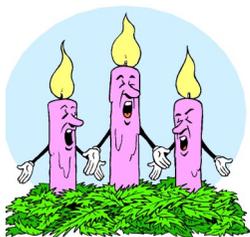
*With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

*Happy Christmas*

*Rory Delany*

St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church

December 2020





## Reading the Sky

As Morag was leaving to go back to England about ten days ago, she told me she had left me a present on my desk in the bedroom. ‘Just so you’ll have something to open on Christmas morning,’ she said. When I got back from seeing her off to the airport, I noticed the beautifully wrapped package and I noticed it every day thereafter, but I didn’t open it. What’s more, I didn’t even pick it up, prod it, or shake it. I waited, as instructed, until this morning. How different, I’ve been thinking, from years gone by when I would have eagerly ransacked the house to find out what Santa had brought me! Now – probably because I’ve got just about everything I need – the urgent desire to satisfy my curiosity seems well and truly under control. And, of course, there’s also the fact that as one gets older Christmas doesn’t seem such a rare event as it used to be. When I was a child Christmas night seemed like a terrible anticlimax, the beginning of an interminable 364-day wait until the next Christmas Day. How would I be able to bear such a protracted interlude? But now Christmases tumble on top of each other with unseemly and frightening haste. No sooner have I put my Christmas books back on the shelf – which I shall do immediately after this service ends – than I am picking them up again as Advent rolls round once more.

Christmas is different when you get older. And, in addition to these purely subjective experiences of change, there are some objective ones. In recent years there has most certainly been a move to eliminate all specifically Christian motifs from this mid-winter celebration. Coca Cola and Budweiser don’t mention Christmas in their lengthy and expensive advertisements. ‘Holidays are coming!’ they sing, as the festive Coke wagon trundles through the snow; and the ‘people at Budweiser’ wish us, not ‘Happy Christmas!’ but ‘a happy holiday season’. And it seems that a new celebration has taken off in America. It’s not Christmas or Hanukah – these are far too religious; it’s not even Yuletide or Saturnalia – these are far too archaic. It’s Festivus, first proposed by George Costanza’s father in the sitcom *Seinfeld*. ‘Festivus,’ he said, ‘is a festival for the rest of us’ – modern people with no particular religious affiliation. He proposed that, instead of a Christmas tree, there should be an aluminium pole around which the family should gather on 23<sup>rd</sup> December, not for the exchange of presents, but

for a ceremony called The Airing of the Grievances, in which each family member in turn informs the others of the ways in which they have disappointed them during the year. And the headmaster of a school in England decided that there would be no traditional Nativity Play this year. Instead, there would be a production of Little Red Riding Hood. As Ronnie Corbett commented on last week's edition of Have I Got News For You, the headmaster presumably believes that a story containing a terrified girl, a talking wolf, and a disembowelling is more edifying than a story about the birth of a baby!

Christmas seems to be troubling us more now than it used to. We don't know what it means anymore. There's lots of scholarly debate about the historical accuracy of the nativity stories, so much indeed that this week's issue of both Time and Newsweek have lengthy articles on Christmas controversies. Both articles go over the same old tiresome ground: When was Jesus born? they ask. Was it when Herod the Great ruled in Palestine as Matthew's Gospel tells us, or some ten years later when Quirinius was Governor of Syria, as Luke has it? And was he born on 25<sup>th</sup> December or on one of about 150 other dates which have been proposed down the centuries. (On Thursday, a learned professor suggested in a T.V. programme about the Star of Bethlehem, that, in all likelihood, Jesus was born on April 7<sup>th</sup> 7BC.) Was he born in Nazareth or in Bethlehem, and, if Bethlehem, was it Bethlehem in Judea or Bethlehem in Galilee? (I'd never heard about this latter place until last week!)

And so on, and so forth. Enough historical conundrums to keep the scholars in doctoral topics and the rest of us in confusion until the end of time. Why? Because the gospel stories are full of historical inaccuracies, logical contradictions, and scientific implausibilities. But these are not present in the text because of unreliable sources, defective memories, or mistaken observations; *they are there to stop us taking the stories literally*. On Easter Sunday a few years ago I mentioned what the great Church Father Origen wrote in the third Christian century, and it bears repeating here: absurdities and contradictions appear in the text to force us to look beneath the surface to find the real meaning of the story. This statement should be printed in block capitals in the front of every Bible, and it should be tattooed on the forehead of every student of scripture. Unless we take Origen's statement seriously we are at the mercy of squabbling historians and that, ladies and gentlemen, is a terrifying situation to

be in. Outrageous and gratuitously insulting statement no. 1:  
*Whenever religion falls into the hands of historians it has the life sucked out of it!*

I remember many years ago going with the whole school to see Lawrence Olivier's film of Shakespeare's Richard III. As we were filing out after the film, one of the history teachers was shaking his head and saying to a colleague, 'That's not what happened.' A shallow judgement indeed! As if Shakespeare, in his great study of the depths of human tyranny and malice was even remotely concerned with something as trivial as what actually happened! Richard was Shakespeare's vehicle for conveying some insights into the nature of human depravity; Jesus is the evangelists' vehicle for conveying insights into the nature of the spiritual life. Outrageous and deliberately provocative statement no. 2:

*the birth stories in Matthew and Luke do not describe the physical birth of one individual in a cave two thousand years ago; they describe the spiritual birth in the soul of everyone who aspires to walk the path towards enlightenment.*

And this spiritual birth is always a virgin birth, because it is not related in any sense (except symbolically) to physical birth. It is brought about in the individual without the help of external agencies. As St. John's Gospel informs us, it is a birth that comes about, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (1:13). And it always occurs in Bethlehem, which means, in Hebrew, The House of Bread; Bethlehem symbolises Virgo, the Virgin, the harvest sign of the woman carrying a sheaf of corn, (which will ultimately be made into bread). And the birth of God-consciousness in the soul is always, throughout the Mystery religions of the ancient world, celebrated at this time of the year.

And here is outrageous and profoundly heretical statement no. 3:  
*Christianity began life as a Mystery religion, based on the universal myth of the dying and rising God, who, in the myths of Attis, Dionysus, Isis, and Mithras was always born after after the winter solstice in late December, when the sun reverses its direction in the sky and light returns to the world. The newly emerging, gradually increasing physical light of the sun symbolises the birth of the spiritual light in those who have discovered that spark of God within themselves and who acknowledge its latent presence in every other*

human soul.

In Timothy O’Grady’s beautiful lyrical novel ‘I Could Read the Sky’ an old Irishman talks about his life as a labourer in England in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is what I could do, he says: ‘I could mend nets. Thatch a roof. Build stairs. Make a basket from reeds. Splint the leg of a cow. Cut turf. Build a wall. Read the sky... (page 35). But he couldn’t trust banks, wear a watch, drive a car, wear a collar in comfort, drink coffee, face the dentist, or understand the speech of a man from west Kerry (page 71). One night he looks up at the sky: ‘To the south is Orion. Across I find the Plough, the Seven Sisters, the Bear. There’s Venus with a very white star above, and Cassiopeia. The wide streak of the Milky Way like an exploded spine, Lyra, Pegasus. I am sitting against the wall of a pig shed smoking a Woodbine and thinking about the mathematics of space....’ (page 64)

We sophisticated moderns, who wear watches, drink coffee, trust banks, and no longer smoke Woodbines, and who never think about the mathematics of space, haven’t got a clue what he is talking about: he may as well be talking like a man from west Kerry! We can’t read the sky, and so we make nonsense of those stories written by people who read little else. Getting a historian to interpret such stories for us is like bringing a plumber in to deal with the electricians. You might be lucky, but I wouldn’t bet on it.

When we learn how to read the sky we realise that Christmas calls upon us to be bearers of the light, to bring to birth the God who lies dormant within the soul. The ancient church called Mary *Theotokos*, a Greek term meaning ‘God-bearer’, and the Catholic Church, which preserves the vocabulary of these ancient mysteries but which has forgotten their meaning, honours her with that title today. But, as Meister Eckhart said in the 12<sup>th</sup> century: ‘Mary is blessed, not because she bore Christ physically, but because she bore him spiritually, and in this everyone can become like her’, a sentiment echoed by Angelus Silesius in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote:

*Though Christ were yearly born in Bethlehem and never  
Had birth in you yourself, then were you lost forever.*

(From Bethlehem to Calvary, by Alice Bailey, page 270)

‘A human being is nothing but a frightened God,’ said Mae-

terlink in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, at a time when we are daily alerted to our collective follies by the media, and consistently told of our insignificance by influential thinkers, never have we, as a species, been more in need of such a tribute.

And our very own James Martineau, who was Unitarian minister here in Dublin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said: ‘The Incarnation (God’s presence among human beings) is true not of Jesus exclusively, but of humankind generally and of God everlastingly.’

As the sun awakens once more in the sky, let us pray for the awakening of the light of God within the soul, because this – not presents, not sentimentality, not families even – is the perennial meaning of Christmas, its mystical meaning, and it has been since the dawn of time, ever since the poets among us started to read the sky.

*Rev. Bill Darlison*  
Minister Emeritus Dublin Unitarian Church

Christmas Day 2004





## A Christmas with a Difference

A solitary child, I watched from the front window, looking down the long path to the front gate where in the dark a magical taxi would appear, to carry us off to Christmas. Mum and Dad carried bags, phoned the Guards to tell them the house would be empty, and fussed over other last minute adult concerns, but it was my job to watch, and then to shout 'it's here!' when the dark car slid into place. Then a long drive through the sleeping city and out to Collinstown, where my name was never called to 'pick up the nearest red telephone'. We were soon in Speke airport, waiting for our luggage to arrive in trucks with sides like fences. I knew my presents were in there, but as an only child, had an adult ability to fake innocence. I didn't believe in Santa, having worked it out when I was just four, but Santa only filled stockings in our family, so it was easy to cast a blind eye. Then a bus into town, to the station, where our bags were put into the left luggage so that we could go shopping. It was always Christmas in Liverpool, the lights were up and it was always satisfactorily frosty. My mother delighted in the wider choices that were available in her native country, and Dad and I stood obediently in many shops while she swooped on the goodies, coming back to us with bulging bags.

In the afternoon we struggled back to Lime Street Station and climbed onto the Ribble bus to Clayton-le-Woods. I loved the bus journeys. People struggled onto the bus out of the black and were greeted by the conductor with loud cries of "Ullo love", and helpful comments about everything that happened. I came from a small but anonymous city and revelled in the temporary community that developed on that bus, changing as each passenger alighted, followed into the murk by shouts of 'Ta-ra, love!'. If it was quiet on the bus, and we were passing through one of the many built-up areas – that part of Lancashire having almost no real countryside- I looked out and into all the good front rooms. Most of these had bay windows, and there was a tree in each one, lit up in multicolours – no subtle monochrome decorations back then – so that every road was ready for Christmas.

I watched out every year for the tell-tale chimney that would let me know it was our stop, but I never saw it until we got off the bus, followed by cheery goodbyes and the thump of cases. Then there it was, a disused factory chimney now bearing the neon words 'Leyland Paints', shining out over our village. We had to walk about fifty yards to my grandparents' house, through air full of ice crystals and the comforting smell of coal fires. The gate squeaked and clanked and we were

in the porch in four paces. I never saw that front door shut, even on the coldest days. I was always at the front, having no luggage to hold me back, so it was I who opened the inner glass-panelled door and gave the call 'Ullo!' as I ran along the tiny hall and into the cosy back room, where 'Moremummy', flushed from excitement, would have been watching the clock for the last four hours. We were swept up into a flurry of hugs and questions, punctuated with 'sensible' comments from Grandad, who was one of the world's pourers of cold water. We had tea, a meal we never had at home, dinner having taken its place when I was a small child too excited by my day in school to concentrate on eating at midday, but which I loved, delighting in the strange juxtaposition of tinned salmon or pork pie with cake or iced buns, or sometimes even jelly. Then I was put to bed, in pyjamas I had been allowed to warm in the slow oven over the fireplace. This was an idea that one would think belonged more to our recycling age, but which had been thought up in the 1920s or earlier, allowing the fire which warmed the room to slowly cook the dinner, and at Christmas, to dry out mandarin peels to be used as kindling, which filled the house with the scent of oranges.

The next day the visits began. There were twelve 'second cousins' all around my age, and my mother, also an only child, had six cousins. Different ones shared Christmas Day with us each year, as the other sides of the family had to be appeased, so shopping trips were interspersed with visits to cheerful and excited houses where I could rush about with the others, nag for mince pies, and pretend to get up to mischief. I only pretended, because as an 'only' I was used to getting the blame for all that was wrong, and I wasn't accustomed to the casual 'not me!' that my cousins employed, usually with success. Louise was my favourite. She was a year older than me, the granddaughter of my Grandad's younger brother 'Uncle Reg'. She was full of ideas and schemes, and was delighted by our visits as her two brothers were 'unbelievably boring'. I didn't agree, I thought they were fun, but then I didn't have to put up with them all year round, only for a week at Christmas, and occasionally for summer breaks. Another boy, Walter, was the cutest, because when I was a small child he was a baby, and I loved watching his attempts to keep up with the rest of us. His Grandma was my 'Auntie', who was actually my mother's Auntie Annie, my Moremummy's sister. He was called what we considered the unfortunate name of Walter – he was mostly known as Wall- because it was a family name from an ancestor called Ann Walters. I'm not sure exactly what Ann Walters had done, but it had impressed those who knew her. Moremummy and Auntie's younger brother had been called Walter, but had died of scarlet fever aged four. This is probably why Wall's older brother was called Peter – it took Auntie that long to get over the superstition

Christmas Day was busy. I remember best the years when we visited

Uncle Reg's. He had the biggest house, so those years we went on Christmas Eve and stayed the night. There were at least six, sometimes ten of us kids packed into the big spare room that had two double beds. I had heard of poor children having to share a bed, but this was a treat. To cuddle down with Louise, Melanie, Hilary, and little Jackie, and call across to the boys in the other bed, keeping ourselves awake so that Santa would barely have time to visit, was the greatest fun. And from downstairs, if we were quiet ever for an instant, we could hear the adults getting very happy on egg-nog. Then we were awake by four and the room was a cloud of tissue paper as we opened our stockings. Usually the boys got something noisy or that could shoot, (this was before political correctness) and we would be involved in happy warfare and the air was full of Opal Mints and Spangles when one of the mums would open the door and say 'Come on, church!'.

Church was fun too, because of the carols, and having people to whisper to, and when we got back the table was laid and there were crackers, and Dandelion-and-Burdock and Vimto, better than any wine, and Moremummy was getting pink on her one glass of sherry and wearing her paper hat at a rakish angle, while Grandad and Great Uncle Reg, and Great Uncle Cecil, if it was their year to be with us, were in a corner full of pipe smoke agreeing that the world was going to hell in a handcart and having another whiskey. Auntie would be trying to control the children – they said she could have been a great headmistress- and they were ignoring her, so she got pinker and more wobbly. And the pudding was brought in flaming, usually by Louise's mum, who smoked so had a lighter and was not afraid of fire, until one year she held the plate too high and set her paper crown alight.

After dinner there were the presents, and happy chaos reigned around the big tree, as the children handed out gifts in such disorder that no one ever knew what was from who, and Auntie Annie tried to keep track but always failed. Games were opened and the dice lost, Meccano was built, with Dads saying, 'be careful of the screws, don't lose them', while 'don't kneel on them' would have been a better warning, and eventually one of the mums, or grans, would announce that she would die of thirst unless someone made a pot of tea, and there would be a rush to the kitchen. A few years, there was snow, and Christmas Day ended with a snowball fight, and the attempt to make a snow-reindeer. We tumbled back into the big beds and were asleep in moments.

All of which is a wonderful childhood memory. With one small problem. It is not all true. I *was* brought to England for my childhood Christmases, and my pyjamas were warmed above the fire. I did get pork pie and Dandelion-and-Burdock, and Moremummy did go pink on

one glass of sherry. There was snow, but it remained where the clouds had let it fall. I was the only child for our Christmas celebrations, which were as staid as in an Old Folks' Home. I opened my stocking with Mum, in her bed, after looking at it and squeezing it for hours from four a.m., never telling her I knew the truth about Santa as I knew it would upset her. I never lost part of a toy, with five adults keeping their eye on me.

Auntie was the headmistress of a Primary School, one of my childhood highlights was being brought with her to the last day of term and being allowed to give out the little bottles of milk that all English schoolchildren received at break time in those days.

And why was Auntie a headmistress? Because her fiancé Cecil was a soldier, and 'did his duty for King and Country'. Unfortunately this involved being mown down somewhere in France.

Great Uncle Reg, my Grandad's adored baby brother, was likewise killed, in 1915. I have read his last letter home, interestingly it was to 'My Dear Phoebe', who was my Moremummy. Reg was too young to have found a girlfriend of his own, and got some solace from writing to his brother's fiancée. The letter from the Chaplain, telling of Reg's death, was found with Moremummy's things. I think it was too hard for Grandad to bear.

My grandfather survived only because he was older, so not accepted by the Recruiting Officer in the early years of the war. His perfectly good health was classified as C3. He tried to sign up again later in the war, when the officer said 'A1, go and run after Jerry!' My granddad replied 'I want my trade', and as result was put into the Royal Engineers and sent to Russia. And those four words- I want my trade- are the only reason my mother or I ever existed.

My mother's cousins were never born, nor were Louise, Melanie, Hilary, Jackie, Peter, or little Wall.

And I was a very only child.

©*Madeline Ann Stringer*  
Dublin Unitarian Church

October 2021

## Why bother wearing a mask in Covid times?

Simple really... you protect yourself and others.. but which masks do what?

If I wear a simple material mask I protect others from the small droplets in my breath....the more layers and the more tightly woven the fabric the more effective the mask. Most are too loose to filter the inbreath.

If I wear a surgical mask ( the blue ones in pharmacies), and if it's tied tightly, I will protect others from my droplets AND get some protection for myself as the material does filter my inbreath provided the mask is tight enough.

If I wear a KN 95 or FFP2 mask it fits tightly to my face, and it effectively filters my inbreath and outbreath. This gives me much better protection against getting COVID-19

(I bought KN95 masks online from [www.tekeir.com](http://www.tekeir.com) at €33 for 50. I use them daily. While designed for single use I rotate them every 72 hours, and replace when torn or dirty.

I try remember to handle them by the ear elastic. )

Stay well !

*Effective masks make sense*

*Emer O'Reilly*  
Dublin Unitarian Church



**A very happy Christmas to you all.**





**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's  
choice for October 2021.**



## **How Much of These Hills is Gold**

by  
*C.Pam Zhang*

In *How Much of These Hills is Gold* C.Pam Zhang attempts a bold re writing of the myth of 'How the West was won'. In her "Re imagined American West" she tells us about some of the people who were omitted from the familiar narrative of pioneers heading west in their wagon trains to the promise of land and freedom.

The setting is in California in the 1860's during the twilight years of the Gold Rush. Zhang paints a harsh raw land that has been devastated by the influx of settlers, mining companies and greed. The buffalo are gone, only their bones inhabit the landscape, the rivers are poisoned from coal mining, the indigenous people pushed off their lands and the victims of genocide. This is an inhospitable world and even more so for those on the 'outside' of society such as the Chinese Americans, whether immigrant or American born. GRIM is the word most of the book club readers used to describe the book, and the grimness did 'nt lift for it's entirety.

At the centre of the story are two sisters, Lucy who is 11 and Sam who is 10, both Chinese American born to Ma and Pa. Ma came from China on a 'labour' ship, destined to work for the railway. Pa is American born, rescued by Native Americans as a baby when his parents mysteriously die in the desert. Now Ma is gone and Pa, an abusive alcoholic, has died in their miners shack. The girls have been taught the rituals of burial by Ma so they need two silver dollars for Pa's eyes to bury him, so they set off into town to beg or borrow the money but to no avail. So following a botched robbery and a gun incident at the bank they steal a horse and become outlaws. They leave town with their dead fathers body tucked inside Ma's medicine trunk strapped onto the horses back.

Thus starts their quest to find a burial place for Pa, and a home. Zhang asks 'When is a home a home' throughout the book.

The girls go on an almost mythological journey in search of a home for Pa's now disintegrating putrid corpse, parts of which are

falling out of the trunk along the roadside. It's a grim almost horror like picture as the girls wander through this brutal landscape finding shelter in buffalo skeletons from torrential rain and wind. There are wild animals to look out for and the ghost of a mythological tiger at their tail. They encounter a dodgy Old Timer who tells them of a place called 'Sweetwater', where they can go and start a new life, be 'seen' just like everyone else.

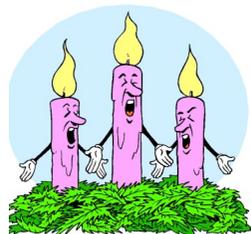
Lucy embraces Sweetwater and wants a conventional life whereas Sam wants to remain an outlaw and so they go their separate ways. After seven years Sam returns and convinces Lucy to leave Sweetwater as she has never and will never be accepted there for who she really is. They must go back to the mother country China to be really 'seen' and to find 'home'. The story takes a few more twists and turns but it is enough to say that there is sadness, sacrifice and grimness to the end.

Zhang deals with so many issues in the book such as racism, sexism, childhood abuse, slave labour, greed, gender identity, social exclusion, prostitution, injustices against the environment, animals and indigenous people. I feel that by trying to include so many issues in very obvious ways that the story suffered in it's telling as there were many loose ends to be tidied up and unanswered questions.

Despite all the grimness, unrelenting sadness and lack of hope it was agreed that it was also a very evocative book and that Zhang, who is only in her early 20's, can certainly write and will hopefully develop her craft into the future. She was asked in an interview what home was for her and she replied "Home is people-a feeling more than a place". The saying 'Home is where the heart is' comes to mind and I hope Zhang finds some heart and hope in her future writings.

*Alison Claffey*

Dublin Unitarian Church



## Apology:

From the managing committee of the  
Unitarian Church  
St.Stephens Green

*On page 16 of the January 2018 edition, Oscailt Magazine published an account of a private gathering of certain individuals, some of whom are members of the denomination. A complaint has been made to Oscailt Magazine and to the Data Protection Commissioners.*

*We accept that it inadvertently contained private and personal details that were published without the knowledge or consent of the attendees at the gathering. The Dublin Managing Committee expresses our regret to the individuals concerned and apologises for any embarrassment the published article may have caused.*

*The Dublin Unitarian Church has established a communications' working group that will review our data protection policy with a view to ensuring that personal data is only utilised in compliance with Data Protection legislation.*