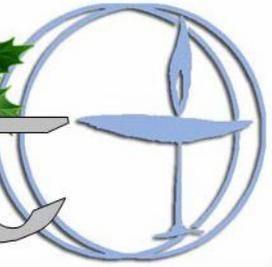


Oscarito



December 2022

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.18 Nº 12



Oscailt

In 2005 Oscailt magazine was first published as a replacement for the monthly "Church Calendar". The magazine tries to reflect the life and events of the Unitarian church communities in Dublin and Cork.

I have published the magazine since its inception. My recent brush with serious illness highlights the need for back-up. I need volunteer(s) to help produce the magazine. I owe a big thank you to Denise Dunne and the team who produced the magazine in September and October at very short notice. Thank you all.

Help is needed to:-

Source articles for inclusion in the magazine and put into a suitable format for printing.

Liaise with church members for details of upcoming events in the church.

Proof- reading.

Email the copy to the printer.

Collect the finished books from Reads in Abbey Street and bring them to the Church.

If you think you could help
please contact Paul Spain or the minister

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone that sent me cards of well wishes while I was in hospital. The support that everyone gave both Bridget and myself is overwhelming.

Thank you all so much.

Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

Oscailt is Published by the
Dublin Unitarian Church
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

To Subscribe
Annual subscription 12 monthly issues.
€35 Posted for Ireland
£35 Posted for England & Scotland
Cheques and PO should be made payable to: *Dublin Unitarian Church.*

Deadline
The deadline for articles to be included is the 21st day of the month.
Unsolicited articles, news items, letters, poems, etc are always welcome, however there can be no guarantee of publication. Copy should be sent by e-mail or at least typed, photographs should be 300dpi.
e-mail: oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

Advertising
Advertising rates available on request. e-mail: oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

Front Cover: Christmas decorations on the church Christmas tree.
(photo P. Spain)

WE WISH ALL OUR READERS

Happy Christmas

CONTENTS

Christmas Presence

Rev. Bridget Spain



St. Stephen.com

Rory Delany

5

Spirit of Christmas

Rev. Mike O'Sullivan

12

Book Review

14

Christmas is Coming

17

Special Presents

Jennifer Flegg

18

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.



Christmas Presence

The celebration of Christmas is perfectly timed; we banish the darkest days of the year with the brightest celebration. We decorate our homes with lights and evergreens. We sing the winter blues away. Thoughts of healthy eating are put on hold as we stock up with comfort foods. As moths are drawn to a flame; humans are drawn to gather in community at Christmastime.

The lead up to Christmas Day is a flurry of shopping, cooking, decorating the house and gift wrapping. Late on Christmas Eve activity begins to quieten and Christmas Day itself settles into its own unique stillness. The shops are closed, there is no public transport, traffic quietens and people who rarely consider Church are drawn to sacred places.

The Christian story of the birth of Jesus, which is portrayed in the crib, chimes perfectly with the emotions of these dark solstice days. Jesus was born at a time of political repression, upheaval and insecurity; his parents shared in the general poverty of their class. They were ordinary people trying to survive under the Roman occupation. A child is born into less than ideal circumstances, as always the miracle of birth outshines everything. The birth of every child is the greatest miracle. The miracle of birth includes your birth and mine.

The baby welcoming service in this church uses the words “It is in the children that the hope of the world is ever renewed.” The truth of those words echoes through history. Each night a child is born is a holy night.

When we consider the libraries of books that have been written about the life of Jesus and its significance for humanity; consider the wars that have been fought in the name of religion; yet there is a remarkable silence surrounding the individuals in the crib scene. The shepherds and the wise men told Mary and Joseph what they had experienced concerning her son. We are told that “Mary kept the words in her heart and pondered them”. Joseph is silent. The world’s most popular Christmas carol is “Silent Night.”

Perhaps it is this silence that speaks so eloquently to us even today. The silence allows the song of the angles to penetrate to us. It

is in the silence that we are able to discern the brightness of the star. The silence allows us to appreciate the miracle of birth and the possibilities that this new life brings; not just two thousand years ago but right now.

We know how the life story of Jesus transpired. Jesus lived the message of peace to all mankind; he spent his years doing good deeds. He followed his star even at the cost of his life. Silence was a central part of the prayer life of Jesus.

It is obvious that people were drawn to the person of Jesus. He made time to listen. He had the gift of making those he encountered feel understood and accepted. We see this particularly in the story of the woman with the haemorrhage. Even in the crush of the crowd Jesus sensed the woman's distress and gave her his attention. Sometimes just to acknowledge pain is enough.

Christmas is about presents and presence. The gifts are less important than the people who are present with us.

While we love to gather with family at Christmas, the gatherings can be tricky as every family has its stresses. Give people your attention, listen, make allowances because this year has been particularly stressful.

The celebrations of Christmas Day and the enforced stillness of the day itself have the power to open the floodgates of memories of Christmases in the past. For most of us the memories will be of some of our happiest experiences; this was when childhood allowed the pure magic of Christmas to enchant us. The story of the train set in the advert for Barry's tea is a great example of this nostalgia for a happy past.

As Bill Darlison wrote, Unitarians are conflicted by Christmas. The rational part of the brain tells us that the Nativity Story is a story. There is no need for conflict. December the 25th is a perfect day as any to mark the birth of Jesus. Birth is always a good news story. The nativity story is so perfectly woven that it draws even the most cynical of us into its beauty.

Christmas is a time of nostalgia; memories of Christmases past have the power to evoke sadness. Christmas gatherings highlight the ebb and flow of family life. This Christmas some families will celebrate the first Christmas with a new family member. While for some families this Christmas will be marked by the permanent absence of a family member. The joy of Christmas highlights the

absence of loved ones. It is healthy to acknowledge the sadness of bereavement knowing that loss is part of the richness of the human story.

Absences are to the fore during this time. Christmas is the time for homecomings, for reunions, it is the one time when we make the effort to meet up with old friends and family. Any enforced separation should be acknowledged with the assurance that it will pass. We are in a better place this year than last year. Let separation allow us to appreciate even more the people around us.

Particularly this Christmas pick up the phone and make contact with someone who is living alone. The human need for connection at Christmas magnifies the pain for someone who is lonely.

Let's temper our expectations of Christmas Day. Today will not bring peace to the world, war and hunger will stay with us. We will think, in particular, of the suffering people of Ukraine this Christmas. But today is the day to appreciate the wonder of nature; the days are now growing brighter. It is a time to reconnect with the people in our lives. We can still sing, laugh and be joyful. We celebrate life in spite of everything - it is still a wonderful world. Life is a gift to be celebrated.

A happy and peaceful Christmas to each and every one.

Rev. Bridget Spain

Minister St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church



St. Stephen.com

Next week will see the 26th of December, the 2nd day of Christmas, a day that is celebrated across the United Kingdom as Boxing Day. Among my many childhood Christmas memories is a memory of the puzzlement I shared with my friends as to why the English called the 26th December 'Boxing Day'. We mainly associated the English Boxing Day with a full fixture list of 'cross channel' football matches many of which seemed to produce unusually high scores. We also had a vague awareness that it was big day for horse racing in England. But there wasn't any boxing! As we grew older and wiser, we learned that the day got its name from traditions of the distribution of the contents of church poor boxes to the poor, and of households and businesses giving Christmas boxes to those who had provided them with services during the year. Monday 26th December the 2nd day of Christmas in this jurisdiction will be celebrated as St Stephen's Day (or *Stephenses Day* as we call it in Dublin).

Many Boxing Day and St Stephens Day customs are common to both islands, especially in the cities. Following the observation of the customs and obligations of Christmas Day, the 26th December is by tradition here and in the UK the first of a few free days offering options of visiting sporting events, the panto, the cinema and, God help us, of shopping all over again. But there are customs here that come with a distinct Irish flavour. Last Christmas I spoke about church bells and I recommended listening to the Chieftains 1991 Album *The Bells of Dublin*. The Christmas songs and tunes on the album includes three St. Stephen's Day tracks, two of which refer to the Wren Boys. Briefly, the tradition of the Wren Boys involves men in costume capturing a wren and going from house to house on St Stephen's Day to request hospitality or the payment of some money.

The Wren In The Furze

*The wren, oh the wren; he's the king of all birds,
On St. Stephen's Day he got caught in the furze,
So it's up with the kettle and it's down with the pan,
Well you give us a penny for to bury the wren?
Well it's Christmas time; that's why we're here,
Please be good enough to give us an ear,
For we'll sing and we'll dance if youse give us a chance,
And we won't be comin' back for another whole year!
We'll play Kerry polkas; they're real hot stuff,
We'll play the Mason's Apron and the Pinch of Snuff,
Jon Maroney's jig and the Donegal reel,*

*Music made to put a spring in your heel!
 If there's a drink in the house, would it make itself known,
 Before I sing a song called "The Banks of the Lowne",
 And I'll drink with you with occasion in it,
 For me poor dry throat and I'll sing like a linnet!
 Oh please give us something for the little bird's wake,
 A big lump of pudding or some Christmas cake,
 A fist full o' goose and a hot cup o' tay
 And then we'll all... be goin' on our way!
 The wren, oh the wren; he's the king of all birds,
 On St. Stephen's Day he got caught in the furze,
 So it's up with the kettle and it's down with the pan,
 Won't you give us a penny for to bury the wren.*

Traditions of 'Hunting the Wren' are by no means exclusive to Ireland. Many European countries have similar traditions. But none of them have The Chieftains. As you'd expect from Ireland's greatest traditional band, the song clatters along at a rollicking pace capturing the feel of a good Irish St. Stephen's Day hooley. The Wren traditions of all countries are interwoven with the story of St. Stephen. Stephen (Stefanos) was a deacon in the early Christian Church who, in 34AD, was accused of blasphemy by the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Found guilty, he was taken away and stoned to death and so became the first Christian martyr. Such was the veneration of Stephen that the day after Christmas Day was dedicated to him as the feast of Stephen.

Many of you will recall the Church of Ireland clergyman and former Irish Times journalist Rev. Patrick Comerford preaching here in 2013 as part of our 150th Anniversary celebrations. On his website patrickcomerford.com, Rev. Comerford publishes an excellent journal which he describes as; '*An online journal on Anglicanism, theology, spirituality, history, architecture, travel, poetry, beach walks, and more*'. The site contains a huge archive of articles that includes a few of his Christmas writings about Saint Stephen. In his writings Rev. Comerford gives accounts of three of the many European churches named in honour of St Stephen, namely St Stephen's Cathedral (Stephans kirche) in Vienna, St Stephens Walbrook in London, and St Stephen's Church in Dublin, probably better known to you as *The Pepper Cannister* on Mount Street.

Rev. Comerford also delves into some of the poetry associated with St Stephen. This is part of a piece he wrote on the poem '*St. Stephen was a Clerk*'.

"St. Stephen was a Clerk is an early English poem associated with Saint Stephen's Day, it dates from the reign of Henry VI, and may have its roots in legends from the beginning of the 13th century.

The 14th or 15th century version of the poem presents an entirely unbiblical version of the life of Saint Stephen, in which the martyr becomes a mediaeval page in King Herod's castle. However, the prophetic element of the biblical story remains and Saint Stephen's reiteration of the phrase, "there is a child in Bethlehem born is better than we all," shows the single-minded nature of his message.

The theme of kingship is present in the poem too, with the paradox that the divine king does not possess the same worldly pomp as Herod, but offers, as Stephen knows, riches that Herod can never match. In this poem, Saint Stephen retains his place as the first martyr, despite recasting the sequence of events surrounding his martyrdom. He gives and does not count the cost, and so, we are told in the final line, why Saint Stephen's eve is "on Christe's own day."

The first few and final verses are;
*Saint Stephen was a clerk
In King Herod's hall,
And servéd him of bread and cloth
As every king befalle.*

*Stephen out of kitchen came
With boar's head on hand,
He saw a star was fair and bright
Over Bethlehem stande.*

*He cast adown the boar's head
And went into the hall:
'I forsake thee, Herod,
And thy werkés all.*

*'I forsake thee, King Herod,
And thy werkés all,
There is a child in Bethlehem born
Is better than we all.'*

An argument ensues between Stephen & Herod and the poem concludes

*Tooken they Stephen
And stoned him in the way;
And therefore is his eve'
On Christe's own day.*

In his writings on St. Stephen Rev. Comerford expresses his concern at the creeping use of Boxing Day here in Ireland. A piece he wrote in 2009 opened with the plea *Please don't call it Boxing Day, call it St. Stephen's*

Day. But, 12 years on, we can say that Stephen has held his own and his feast day hasn't been homogenised into the Boxing Day of our near and bigger neighbour. Stephen though, hasn't been so fortunate elsewhere. The advances in electronic communications have been a great boon for this church in that they have allowed us to communicate with each other and the wider public in ways that we would have found hard to imagine a few years ago. Some of you will have made your first connection to the church through one of these channels. Our website, email, Facebook, Webcam and Instagram accounts all come with the handle 'Dublin Unitarian Church' attached. It might interest you to know that if someone had searched for a church of that name 20 years ago they wouldn't have found it. Let me explain

In June 1863 the Strand Street congregation placed the following notice in the Irish Times.....

STRAND STREET MEETING HOUSE

On SUNDAY next, the 7th inst, Divine Service will be performed for the last time in this House previous to the removal of the Congregation to their New Church in Stephen's Green. The closing Sermon will be preached by the Rev George A Armstrong AB, Minister of the Congregation.

On the following SUNDAY, the 14th inst, the New Church in Stephens Green will be opened. The Opening Sermon will be preached by the Rev WILLIAM JAMES of Bristol

*On each occasion Divine Service will commence at Twelve O'Clock
There will be no collection*

Most of the records of this congregation and the congregations it descends from were deposited with the Royal Irish Academy a few years ago. But there are still a lot of records stored downstairs in the vestry and I undertook a pandemic project to get them sorted, labelled and filed in a respectable order. The records include Baptismal and Marriage Registers, Annual Reports, Financial Reports, bound and embossed Minute Books, the church magazine, and the 1927 Service Book. There are invitations to the ordinations of Revs. S Hick in 1910, K Wright in 1964 and B Darlison in 1996. There are also invitations to lectures, to flower shows and to recitals. There are printed judgements issued by the pre and post-independence courts of law regarding the application of school funds. And there's lots more. Not one of them mentions a place called Dublin Unitarian church! Likewise, reports in the national press of the ordinations or funerals of ministers never mention a 'Dublin Unitarian Church'. The name used was almost always Stephen's Green Unitarian Church or a slight variation of that name. But *Stephen* was always included. And it's not just in documents. The framed Illustrations that hang in the vestry of the church building and of the organ use Stephen's Green, and portraits of Revs. Savell Hicks and Kenneth Wright both include their titles; *Minister St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church*. Beyond the walls of church, in Mt

Jerome Cemetery, Stephen's Green is inscribed into the grave headstones of former ministers, and in Cork Street, the 10 houses known as Huxley Crescent have plaques on the side of the houses at each end of the Crescent that include the words Stephen's Green as a record that the houses were built by members of this congregation.

If you think about it, this church wouldn't or couldn't have been called 'Dublin' as, when the Strand Street congregation moved here there was still another Unitarian congregation meeting in Eustace Street. Also, really, what practical purpose would naming the church *Dublin Unitarian* serve? If you leave here today and someone asks you where's the Mansion House? Or, where's Arnotts? Answering 'Dublin' isn't going to be very helpful, is it? The very name Dublin Unitarian Church admits that there will only ever be one Unitarian church in the city and county. As such it is an acceptance that in a population of 1 million people there will never be many more Unitarians than can be accommodated in this 200 seater building.

So why the shift in name? My memory of this shift dates back to just after the millennium. The Irish Times used to publish notices every Saturday of the church services that would take place the following day. After the Church of Ireland notices the other notices were listed by denomination in alphabetical order. However, if there was a demand on space, Unitarians and one or two others lower down the alphabet would be dropped. The problem was discussed at the Managing committee where it was suggested that we try sticking *Dublin* in front of Unitarian. The Times didn't fall for our cunning plan but I think some seeds were sown in our own minds. Around the same time digital communications were really starting to make headway and, with its abbreviations and punctuations, St Stephen's Green isn't a very hashtag /dot com friendly name. Dublin is much simpler. I used the Dublin name myself as shorthand but I always thought of it as a name of convenience and that 'everybody knows our proper name'.

I love Dublin, but there are some places in Dublin that I love more than others and St Stephen's Green is one of my most loved. I am obviously not the only one who loves the Green. Estate agents advertise houses in the mountains as *only 15 minutes from Stephens Green*. And for obvious reasons. It helps their sales pitch if a property is associated with what is possibly the best address in Dublin.

Patrick Comerford worried about St Stephen's Day being lost through being homogenised into the Boxing Day of our neighbours. I'm afraid that it hasn't worried us at all that we have all but lost our lovely St Stephens Green name to a convenient but homogenised dot com address. In my opinion that is a sad loss.

The development of St Stephen's Green commenced in the early 1660's with the laying out of plots for houses surrounding an enclosed

park. That layout is more or less the one that exists today but the design of the park has changed a few times and the surrounding buildings have been developed and re-developed substantially over the course of 360 years. By the time the Strand Street congregation moved to this building in 1863 the Green had 200 years of history behind it and it was no longer a mainly residential area. Many of the institutions that took over the occupation of the older houses have themselves come and gone. But some are still alive and kicking. The Green has been home to many notable residents and the site of many historic events, it has also been the home of markets, theatres, cinemas, hotels, gentlemen's clubs, museums, a hospital and educational bodies; Loreto on the east, UCD and Wesley College on the south and of course RCSI and the Damer Schools of this church on the west. And then there were the religious bodies that made homes here – a Catholic church and a Methodist church on the south of the green and Unitarians and Congregationalists on the west. I should add that the Quakers had a cemetery on this side of the green and, as you know, a Huguenot cemetery adjoins the Green at Merrion Row. But it is from much earlier religious associations that the Green gets its name.

The medieval boundaries of a tear shaped monastic enclosure that was situated just 5 minutes from here can still be clearly identified in today's street patterns. - Remnants of some buildings in the enclosure were uncovered recently and can be viewed beneath the floor of the LIDL supermarket on Aungier Street. The enclosure was occupied by the order of Carmelites from about 1280 but its existence goes back earlier and some historians believe that it probably dates back a few centuries earlier to the Hiberno-Norse period. The enclosure contained a priory and a church, and at its eastern edge, where Mercer Street Hospital used to be, there was a hospital for lepers. The hospital was named after St Stephen and the great and the good of the city attended the chapel of the hospital for mass on St Stephen's Day. It was this hospital that gave its name to the piece of open ground known as the Green of St Stephen.

I am open to correction, but apart from St Mark's in Edinburgh I don't know of any Unitarian churches in these islands that are named after saints. They are usually named after the town or street that they are located in. Of course, this church wasn't named after a saint, but the place where it is located does bear a saint's name. And what a place that is, beautiful, historic St. Stephen's Green.

So, some food for thought. With good reason we often bemoan in this church the endless shopping and commercialisation of Christmas. Isn't it ironic then – in the area that takes its name from the martyr who forsook privilege and worldly goods to follow a higher cause, our historic church has all but surrendered the name of Stephen and the most prominent building in the area associated with his name is not a beautiful church but the huge shopping centre once described by Frank McDonald as a stranded Mississippi show-boat.



A place of worship since 1717

UNITARIAN CHURCH

Prince's Street, Cork.

Registered Charity Number 0000246

Service: Sundays at 11a.m.

Minister: -Rev.Mike O'Sullivan Telephone:023-8842800

e-mail:- osullmike@gmail.com Mobile 087-9539998

Further information from 087-9539998

Treasurer : Brian Cluer e-mail: bmcleur@gmail.com

Secretary : Colm Noonan : e-mail : colm.noonan@gmail.com

www.unitarianchurchcork.com

**Jazz Vespers,
first Friday of the month @ 6pm.**

An ecumenical service with the Methodist church.

Please Note

If you are aware of any member of our community who is unwell, or who has suffered a bereavement, and who would welcome contact from others in the church, please e-mail Rev.Bridget Spain.

Vestry 01 - 4780638

e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com

For any queries about Sunday Club, or to volunteer as a leader, please email Denise at sundayclub@dublinunitarianchurch.org

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

Lunch-time service every Wednesday from 1.10 to 1.40 p.m.

Each week Eileen Delaney sends an e-mail circular as to what is happening in the church and the other activities associated with the church.

If you would like to receive this information you should send your details requesting your name be added to the list to:-
eileendelaney76@gmail.com



Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St. Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for December 2022

4th December *Darkness into Light*
Service Rev. Bridget Spain
Reader Gavin Byrne
Flowers Janet Mulroy
Welcomer Janet Mulroy
Coffee Trish Webb Duffy, Catharine Cook, Paula Mills



11th December *Only the Lonely*
Service Paul Murray
Reader Aidan O'Driscoll
Flowers Frank Kelly
Welcomer Kevin O'Hara
Coffee Frank Kelly and Lis, Denis Conway



18th December *Carol Service* Charity Collection St. Vincent dePaul
Service Rev. Bridget Spain
Reader Emer Ellis-Neenan
Flowers Trish Webb Duffy
Welcomer Trish Webb Duffy
Coffee Andrew Connolly Crangle, Monica Cremins, Janet Mulroy

25th December *Christmas Day* Charity Collection Cappicuan
Service Rev. Bridget Spain
Reader Denis Conway
Flowers Elaine Sisson
Welcomer Denis Conway
Coffee No Coffee

1st January 2023 *Favourite readings*

Service Rev. Bridget Spain
Reader Elaine Harris and Various
Flowers Janet Mulroy
Welcomer Catharine Cook
Coffee Janet Mulroy, Paula Mills, Dorene Grocock



Services are broadcast live from the church each Sunday at 11a.m.
On our WebCam, click and connect at www.dublinunitarianchurch.org

Recordings of previous services are also available on the website.

LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH
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.

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23, Ireland.
Unitarian Church - Dublin Registered Charity Number 20000622

Service: Sunday at 11a.m. Phone: Vestry 01-4780638

Managing committee:-Madam Chairman: Denise Dunne;
Vice Chairman: Dennis Aylmer; Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy; Treasurer: Rory Delany;
Tony Shine; Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell;
Paul Murray; Madeline Stringer; Gavin Byrne; Tony Brady.

www.dublinunitarianchurch.org
e-mail: hello@dublinunitarianchurch.org

www.oscailtmagazine.com
oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

Minister: Rev. Bridget Spain: Telephone: 01 - 8388 808
Vestry 01 - 4780638 e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com

Rev. Bill Darlison (*Minister Emeritus*)

Madam Chairman: Denise Dunne:- Tel: 087-2450660

Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy:- Tel: 087-9346720

Treasurer: Rory Delany: 087-2217414, e-mail: rorjdelany@hotmail.com

Musical Director: Josh Johnston :- 086 892 0602

Caretaker: Kevin Robinson Telephone: 4752781

Recordings of the church services are available on the church website.

As is customary the day following Christmas Day will be Boxing Day if you are in the UK but most definitely St Stephens Day here in Ireland. Wherever you are you might, given the current situation, be looking for something to lift your spirits. If so, you might consider tuning in to our favourite readings service here in St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church.

Happy Christmas to you all.

Rory Delany

St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church

After the recent visit from Dara Mulloy, can you include these links to his web sites as people might like to keep in touch. It offers snippets of Celtic spirituality and Jungian psychology from his wife Tess and Dara.

The newsletter is available on www.aislingpublications.com



Spirit of Christmas

This morning, the universal church, of which we are a part, kicks off Christmas and begins to immerse itself in the wonder and colour that is for many, the most wonderful time of the year. Advent is a time when amid the darkness of winter, the focus is on light and although for Christian churches this a reference to the birth of Jesus, like most rituals in the modern era it probably has its roots in our ancient and pagan past.

As for Advent itself, it is agreed that it is impossible to put a date on its origins, though it does seem to have been around in some form around the year 480. Less than a hundred years later, the Council of Tours declared that Advent, then the month of December, was to be a time when all monks were expected to fast, for the entire month. One would imagine there was a decline in vocations!

Christmas itself is firmly rooted in the ancient and the pagan, our pagan ancestors in the northern hemisphere celebrated the last day of winter by honouring the Great Mother Goddess giving birth to the baby Sun God. For the Romans, it was a feast to honour Mithras, the Roman God of Light. You can see the emergence of a continuing theme, one that the early church embraced. The early Christians did not it seem celebrate the birth of Jesus, but some sort of formal acknowledgement of his birth seems to have begun around the year 125, with December the 25th being set as the official day by decree of the Pope in 340. But in the early church the idea didn't catch on and it was a case of echoing that now famous line in the Life of Brian; "what have the Romans ever done for us?"

Five years after the papal decree, Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of Rome decreed the day as a feast day across the Roman Empire. In doing so, he had tied Christmas day into the Roman feast of Mithras. As a result, it seems many Christians, well, kind of ignored Christmas, seeing it as being tied into the Pagan. In fact for most of the last 2,000 years, Christmas as we know it was not the major festival it is today. In fact between 1649 and 1660 in England, Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas and it hardly caused a ruffle.

Christmas as we know and celebrate it, is in terms of history, a modern affair. The Christmas tree was not heard of in the UK until Queen Victoria put one up in Windsor castle in the 1830s, she did so at the insistence of her husband who was German. And it was in the 1830s in the UK that Christmas as we know it was born. It was in fact, the week before Christmas in 1834 that Christmas changed forever, that it took on the life it has today, that it became the holiday it is today.

The event was the publication of "A Christmas Carol" by Charles

Dickens. Although born an Anglican, Dickens became a Unitarian in his early thirties and one of the reoccurring themes in his work was the treatment of children.

It is important to remember that in Victorian Britain only the children of the wealthy were educated and then only the boys. Working class children were sent out to work as soon as they could walk. Many worked as chimney sweeps because, well, they were small enough to fit up the chimney.

Dickens opposed child labour, he believed in education, he believed in education for all children.

In a "Christmas Carol" he created a magical and wonderful time, a time that highlighted the wonder and innocence that should be a part of every childhood. He pointed an accusing finger at Victorian Britain for failing to recognise that children were children.

He gave us an image of magic, of Christmas carols filling the streets, of presents, of goodwill and equality for all. He gave us a special, magic filled time of the year, he gave us a day filled with dreams, a day filled with hope.

He gave a vision of Christmas that has filled every childhood imagination ever since. He gave us a vision of Christmas that can be shared by all, the believer and the non-believer.

So, as Unitarians, we lay claim to a part of Christmas, that part which is common to all; the Spirit of Christmas, a time for giving, a time for family and loved ones, a time to believe that in the darkness of winter, there is light, there is hope, there is, even for one day, goodwill among all people. A time to believe, perhaps even foolishly, that Tiny Tim represents every child in the world. A hope that perhaps for one day only, the child within each of us, so long lost, may find life again. We know it's probably not true but for one day, we want to desperately believe.

Rev. Mike O'Sullivan,
Minister Unitarian Church Cork.



**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for October 2022.**



Notes from an Exhibition

by
Patrick Gale

The exhibition in the title of this novel is a retrospective of the fictitious and celebrated abstract artist Rachel Kelly who died alone in her Penzance studio leaving behind her husband and adult children with more than the usual personal paraphernalia of a person's life to clear up.

Rachel suffered from bipolar disorder and was prone to suicidal ideation. She is very much at the centre of the story and we see how her bipolarism and her creative drive as an artist dominated her life and those that surround her.

Anthony, her Quaker husband, fell in love with the bohemian Rachel while in college. He rescued Rachel who is pregnant from a suicide attempt after a failed affair with an art professor. He takes her to his home in Penzance to recover and she quickly settles in and never leaves! They marry, he becomes a teacher and Rachel settles in with the Cornwall arty set and thus becomes a recognised abstract artist. They also have four children along the way and the whole family become a part of the local Quaker society and attend the meetings, this is a very interesting aspect to the story. Rachel attends the meetings but never speaks to the relief of her children as they know that their mother is not like other mothers. It is this knowledge that affects how they each grow and develop as they try to accommodate and cope with Rachel's mental state at any given time.

Her children are Garfield, Morwenna, Hedley and Petroc. We learn from early on that Petroc is dead but we don't know how or when this event happened until the last chapters of the story (no spoilers). There is an air of suspense not just around Petroc's death but you can also sense the insecurities and fears experienced by the children regarding their mother and her mental illness. Hedley says that every conversation with Rachel had been a skirmish. Through-

out his life Hedley tries to avoid confrontation and to not rock the boat. This passivity and avoidance plays out in his relationships well into his adulthood.

Rachel creates a family tradition of taking each child out on their own with her to celebrate their birthday. It is to be their day to do whatever they would like but more often than not they end up doing what Rachel wanted to do all along. Morwenna, who inherits her mother's artistic creativity and probably her bipolarism, is taken to an art exhibition run by the Cornwall set and is painfully ignored by Rachel who is obviously paranoid about how she is perceived and treated by the other artists. You feel every hurt and compromise that the ten year old Morwenna goes through as she tries to just get through the day.

Petroc on his 6th birthday is brought to one of Rachel's favourite beaches where she spends the day sketching leaving Petroc to play on the beach with stones. As the day and time moves on you become afraid for him as Rachel is oblivious to his whereabouts. When she does join him he has a stone named for each member of the family and insists on taking them home to keep them 'safe'. This protectiveness and being together is a big feature of Petroc's character.

Garfield is the eldest child and on his 7th birthday he and Morwenna and Anthony visit Rachel in a mental hospital. She has Hedley with her as he is still a tiny baby and she is suffering from post natal depression again. Garfield assumes the big brother role and responsibilities by helping Anthony with Rachel. As an adult he lives the nearest to his parents but feels the furthest apart. He finds out about his biological father after Rachel's death as she wrote him a letter when he was born revealing all and instructed Anthony to give it to him in the event of her death. Was this not the cruellest of all Rachel's ill thought out actions and I for one would question Anthony's role here too.

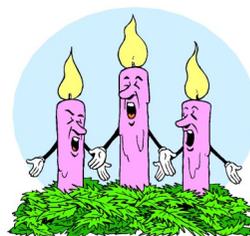
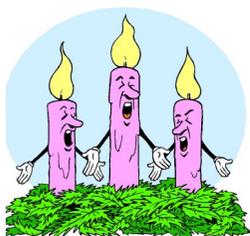
Rachel never talked about her life previous to this, they just know she's from Canada and was in New York before England. Hedley encourages Anthony to try find out about Rachel's life and with the help of the internet Anthony is contacted by a Canadian called Winnie Ransom who turns out to be Rachel's sister, but Rachel was then called Joanie Ransom. We find out about Joanie's

life in Canada, her wildness and free spirit, the beginning of her mental illness which along with a traumatic event led to hospitalisation and her eventual escape and flight to New York and England. You can understand why she never talked about it and you do feel sympathy for her, yet also a certain amount of rage as she heedlessly lived her self centred life regardless of the effect on others. For example she is willing to sacrifice all by not taking her medication as it dulls her creativity and her best art happens when she is non medicated, but at what cost?

This is a book of big issues and there was lots to discuss by the book club. The readers mostly enjoyed it and the writing and descriptions of the Cornwall landscape were very good. Some of us felt that some of the characters could have been more developed such as Anthony the father/husband. The story is well paced and the author kept the reader engaged as it unfolded right until the end. Not all would recommend it as a book choice, but we agreed it was a book worth reading.

Alison Claffey

St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church



Christmas is Coming

Here are a few important dates for your calendar during December.

Saturday 3rd December @ 2.30

There will be a service for parents bereaved through still birth or neo-natal deaths.

Saturday 10th December @ 8.00p.m.

The Reach Carol Service. This service of carols and readings is led by members of the Gay Community.

Friday 16th December @ 7.30p.m.

The Communications Workers Brass Band return after an absence of several years for a concert of music and carols.

Sunday 18th December @ 11.00 a.m.

Charity Collection St.Vincent dePaul

Our Service of readings and carols. Do invite family and friends to come along. There will be a cake sale in aid of the Refugee Committee after the Service.

Sunday 25th December @ 11.00 a.m.

Charity Collection Cappicuan

Christmas Day Service.

Sunday 1st January 2023 @ 11.00

Favourite readings service. Bring your favourite reading/poem or piece of music to share.

As usual we will have a Christmas Tree in the church and accept gifts for under the tree. This year the gifts will be donat-

ed to Brother Kevin's work in the Capuchin Day Centre. Gifts must be new and indicate on the outside the gender/age suitability of the gift.

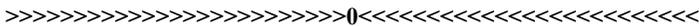
Do remember gifts for teenagers and adults.

Gift tokens are welcome.

Charity Collections. The collections at the Carol Service and on Christmas day will be donated to charity.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Managing Committee and each member of the church for your support during the year. A particular thank you to those who took Services from August onwards, together you kept the church open and working. Thank you all. I wish each of you a happy and healthy Christmas and every good wish for the New Year.

Bridget



Special Presents

Christmas, as any child will tell you, is all about presents. They are at least partly right. Presents may not be at the very heart of the Christmas message, but ever since that day two thousand years ago when the Magi arrived in Bethlehem with gifts for the baby in the manger, present-giving has been a significant part of Christmas celebrations. What with one thing and another this tradition may have got a bit out of hand in recent years so that many well-meaning people today are doing their best to rein in excessive spending, but by and large present-giving has retained its place as a major feature of Christmas. We all love being given presents.

Sometimes though, the best and most lasting presents are not the ones piled up under the Christmas tree, gift-wrapped and carefully chosen though they may be. I would not for a moment dispar-

age the pleasure that they give, but I have in mind a different kind of present altogether.

To illustrate what I mean let me begin with a story.

Many years ago, sometime during the early part of the last century, there lived an elderly man in one of the little roads leading off the South Circular Road in what is now Dublin 8. Very few people knew of him then, and virtually no one knows of him now. I can only tell you a little. His name was Mr Brown, and he owned a gramophone and a collection of records.

The gramophone would have been one of the wind-up ones, such as we see in the old 'His Master's Voice' advertisements where the little dog, ears pricked, turns eagerly towards the trumpet to catch the loved familiar voice. The records would have been the early 78's which are virtually unknown now, the scratchy ones, the best of which have been digitally remastered and turned into CD's. Listening took longer then, as you had to wind up the gramophone every couple of records, and a record itself lasted only three or four minutes. But the great composers and performers of the world were recorded then just as they are today.

Mr Brown used to sit in his front room, which looked out on the street, and play his records. But he did not always play them alone. He had noticed, outside in the street, a small boy who lived in one of the neighbouring houses. One day something prompted him to invite this little boy in, and he played him some of his records. He found a ready and avid listener. This was the first of many such occasions; after that day the records were played over and over again with the old man and the earnest little boy listening together one on each side of the gramophone. Mr Brown talked to the boy about the music, the singers, the composers, and consulted his opinion about the next choice. The friendship between them lasted, I think, until Mr Brown's death.

That little boy was my father, and he listened to music for the rest of his life. Gradually his equipment became more sophisticated, and I remember each burst of excitement as the old family wind-up machine was replaced by a long-armed affair called a pick-up, which in turn gave way to a smart all-in-one Phillips box which – wonder of wonders – could actually play two records consecutively all by itself. In time the scratchy records were replaced by sleek vinyl discs, one side of which could contain a whole symphony. But, as with Mr Brown, what really mattered was the music. Listening was the key.

And I was the fortunate inheritor of all this. As Mr Brown had selected, played, discussed and shared his music-listening with my father, so my father did with me. The gift was handed on.

It seems to me now that this is one of the greatest things any one of us can do for another. To awaken in another person an interest which might have remained dormant – to introduce an endless source of delight to someone who might otherwise never have found it – to share what one enjoys oneself in such a way that the enjoyment is passed on, and thus increased and enlarged and extended way beyond the limits of one's own awareness or comprehension – surely this must be one of the supreme rewards of living. And to have benefitted from all this, to be the recipient of such inestimable favour, is surely cause for a lifetime of gratitude.

We all have a Mr Brown in our background, perhaps several such people. Sometimes they are easy to identify, sometimes they aren't. Sometimes, if they are still alive, they can be thanked. Sometimes that is not possible. Often they can never have any idea what they have done for us. Sometimes we may wonder how we can ever repay our debt of gratitude. The short answer is, I think, that we can't. We have received a gift, freely given, and there can never be any question of repayment. But there are two things we can do. One is to be aware of the gift and enjoy it. Enjoy, and appreciate it to the full. The other is to remember that perhaps, if we are lucky, we may be able to do something of the kind for someone else. It probably won't happen deliberately. These things don't seem to work like that. But it just may happen that we unwittingly open a door for someone which will extend their horizons far beyond their dreams.

That, I hope, explains the background to what must be one of the best presents I have ever been given. I think of Mr Brown frequently and gratefully - every time I go to a concert or listen to music at home. Were it not for him, my father's life and in turn mine might never have been enriched by such a source of delight.

Jennifer Flegg

December 2022

Dublin Unitarian church

Unitarian Art Spotlight

Art for the Soul and Soulful

On Saturday 12th of November the Unitarian church Cork welcomed the Lord Mayor of Cork to our historic church.

Cllr Deirdre Forde was there to launch a new initiative from the church; the Unitarian Art Spotlight. With the recent reconfiguration of our building and our new permanent chapel this has left the main space within the building free to be used exclusively as a church hall, while still available for religious services if needed.

This has allowed us to move away from the commercial rentals which were a part of the buildings past and concentrate on more community orientated events. One of these is the Unitarian Art Spotlight.

Initially, a monthly event, the aim is to give local artists a space within the city centre to promote themselves and their work with the events running on a Saturday, the busiest day for footfall in our city centre. The launch featured the work of local artist Virginia Giglio with an exhibition titled; "*Whimsical Women*".

During her speech the Lord Mayor spoke of the historic importance of our church building and the role it is now playing in promoting the arts in the city. In his speech the minister, Rev Mike O'Sullivan said that art and church go hand in hand as both seek to peel back the layers beyond what is physical and provable.

Our next show takes place on 10th December featuring the work of Jokamin. Full details can be found at; www.unitarianartspotlight.ie and by following the Facebook page.

See:- Pictures backcover.

Unitarian Art Spotlight



The Lord Mayor of Cork Cllr Deirdre Forde launched a new initiative from the Unitarian church;
the Unitarian Art Spotlight.

See inside back cover



Unitarian Art Spotlight
Art for the Soul and Soulful

next show takes place on 10th December
In the Unitarian Church Hall