

Oscailt



December 2023

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.19 Nº 12





Rev. Bridget Spain welcomes Rev. Brian Moodie
from NSPCI church in Dromore
to the church on Sunday 26th November 2023.

Rev. Moodie lead the service today.



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.

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Front cover: -Angels Trumpet (Burgmancia) in full flower in Bridget's garden Nov.2023

WE WISH ALL OUR READERS

Happy Christmas

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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.



Learning to be Grateful

A Christmas Sermon

Reading:

Why I Believe in Santa Claus

What has happened to me has been the very reverse of what appears to be the experience of most of my friends. Instead of dwindling to a point, Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my life until he fills almost the whole of it. It happened in this way. As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it. I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them. I had not even been good – far from it. And the explanation was that a certain being whom people called Santa Claus was benevolently disposed toward me.....What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing. And, as I say, I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea. Then, I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking; now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void. Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dolls and crackers; now, I thank him for stars and street faces and wine and the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into the stocking. Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a present so big that it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside; it is the large and preposterous gift of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of peculiarly fantastic goodwill.

(G.K. Chesterton)

Address:

Christmas is a time for us to exercise our generosity, and calls on our willingness to give are never greater than at this time of the year. Presents for family and friends, charity collections throughout December, appeals on television, appeals in church, all ask us to dig deep into our pockets and our purses. And we do. Whatever the motivation - concern for others, guilt at our own good fortune, or probably a mixture of both, most of us do show the most incredible generosity at Christmas. And you'll be glad to know that I'm not going to ask you to show any more. On the contrary. Today I want us to consider briefly the other side of the transaction. Not giving, but receiving. Today we will probably say 'thank you' more than we would in a month of ordinary days, and so it is a good time for us to reflect on the fact that there is an approach to spirituality which is based on nothing more complicated than those two simple words: 'thank you'. According to the practitioners of this spiritual system, there's no need for us to spend hours in meditation; no need to study incomprehensible theologians; no need to go to an ashram in India and sit at the feet of a guru; no need even to come to church. We just need to learn to be thankful. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century German mystic said, 'If the only prayer you ever pray in your whole life is "thank you", it is enough'.

Thank you for what?

For everything.

For the fact that we exist at all in this wondrous, curious, exciting world; for this stupendous gift of life – offered to us freely by God or by the universe - a gift which, as far as I am aware, we have done nothing to deserve.

To see life as a gift, to appreciate it as a gift, completely transforms our attitude, and affects profoundly every area of our existence. Greed, conflict, misery and mayhem spring from the petulant feeling that we are not getting what we think we deserve. Once we accept that we deserve nothing, but that we are neverthe-

less immersed in boundless generosity, then we are on the road to wholeness.

G.K. Chesterton, another exponent of gratitude spirituality, wrote a tiny poem which sums up this approach, and which I try to say silently to myself each night before falling asleep:

*Here dies another day,
During which I have had eyes, ears, hands,
And the great world about me.
With tomorrow begins another.
Why am I allowed two?*

‘Why am I allowed two?’ I calculated this very morning on a website called *How Long Have I Lived?* that I have lived 22, 478 days – 22, 478 days to be thankful for. Never mind, ‘Why am I allowed two?’ Why am I allowed 22, 478? And, if I go the full span – 3 score years and ten – that will be 25, 568!

We don’t come to an appreciation of the graced nature of existence automatically. I said earlier that we need *to learn* to be thankful; and we have to teach ourselves by regular practice; and if you want a sensible idea for a new year’s resolution, let it be that in the coming year you will turn your life around by learning to become grateful. What does it entail? Not much. Listen to this little passage from Annie Dillard:

When I was six or seven years old, growing up in Pittsburgh, I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. It was a curious compulsion; sadly, I’ve never been seized by it since. For some reason, I always hid the penny along the same stretch of sidewalk up the street. I would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write, I labelled the arrows: ‘Surprise ahead!’ or ‘Money this way!’ I was greatly excited during all this arrow drawing at the thought of the first lucky passer-by, who would receive in this way – regardless of merit – a free gift from the universe. But I never lurked about. I would go straight

home and not give the matter another thought until some months later I would be gripped again by the impulse to hide another penny.

(Pilgrim at Tinker Creek)

Now, I'm not asking you to leave money lying around for people to pick up, although if you want to do it, then by all means do, but stage one in gratitude spirituality is viewing the world as a place of hidden surprises. Upon waking up, think to yourself, 'What treasures has God hidden for me today? What delights does the world hold for me today?' Brother David Steindl Rast says that we need *to practise* opening ourselves up to surprise, and he suggests that we provide ourselves with a little alarm clock in the shape of a question that we should ask ourselves at least twice every day. And the question is: 'Isn't that surprising?' Whatever it may be. And your answer should always be, 'Yes, indeed it is!'

In yesterday's Observer (24th December, 2006), there was an interview with a chorister, a fourteen year-old boy, part of a series called 'What I Know', and part of what this lad knows is this: 'I've a weird feeling when I look at myself or my reflection – how can that work? – that I exist, and am conscious of myself. And my limbs move when I want them to'

It *is* pretty weird. Have you not thought that yourself? Why is that possible? Isn't that amazing? We do it all the time, and never really advert to it.

Of course, not all surprises will be immediately perceived as pleasant. In addition to the major calamities of life, every day has its minor inconveniences and setbacks. How can we be grateful for such things? Brother David says that, instead of the conventional 'Oh, woe is me? Why is this happening to me?' we should ask, 'What's my opportunity here?', and there may be a variety of opportunities presented. Unfortunately, God's pennies don't have arrows leading up to them like Annie Dillard's did. Sometimes they are buried in the most unlikely places. Sometimes we have to dig to find them. Sometimes we don't appreciate their value until months, or even years, after their discovery.

Before you go to sleep – and this is stage two of the spirituality of gratitude – ask yourself, 'What surprised me today? What

have I got to be grateful for today?’ It could be the most trivial of things. Only last week, getting into bed on a cold night, I asked myself the question and realised that I should be grateful for the warm body of my wife Morag at my side, and the hot water bottle at my feet! Be grateful for such ordinary things. Be grateful for the fact that when you turn on the tap, hot water comes out! Can you imagine life without that?

Count your blessings, every day, just like the old song says. Keep a gratitude journal. Some people write down the things they feel they need to be thankful for, every day, or every week. ‘But,’ you might protest, ‘I don’t really think I believe in God!’ Why do you have to believe in God to do this? Thank Mother Nature; thank the Universe; thank your parents; thank your ancestors; thank the process of Evolution; like G.K. Chesterton in our reading this morning, thank Santa Claus. Invent a recipient of your thanks and call it ‘Uncle Cyril’ or ‘Aunt Jemima’ or something. You don’t need to have a metaphysical entity at the end of your thanks to make them effective. The object of these exercises is not to ingratiate ourselves with God. God does not need or desire our thanks. *We* need to be thankful, in order to counteract that sleepy, whinging, self-indulgent cynicism - which the Irish sum up in the word ‘begrudgery’ – which disconnects us from the world and from each other, and which contributes in no small way to the feelings of hopelessness and despair, which, sadly, are so prevalent, even in these days of relative comfort and prosperity.

Christmas is a wonderful and abiding metaphor for the grace filled nature of life, and there is no more appropriate time to commit ourselves to a consistently gracious and grateful response to it. When the whole of our lives becomes an expression of gratitude, a prayer of gratitude, as Meister Eckhart said, we are then playing our part in the transformation of the world. The effort is minimal. The benefits – I can assure you – are incalculable.

Happy Christmas to you all!

Rev. Bill Darlison

Minister Emeritus.





Why do you go to Church?

My address this morning is entitled ‘Why do you go to Church?’. It appears a simple question. However, the answer, or answers, are varied and not so simple. So I would like to share some thoughts and reflection on going to church, on church going.

Imagine the following exchange between a Catholic and a Unitarian. The Catholic points out to the Unitarian. ‘You don’t believe in God. So why do you go to Church?’ The Unitarian replies. ‘I know you well. You believe in God. But you do not go to Church. Why so?’ Have we something of a contradiction here? On the face of it, there appears to be. However, I am not sure there is a contradiction. The reasons that people go to Church, to Sunday Worship, to Mass, to Synagogue, to respond to the Islamic Call to Prayer, are manifold and very different.

The first, and of course foremost reason, people go to church is to pray, to acknowledge and celebrate a God or a Deity. Such a god or divinity can take many forms and involve varied beliefs depending on different religions. Such prayer will pay homage to a narrative of the past prayer practice and religious experience, such as the Bible, the Torah or the Koran. For many people, members of established faith systems, weekly or regular attendance is a compulsory part of their faith.

But beyond this formal prayerful dimension of going to Church lie many other reasons for participation. People may like the sense of occasion and formality of a service, the accompanying music and hymn singing, and the possibility to learn new insights and skills. Children and young people may benefit from play and study groups. And importantly, people come to Church to enjoy a sense of companionship – to meet and befriend others in the congregation, often to share coffee and biscuits after the formal proceedings, and to talk, laugh, and commiserate together. For some, going to church can mean going to a home-from-home, or sometimes simply, to a home.

So in considering why people go to Church, we can observe an array of reasons, along a *spectrum* from the sacred and divine to the more worldly and everyday. These reasons can be seen as complimentary and as enriching one another. Indeed, when it comes to Sunday Service or Sunday Worship, the sacred and the secular are often surprisingly intertwined. In this Church I am quietly amused when I hear ‘Yes, I enjoyed the service’. In my dictionary enjoy equates to take pleasure in.

Another comment I sometimes hear in this Unitarian Church is ‘No, I don’t come to worship’. The word worship is seen as old-fashioned and suggesting an undesirable subservience. Yet in the prayer entitled ‘To worship’ by David Trapp that I recited earlier in the service, he speaks in broad definition of worship: ‘To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth’, ‘Worship is a loneliness seeking communion’, ‘Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond’.

Yes, the word worship can imply a genuflection, even a prostration, to adore or appease a deity, a practice that is very important and significant in many traditional religions. However, for many of us, at a more prosaic level, worship can also suggest an acknowledgement of a possibly greater presence than our mere selves, of a transcendence towards which we might aspire, of a divineness that might nourish us. The writer David French speaks of an *existential humility*, and argues that ‘such an existential humility admits the limits of our own wisdom and virtue, and helps expose our own mistakes and shortcomings’.

There is a deep need within many people to find meaning, to ask what our life is all about, to ponder the eternal and how it might interlink with our daily existence. This exploration of the soul, this ‘soulwork’, drives us to delve into the spiritual and divine within us, in order to understand how we might lead more authentic and worthwhile lives. A church, and church going, offer a safe and welcoming space and opportunity on this spiritual and reflective journey. To quote from Philip Larkin’s poem entitled ‘Church Going’ written in 1955: ‘A serious house on serious earth it is.’

Of course, there are many other important spaces and opportunities for personal and profound reflection: in nature, through lit-

erature, drama, art, architecture, and music, engaging in travel, in formal study and contemplation. However, since time immemorial, a temple, a chapel, a church, has had a central role in human destiny. A church provides a building, a community, religious practice in an intergenerational way, spiritual insight, learning, shared memory, a heritage and a history – all under one roof.

Yet we are confronted with a great irony. On the one hand, we are living in a noisy and fragmenting era where the challenge to find meaning and a satisfactory life direction is getting harder. On the other hand, churches and organised religion, which could possibly help, are in decline. This irony particularly affects younger people who often see traditional religious institutions as unbending monoliths, irrelevant to their lives and to their quest for understanding. But their quest remains.

Gladys Ganiel, a professor in the sociology of religion at Queen's University Belfast, and the author of several books on religious belief in Ireland, has some interesting observations on this quest in a recent newspaper article. She points out that many young people who are categorised as having 'no religion', so-called 'nones', are still engaged with spiritual thought. She quotes a group of US sociologists who have observed how young adults retain a 'back-pocket God', despite abandoning organised religion. These young people treat faith like a smartphone app, something 'readily accessible, easy to control, and useful – but only for limited purposes.'

As a young person I was fortunate to attend a Catholic boys' school/college in Dublin where I received an education I greatly appreciate. However, in my teenage years a big disconnection developed between how I perceived the world and the Catholic faith, in which I was brought up, and which was espoused by the college.

Since that time, I have continued to be interested in matters of the spirit, in various belief systems, whether religious, political or social in nature, and even in low-level philosophical inquiry – mindful, I suppose, of Socrates' famous dictum 'that an unexamined life is not worth living'.

For most of my adult life I have been somewhat envious of people who dressed in their Sunday finery and went to church, en-

joying the formality of the occasion and a likely sense of fellowship. But I always felt uneasy or out-of-place going to a church service. I felt my own beliefs, or lack of them, sat uneasily in the presence of a strong faith-based community in a church.

Until one Sunday service, some 11 years ago, when my wife Rita and I quite literally stumbled into this church on St Stephen's Green. I was full of wonderment at what we encountered; a thoughtful sermon, hymns, music, conviviality, all celebrated in a respectful but not overly creedal way. Liberal theology and a non-subscribing frame of mind were for me. And so my membership of this remarkable Unitarian community has greatly enriched my life over the past decade. And I would very much like to thank our minister Rev Bridget Spain for this.

At times a church can appear austere, intimidating, uninviting, a place that separates and sets apart, that invites only the select few. So let's remember the great European cathedrals that opened their doors in mediaeval times to provide lodging and hospitality to pilgrims on their long journeys. A church is a welcoming place and space, not just to the few. It welcomes all comers, whether worthy or unworthy, whether fervent or not-so-fervent, whether contented or unhappy. No passport or interrogation are required. A church welcomes the lonely, the financially needy, the anguished, the sinner, the searcher, the back-pocket God advocate, and the bouncy castle Catholic. Each may find a space, an insight, a revelation, a hope, a friend, a sense of community, something transcendent, maybe even a religion.

Breda O'Brien, the Irish Times columnist who addresses issues of faith and religion in society, wrote recently, with some frustration, about the bouncy castle Catholics church attendees who only come with their children on the occasion of a First Holy Communion or Confirmation celebration, and where the party-after seems more important than the ceremony itself. She wisely noted: 'Some of the parents bringing their children for First Holy Communion are not counting down the minutes until they can get on with the real business of the day, the party. They are there because of an inchoate sense of missing something, and wanting their children to have a deep connection to meaning.'

Turning a back-pocket faith, or bouncy castle Catholicism into meaningful religious conviction is not an easy task or journey. But didn't Jesus tell his followers to chase the lost sheep rather than just



A place of worship since 1717

UNITARIAN CHURCH

Prince's Street, Cork.

Registered Charity Number 0000246

Service: Sundays at 11a.m.

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

An ecumenical service with the Methodist church.

FREEDOM - REASON - TOLERANCE

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

Childrens Programme - Sunday Club

Takes place on the 2nd Sunday of each month

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



Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St. Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for December 2023

3rd December
Service
Reader
Flowers
Welcomer
Coffee

Food Eating and Forty days.

Aidan O'Driscoll

Gavin Byrne

Paula Mills

Paula Mills, Karen O

Gavin O'Duffy, Janet Mulroy, Maeve Edwards

10th December
Service
Reader
Flowers
Welcomer
Coffee

Try Harder at the Praying
Rev.Bridget Spain
Chris Quinn
Emer O'Reilly
Emer O'Reilly, Andy Pollak
Doireann Ni Bhriain, Andy Pollak, Colette Douglas

17th December
Service
Reader
Flowers
Welcomer
Coffee

Service of Readings and Carols
Rev.Bridget Spain
Various
Eileen Delaney
Rita O'Driscoll, Eileen Delaney
Emer O'Reilly, Paula Mills, Carol Stafford

Cake and Book sale -Monster Raffle

24th December
Service
Reader
Flowers
Welcomer
Coffee

Hark & Hallelujah !
Rory Delaney
Dorene Grocock
Rita O'Driscoll
Paula Mills, Catharine Cook
Lorraine Doyle, A Connolly Crangle, Catharine Cook

25th December
Service
Reader
Flowers
Welcomer

Christmas Day
Gavin Byrne
Denis Conway
Paul Spain
Tony Brady

31st December
Service
Reader
Flowers
Welcomer
Coffee

Goodbye to the Old - Welcome the New.
Rev.Bridget Spain
Denise Dunne
Karen O
Karen O, Lorraine Doyle
Michael Robinson, Janet Mulroy, Daniela Cooney

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:- Chairperson: Denise Dunne;
Vice Chairman: Dennis Aylmer; Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy; Treasurer: Rory Delany;
Tony Shine; Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell; Collette Douglas;
Malachy Hevehan; Paul Murray; Madeline Stringer; Gavin Byrne.

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Musical Director: Josh Johnston :- 086 892 0602

Caretaker: Kevin Robinson

Telephone: 4752781

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

comfort the flock? The Parable of the Lost Sheep is one of the three so-called redemptive parables. It is a beautiful and profound parable where Jesus speaks the following closing lines: 'I tell you that even so there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.' (Luke 15.7)

Most of this address has spoken about meaning and spiritual engagement. Yet most of us go to church to embrace a sense of community and interact with a fellowship of like-minded people; it is as much about a social connection as a spiritual connection. But this is what makes a church a special place. We can, of course, build our sense of belonging, friendships and social capital from a myriad of activities outside a church, like recreational and sporting activities, volunteering and charity work, group travel and so on. In these ways we become less isolated and do not have to, in the words of David Putman, 'bowl alone'.

Yet a church provides more. I spoke earlier of how, under one roof, a church provides a building, a supportive community, religious practice in an intergenerational way, spiritual insight, learning, shared memory, a heritage and a history. Social-capital building activities beyond a church can offer aspects or parts of what a church offers but not all. Indeed, a number of recent sociological studies, particularly in the US, have confirmed that the communities created around secular activities, outside of houses of worship, cannot give the same level of wraparound, holistic support that a temple or mosque or church are able to offer.

That's what makes a church unique. That's why we go to church.

Aidan O'Driscoll

Dublin Unitarian Church





Coming Home

I first set foot in this church 20 years ago this month. By a stroke of good fortune, I had come across an article by Chris Hudson entitled “Welcoming Church.” As you will appreciate, in those days, the church here did not have a website of its own, but luckily even then there was the internet where information about Unitarian philosophy was readily available.

It cannot be an easy thing stepping into an unfamiliar church for the first time, so it was with some trepidation that I first made my way in the door and up the stairs for a Sunday service in December 2003. In his address, our minister at the time, Reverend Bill Darlison, made the point that here in the Unitarian church, we do not believe we are in possession of the truth. He spoke about the importance of the individual search for meaning and purpose, and he explained that he found himself changing his own views, sometimes from week to week.

For me, this was a case of coming home, the discovery of a place where I already belonged. This was the complete opposite of what had been preached to me for my life up to that point, coming as I did from a church that believed it was the repository of the truth.

In those days, our congregation was much smaller than it is now. The coffee and chat after the service happened in a small space at the back of the church between the organ and the entrance door. There were people there who made a stranger feel immediately at home, the friendly faces of Charlie and Moisie McCaw, Jennifer and Aubrey Flegg, Sean Cahill, and on the stairs coming in (usually having a smoke), Paddy McElroy, whose wonderful multi-faith sculpture can be seen on the panel beneath the balcony.

I love the open philosophy of this place, the congregation here, and every brick and stone of a beautiful building that provides a space for our search for meaning. My only regret is that I did not discover our church long ago. But there is no future in the past. Regret is like longing for a better past, as useless as trying to unmake a Christmas cake, which reminds me to say, “Happy Christmas everyone, and I hope the year ahead will provide many moments of happiness for all of us.”

Tony Brady

Dublin Unitarian Church

December 2023

CONGREGATIONAL VISITS TO THE SYNAGOGUE AND MOSQUE

Our theology is generally closer to that of the Jews and Muslims than almost any other Christian denomination. Our very name “Unitarian” indicates that we generally worship one God as they do (not a Trinity). We also have the same approach to Jesus, as being a human being and not God, as the Muslims regard the Prophet Mohammed. Our connection with the Jews was shown in the final years when our Damer School was functioning; the majority of the students were Jewish boys. So it was a great pleasure to receive an invitation for our members from the Jews in the Synagogue in Rathgar on Friday, 20th October, and from the Muslim Mosque in Clonskeagh on Friday, 27th October.

The Synagogue

20 of our members were not deterred by the appalling weather which accompanied our visit to the Dublin Jewish Progressive Congregation Synagogue in Rathgar for Friday night (Shabbat) Service. Indeed, our numbers exceeded those of their own congregation. We were greeted at the door by Hilary Abrahamson, Community President. Jews expect men to cover their heads on entering the worship area (in contrast to the Muslims who expect the women to cover theirs!), and a basket of kippahs (skull caps) of various sizes and colours was provided for this purpose at the door.

The Service was predominantly conducted in Hebrew, but the Prayer book provided an English translation for most of it. However, as the Hebrew Prayer book reads from back to front, I think many of us found it difficult to follow what page we were on! During this Service, the prayers focussed very much on respecting nature and the planet, which gelled very much with our sentiments. Music played a significant part in the worship, and this was provided by a Cantor who sang psalms and hymns in Hebrew, and the Congregation joined in for most of them. We also tried to sing along as best we could (not knowing the music or the language!), which at least made us feel we were not just spectators. The cantor sang beautifully, unaccompanied, and we noticed

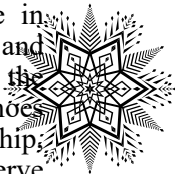


appeared not to have any words or music in front of her, which was very impressive, and seemed to hold her pitch throughout. Towards the end of the Service, bread and wine were distributed amongst the pews in a manner very similar to that of our Non-Subscribing Presbyterian associates, (the wine in miniature individual glasses), but the meaning behind it was very close to that of our own Communion Service. This reminded us that the serving of bread and wine was not initially instituted by Jesus at his last supper, but existed in the Jewish Services centuries before Christianity. During the Service there was a brief moment when the Congregation turned round and faced the door. This is done on Friday evenings to welcome the Sabbath. Naturally, we followed suit! However, the address by the Rabbi on video was focussed very much on the appalling events taking place in Israel and Gaza with its political overtones.

Following the Service, light refreshments were available. We were very honoured when Hilary Abrahamson opened up the Ark, the sanctuary where the sacred Torahs are kept, and brought out two of them. These scrolls are at least 200 years old, beautifully inscribed in classical Hebrew on parchment. She described how they were made, and a lot of the detail of the script, including that it had no vowels, and we also noted there was no punctuation either! So ended a fascinating and spiritually-uplifting visit, and we thank the members for the wonderful welcome they gave us.

The Mosque

17 of us visited the Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre in Clonskeagh on 27th October. We were welcomed by Dr. Ali Salim and ushered in to the great carpeted Prayer Hall where Friday Prayers, the Salah al Jumuah, were taking place. As required, we took off our shoes before entering the Hall. We were not invited to take part in worship, but seats were arranged in a corner of the Hall so that we could observe it. Two long parallel lines of male worshippers faced Mecca (East). Women did not take part with the men, but could attend in the gallery. Three of our ladies were in the gallery, and noted that some of the ladies there followed the movements and prayers of the men down below. There was no music, and it appeared to us that there was no verbal participation by the congregation in the worship either. Their participation was entirely physical, and the prayers, recitations from the Quaran, and leadership of the physical movements of the worshipers were entirely conducted by the Imam in Arabic. The series of movements which ac-



accompanied the prayers, known as the Rak'at, were conducted with almost military precision, started with worshipers standing, with the Imam reciting opening words and reading a chapter from the Quaran. Each prayer that followed was accompanied by a physical movement by the worshipers, bowing, kneeling, prostrating with foreheads touching the ground, and returning to the standing position. Anything up to four of these "Rak'ats" would be repeated, depending on the time of day, and as Muslims are required to pray five times a day, it helps to have a prayer mat available. We entered the hall in the middle of worship, so it was not clear how long worship had been proceeding at that stage. It occurred to me that if a devout Muslim had faithfully followed this routine all his life, into old age he would probably be a bit fitter than your average Christian! The physical movements are designed to aid spiritual sentiments, and in this respect, there is an interesting connection with Yoga.

After leaving the Prayer Hall, we were invited into a large reception room, furnished with a long table, and the Imam joined us for discussion. He only communicated in Arabic, and Ali Salim provided translation, which somewhat limited the conversation. Sadly, as in the Synagogue, it drifted into mention of the appalling Israel-Gaza war. Then a considerable array of delicious food was brought in which we deeply appreciated, and it was clear that a considerable amount of trouble had been taken to make us welcome.

These visits to the Synagogue and the Mosque were very popular as shown by the numbers of our members who attended, and we deeply appreciate all involved in making them so instructive and successful.

Dennis Aylmer

Dublin Unitarian Church



Dublin Unitarian Church Book Club's

Review I

The Offing

by

Benjamin Myers

*The Offing 'in the part of the ocean visible
between shore and horizon'.*

The narrator of our story is Robert Appleyard who is looking back at his life and in particular to the year of 1946, when at the tender age of sixteen he takes off on a road trip from the small mining town of his birth in the north of England. It is a time of hope and of looking forward to a world of change after the devastation of the second world war, but Robert does not feel that change and instead feels caught in the expectations of family and society to follow in the footsteps of his father and to work in the mines. He wants one last summer of freedom before facing that destiny and so he heads off towards the coast working along the way for board and lodging on farms where there is a labour shortage as many of the men have not returned from the war or those that have returned are 'depleted, decrepit or broken'.

His journey brings him to Robins Hood Bay where he encounters an eccentric bohemian woman of about sixty called Dulcie Piper. Dulcie lives alone in a remote cottage with her Alsatian dog Butler and she invites Robert to have some tea, nettle tea that is, and thus starts an unusual and possibly unlikely friendship.

Initially Robert does some gardening and maintenance in return for board and food, not just any food though as post war rationing does not apply to Dulcie as she is wealthy and has connections and so has a larder of fine foods and wine which she delights in sharing with Robert. It is not just the fine food that Dulcie introduces Robert to but also the wider world of literature, poetry, art and ideas. Dulcie sees the potential in the young Robert and as he stays over the summer renovating a disused studio they engage in many late night conversations that are wide and varied and Dulcie challenges Robert to rethink his views of the world.

While Robert is renovating the garden studio he discovers writings, poems and a hidden letter by the famous German poet Romy Landau who was

Dulcie opens up Robert's mind to new possibilities and helps him escape his perceived destiny of the coal mines by helping him go to university and to become a writer. The metaphors of darkness and light being very obvious.

The authors' writing is very descriptive of the English countryside and there is a strong sense of place and time. Some of our readers loved the descriptions and others not so much. The characters were well filled out although Dulcie was over the top at times. The book club found the book very readable and would recommend this gentle coming of age novel.

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Review II

Half of a Yellow Sun

by

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The book title refers to the short lived Biafran Flag, three horizontal stripes, red , black and green with a bright yellow half sun in the centre of the black stripe. In this book the author takes us from the hopeful early days of the new emerging country of Biafra as it struggled to establish independence from post – colonial Nigeria in the late 1960’s. This struggle leads to a chilling and devastating war which the reader experiences through the main characters’ lives as they are swept up in the war, it is a story which Adichie expertly weaves together.

Ugwu is a rural bumpkin who starts to work as a houseboy for a professor named Odenigbo. The professor takes Ugwu under his wing and encourages him to pursue his education which he does enthusiastically. During the war Ugwu is conscripted into the Biafran Army and his horrendous experiences of combat and sexual violence change his views of the world and reality forever.

Odenigbo is a Maths Professor at the Nsukka University. He is an idealist and has many intellectual friends who meet to discuss their hopes for the future of this new emerging country as being one of social equality

shaking off the shackles of colonialism and western capitalism. As the war encroaches on their lives and it affects their families and friends all hopes for this future are shattered.

Olanna is Odenigbo's lover and then wife. Her family are part of the Nigerian elite class of wealthy businessmen who are well connected to the powers that be at any given time. They are corrupt and shameless in their dealings and Olanna shuns them as much as she can. She falls for the charismatic professor and his idealistic view for an independent Biafra, free of the trappings of society. Olanna's war is full of trauma, she witnesses the murder of her Aunt and she slides into Post Traumatic Stress, she becomes a refugee and experiences hunger and famine yet she emerges from the war stronger and more independent, not totally broken.

Kainene is Olanna's twin sister, she is strong willed, world wise and runs her father's business. At first she profiteers from the war by selling arms but after witnessing the horrors of the war she leaves her high end life to run a refugee camp. She takes risks to get supplies and moves between the borders, one day she goes missing never to return or be heard of again.

Kainene had fallen in love with an English writer/journalist called Richard Churchill who is in Nigeria to research Nigerian/ Igbo Art and Culture. He tries to insert himself into Biafran society and culture by learning the language and calls himself a Biafran, but it is clear that he never really understands his place in the post-colonial world of his adopted country and as he writes his accounts for the western press Adiche shows how Western analyses can be biased, ill-informed and ignorant of such a complicated tribal civil war.

The book was well received by the book club as it gave great insights into the different social groups such as the rural tribal villages, the intellectual elites, the emerging wealthy businessmen and the ambitious and corrupt politicians. The readers were impressed by the description of how a seemingly stable post colonial country could slide into war.

It was thought a bit lengthy and had a lot of minor characters to remember but a book worth reading and one to recommend.

Alison Claffey

Dublin Unitarian Church

From the Minister

The year is drawing to its close and Christmas is almost here again. On the 17th we will have our Carol Service; this is the highlight of the year for me. This is the first Christmas since 2019 that the shadow of Covid has lightened and we will sing the carols with abandon. Do please, remember to invite your family and friends to join us for the Carol Service.

2024 will be a new chapter in the story of the church. I will be retiring, and Dublin will have a new minister. We are often apprehensive about change, but change is the nature of life and change brings its own blessings. This is the time to be excited by new possibilities.

A big thank you to everyone who has helped or contributed in any way to the life of the church. I really mean it when I say without your support the church could not function. So TAHNK YOU EACH AND EVERY ONE.

Bridget

Christmas Giving.

For many years our community has supported Women's aid by giving gifts for the Children and the Women in their care at Christmastime. However, traditions change and the support we offered no longer met the requirements of that organisation.

However, there is still a great deal of deprivation and need in our city. The Capuchin Centre in Smithfield provides support to people. Services include breakfast and lunch six days a week. They distribute food parcels weekly, provide clothes and showers and some health services.

They don't ask questions they fill needs. During the past year the number coming for lunch has increased from five to seven hundred people daily.

What would be of most help now is:

Warm hats and gloves for children.

Christmas Pyjamas for children.

Gift tokens for Smyths toy store. Each child will receive a token for €40. If you cannot afford €40 we will happily accept vouchers for a lesser or any amount.

There is no need to wrap the hats, gloves or pyjamas.

The Offertory collections on the 17th (Carol Service), 24th and Christmas will be donated to the Capuchin Centre.

Thank You, Everyone

Managing Committee Notice

Annual Registration of Voting Members (2024)



For the Attention of Members



If you are a Member of the congregation (*that is, if you signed the Membership Book during any year up to and including 2022*) and you wish to have your name included as a **Voting Member** on the **Register of Voting Members for 2024**, you should complete and return a **Voting Registration Form** by not later than **31st December 2023**.

Voting Registration Forms are now available for collection in the church. If you are a Member who can't attend church often, or who usually listens in online, a form can be sent to you on request by post or email.

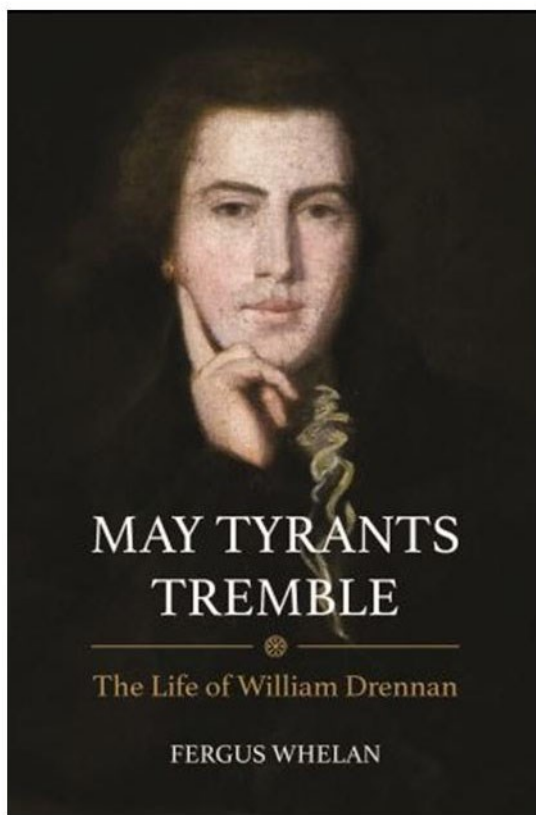
Requests for **Voting Registration Forms** should be sent to
(*by post*)

The Treasurer
Unitarian Church
112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23.

or

(*by email*) treasurerunitarianchurch@gmail.com

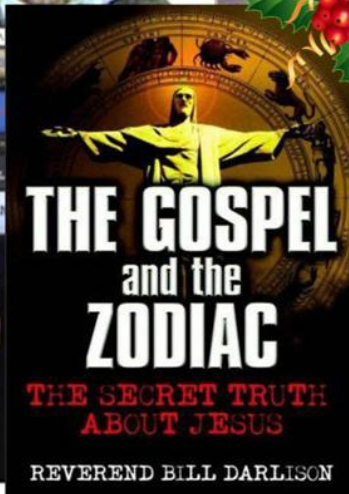
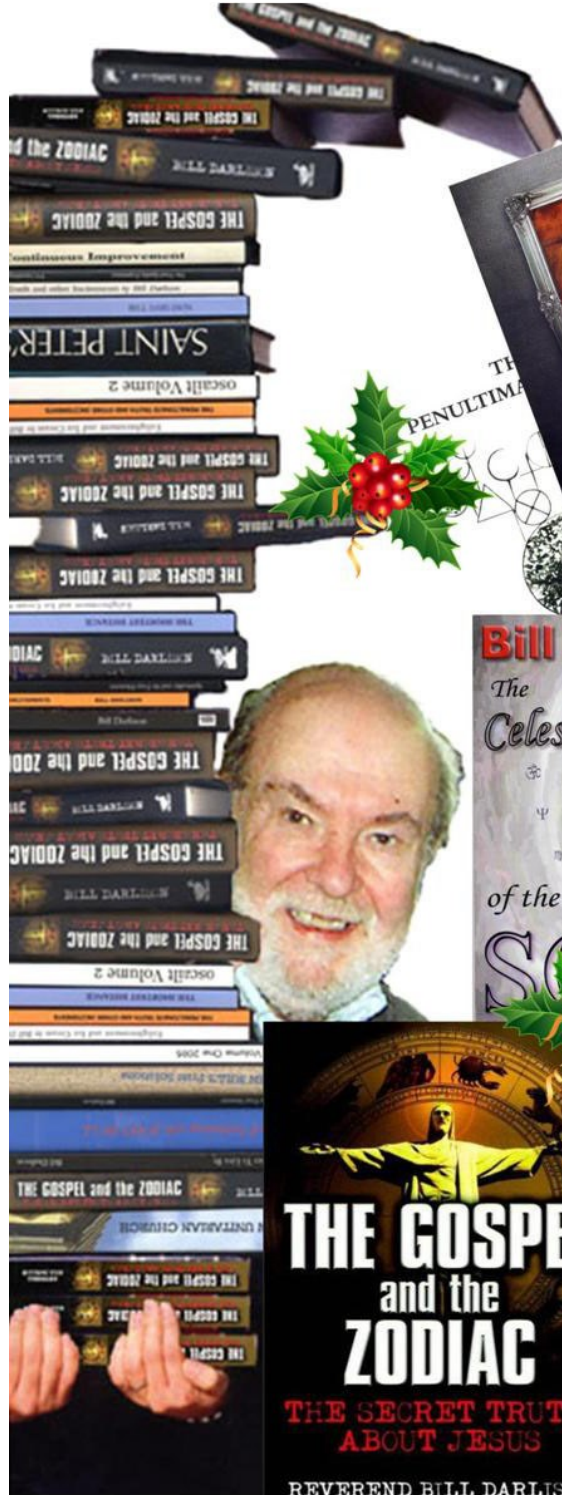




Fergus Whelan giving a talk on his book at the church recently to the Dublin Historical Society.

“May Tyrants Tremble”.
Available from most bookshops.





Czech Edition

Compare prices on Amazon
or
a better site is www.bookkoob.co.uk
(watch the spelling)