

July 15th 2007 saw a Unitarian minister preaching in the Parish Church, St Mary's in Hinckley – and being invited to talk about Unitarianism. This is that address:

Conventionally, I should start by recounting our history. And I will scamper through it. But with a health warning. I am NO historian. O level was a scary experience!

In this country, we Unitarians trace our origins back to the Great Ejection of 1662. So Hinckley was in at the very beginning, when Thomas Leadbetter left St Mary's. The Act of Uniformity passed in 1662 required clergy to buy in to the Book of Common Prayer in its entirety, and something like 1700 clergy (that's about 10% of the number there were at the time) left the Church of England as a matter of conscience. It would have ruled me out. Look at the 39 Articles, and I start responding yes, maybe, absolutely not! One of those clergy was Thomas Leadbetter. Most of those clergy joined a grouping called the English Presbyterians which hoped to rejoin a more liberal Church of England, and it's that grouping that the Great Meeting Unitarian congregation here in Hinckley traces its origins back to. But the establishment got tougher and tougher on non-conformists, making it illegal for ejected clergy to go anywhere within a 5 mile radius of any parish or town where they had previously ministered, then making house and outdoor meetings illegal, and then requiring people to swear an oath of allegiance to the Church of England and take communion in it. Interesting phenomenon – being required by law to belong to a particular denomination, and participate in communion. Anyway, the change from English Presbyterian to what we know now as Unitarian wasn't an event – it was a process that took some years. By the early C19, about ½ English Presbyterian ministers and their congregations had become Unitarian. Not a new idea, Unitarianism, it had been about for some time. Essentially, they were questioning the traditional interpretation of Jesus as one of the three parts of the Trinity, and arguing that it was non-scriptural and didn't arise till approaching 400 years after Jesus lived. They saw Jesus as an exceptional human being, especially chosen by God, but not a human incarnation of God. Hence the name Unitarian, as opposed to Trinitarian, of course. They followed Scripture closely, and believed that the Bible was the sole source of authority regarding religious truth. Now Gunpowder Joe, as he's nicknamed. Joseph Priestley, the

scientist who discovered oxygen, was also a dissenting minister. And he, with others founded a rational religion. He was trying to get back to the roots – he thought Christianity had got encumbered with tradition.

Unitarian worship didn't become expressly lawful till 1813, so it wasn't till the nineteenth century that we saw the beginnings of our national structure and formal organisation. Which leads me to suggest that the fact that our building in Hinckley isn't in a prominent position is probably not a coincidence. Many of our buildings are set in places that weren't too obvious. If you ever go to Whitby, take a look at the Escape Hatch just near the pulpit. It takes you through a tunnel to the local pub. There's a lever in the pulpit in Dukinfield which rotates the pulpit to the outside of the chapel, **not** for use by the congregation in response to a boring sermon, but where the preacher would have kept his horse tethered for a speedy getaway. And so on.

Unitarianism developed theologically during the nineteenth century, with James Martineau urging us to embrace reason and conscience OVER scripture. Martineau saw Jesus as exemplifying the moral awareness of humanity at its highest level. And Martineau placed intuition over even reason in religious thought. And then, towards the end of that century, we Unitarians began to embrace religious insights from other faiths – hence the records of a Hindu and a Buddhist conducting services in the Great Meeting in 1906. Enough of history, or I shan't be able to talk about today. Oh, except that I should say that our history is very far from as simple as I've portrayed. There is a diagram of the various strands that make up present day Unitarianism, which looks remarkably like a piece of my grandmother's crochet – that is, after she lost her sight!

Today, we are more diverse movement than that history might suggest. People argue about defining us, but I'd say we are a spiritual community, with its origins in Christianity, which encourages you to think for yourself. We believe that everyone has the right to seek their own truth and meaning. And we hold that the best setting to seek truth and meaning is in a community that welcomes you for what you are – beliefs, doubts, questions and all! In essence, we'd call ourselves religious liberals. We are non-doctrinal – insisting on a pattern

of beliefs would hardly be compatible with what I've just said. And partly as a result of that and partly because of the openness to all insights, many of our congregations happily accommodate people with a remarkable diversity of beliefs. We at the Great Meeting are happy that a Hindu couple quite occasionally worships with us. So our unity isn't in shared beliefs, it's in shared values – values like the importance of nurturing life's spiritual dimension, values like using reason and honest doubt as tools to help in the search for truth. Like constructive tolerance and openness toward the beliefs of others. Like wanting peace, compassion, justice and democracy to be key values in world affairs, and like respect for the earth and the whole natural system we are part of. Lots of fine words. But what do we actually look like? What do we do, day to day?

If you were to come into the Great Meeting, and into many of our other chapels, your first glance would probably register it as a pretty well conventional place of worship. And then you'd notice differences – like there being no cross on display. Mind, in some other Unitarian chapels, you'd find crosses. That's because our congregations embrace a wide variety of beliefs. Most of one congregation might regard themselves as Christian Unitarians (by which I mean they would label themselves as Christians but not accept that Jesus was an incarnation of God). Other chapels might not look like places of worship at all – without pews or pulpits, sometimes using space flexibly. But most of our services on Sundays look pretty conventional. Based on what we irreverently call the hymn sandwich. Except we've tweaked it. There is often no Bible reading at all. There is quite often a reading from other sacred texts. The hymns look familiar at first sight, but we've either tweaked the words or nicked the tune and written new Unitarian words for it. You see our Dissenting tradition in the prominence of the sermon (though it's conventionally only 20 minutes nowadays, thank goodness). Sometimes, services are more freeform. Before I came to Hinckley, I ministered to our congregation on the Isle of Wight. They enjoyed a service once a month, sharing a piece of music, a piece to read or a prayer or meditation that was particularly meaningful to them. And we met regularly for silent meditation.

Before I finish, I should perhaps draw attention to our broadmindedness as a movement. The first woman was

ordained in 1904 in England (earlier in the States, and earlier in Scotland if you count the Universalist strand of our ancestry). We have had an overt policy opening our ministry to all, regardless of sex, race or sexual orientation since the mid 70s. Nearly all our ministers and most of our chapels are happy to host same sex blessings – which, like our weddings, baptisms and funerals, are individual. It's hard work to write every one individually – but very rewarding, I have to say.

I'll finish by telling you the story of the American who came across a man on a bridge, about to commit suicide. He decided to try to stop him and started talking. And asked him whether he believed in God.

"I believe there's a God."

"So we share that. Are you Christian? Jew? Muslim?"

"Christian."

"So we share that. Are you Protestant or Catholic?"

"Protestant."

"So we share that. What denomination?"

"Baptist."

"So we share that. Northern or Southern Baptist?"

"Northern."

"So we share that. Northern United or Northern Federated?"

"Northern Federated."

"So we share that. Northern Federation of 1882 or Reformed Northern Federation?"

"Northern Federation of 1882."

"So we share that. Great Lakes Grouping or New England Grouping?"

"Great Lakes Grouping."

"So we share that. King's Circuit or Grace Circuit?"

"Grace Circuit."

"So we share that. Westport, or York membership?"

"Westport."

"So we share that. Westport Unity Church or Westport Central?"

"Westport Central."

"Die Heretic!" And he pushed him off the bridge.

The moral, of course, is that we people of faith have far more common ground than differences. And that we should honour that, rather than concentrating on the differences.