

Welcome to our online worship service. We greet you in the spirit of freedom, tolerance, justice and peace and may the God of love and peace be with us.

My name is Alex Bradley and I am a Unitarian minister living and working in Cheshire.

And I light this flame with words from some words from a 20th Century figure Sigmund Freud: “Most people do not really want freedom, because freedom involves responsibility, and most people are frightened of responsibility”.

And from a person in our own time, the Dalai Lama: “When you think everything is someone else’s fault, you will suffer a lot. When you realize that everything springs only from yourself, you will learn both peace and joy”.

Prayer God the Spirit of love and peace. we ask that you turn us away from self-centred thoughts and ways.

Help us to keep faithful to your love.

Keep us responsible so that we can bless others with your love.

Keep us responsible so I that we can live in a world that one day will accept all as equals rather than favouring some and turning from others.

Keep us on the path that leads to your open arms in the great infinite love of your being.

Keep us self-controlled and self-disciplined in all we say, think, and do.

In all things, in all ways, show us the full responsibility of walking in your ways.

READING Our first reading comes from Galatians 6 **New Life Version (NLV)** Christian brothers and sisters, if a person is found doing some sin, you who are stronger Christians should lead that one back into the right way. Do not be proud as you do it. Watch yourself, because you may be tempted also. Help each other in troubles and problems. This is the kind of law Christ asks us to obey. If anyone thinks he is important when he is nothing, he is fooling himself. Everyone should look at himself and see how he does his own work. Then he can be happy in what he has done. He should not compare himself with his neighbour. Everyone must do his own work.

He who is taught God’s Word should share the good things he has with his teacher. Do not be fooled. You cannot fool God. We will get back whatever we plant! If a man does things to please his sinful old self, his soul will be lost. If a man does things to please the Holy Spirit, he will have life that lasts forever.

Do not let yourselves get tired of doing good. If we do not give up, we will get what is coming to us at the right time. Because of this, we should do good to everyone. For sure, we should do good to those who belong to Christ.

READING Our second reading is taken from the book 'Reverence for Life' by Albert Schweitzer:

Being faithful in our calling does not simply mean being faithful in fulfilling our duties, but being faithful in everything that we can accomplish here on earth. Faithful in that highest sense of awareness that we ourselves are not masters of our own ability and knowledge. They, like our talents and our health, are a loan presented for our use.

We must live as people who know that such temporary possessions are not true belongings and that we must give account for our management of them. We shall be asked how we have handled these valuable loans. We must not live our lives as men and women who say: "This and this is mine. I can help myself to anything I need to make me happy and give me pleasure". No, we must live like men and women who know and are becoming ever more mature in the knowledge that the most precious gift in life is to live not for ourselves but for the benefit of others, for truth and goodness.

Reflection

"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves" Paul writing in his letter to the Christians in Rome, (chapter 15, verse 1)

'Passing the buck' is a familiar phrase for someone wanting to dodge or evade responsibility. It's a turn of phrase I suspect most of us have heard, and some will have used. However, it was only recently that I decided to look up the origins of the term. Thanks to Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, I discovered that it derives from the game of poker, where a buckhorn knife was put in front of a player to show that he was next to deal. From a literary point of view, it has an added interest in that Mark Twain is the first person recorded as having used the phrase, back in 1872.

I remember overhearing a senior colleague possessed of an amiable manner and a rather peculiar sense of humour saying: 'I'll be right behind you: running away as fast as possible'. It was obviously meant as a joke and it was taken as one but a little question mark remained in my mind, which is best summed up in another famous phrase, 'Many a true word is spoken in jest'.

If you are a person who 'wants to get on', in terms of your career, or social status, or wealth or power, depending on which seems most important to you (I have not placed them in any particular order), then much of the teaching of

Jesus, both here and elsewhere will seem not just irrelevant but positively inimical to your purpose. Although he met and mixed with some powerful and influential people, he specifically told his disciples that when they gave a party or dinner, they should not invite their relations, or rich neighbours but instead “ask the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind: and so find happiness. For they have no means of repaying you.” (the quote is from Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 14) What sort of advice is that? This goes against all the common sense principles of ‘networking’: ‘getting along and getting ahead’, meeting the right people, showing your face, being known in the right circles by the right people.

Now there are times when it may be necessary and even quite right and proper to use such techniques. “Be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves”, says Jesus in another context. We should not be so unworldly as to be no earthly use to ourselves, or anyone else. Your teenage son or daughter need to know how to survive and thrive in a difficult and competitive world, at school, at college, if they attend one and in the world of work and commerce. The crux of the matter is when we fail in our duty to care for others and worse still when we avoid responsibility for the care of others, even when there is clearly an ethical, if not a legal, duty to do so. This is not a new phenomenon: on the contrary, it is probably as old as humanity itself. In the mythical story of origins, in the book of Genesis, (which of course, means just that ‘origins’), Cain having killed Abel, his brother, trying to deny his responsibility and his guilt, says to God: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’

Paul says in his letter to the Christians in Galatia that they have a responsibility to help people who might be straying from the right path (notice too, that his words come with a health warning against any kind of spiritual pride: take care, he says, in case you yourself are tempted onto the wrong path). How does that advice apply to us? Our circumstances will all vary but the opportunities will be there. A senior colleague told me many years ago of how he was approached by a young man in the street, the gist of whose words were: ‘Do you remember me? You helped me when I was going off the rails as a teenager and got me back on track’ He now had a partner and baby and a steady job which supported him and his family. Two things stood out for me in that little story. Firstly, my colleague did not need to do what he did. It was not part of his professional remit, he being neither a social worker or a teacher. He did it out of a desire to help. Secondly, it was not a church matter: the teenager was not a part of his church; neither did he join it then nor later. My friend in his own way was following Paul’s instruction to do good to everyone, not just Christians or Unitarians, without hope of reward. Everyone, all people, without exception, are worthy of help and loving kindness.

Don't compare yourself with others, says Paul. One could take this in different ways. Some people might be tempted to spiritual pride: 'look at me: I do far more than x or y do', rather like the proud Pharisee in a story told by Jesus, who boasted of strictly keeping all the religious laws. On the contrary, we should try to do good according to our own gifts and strengths without pride. Conversely, some might say to themselves: 'look at him (or her, or them): he (she, they) don't bother: why should I put myself out?' This is a very understandable emotion: it hurts when we see other people not pulling their weight – but perhaps if we knew their personal circumstances and could look into their hearts, we would realise that **we** are the strong, in Paul's terms and **we** have strengths and opportunities they do not. 'To those who are given much, much is expected', says the Scripture. However, even if it seems clear that they are not pulling their weight for selfish reasons, should **we** do the same? Do we wish to live our lives by the standard of the lowest common denominator or to live by a higher standard we set for ourselves? Do we wish to blame them for our own shortcomings? The Dalai Lama's words remind us that suffering comes from blaming or passing the buck onto, someone else. Joy and peace come from accepting that responsibility comes from within ourselves and no-one else.

This particular passage from Paul is rich in psychological and spiritual teaching. It contains the famous phrase, using an older translation: 'whatever a man sows, that shall he reap'. You cannot fool God, Paul says. Also, I would want to add, one cannot fool nature and the universe either., They who live only according to their selfish desires will ultimately reap a miserable harvest in terms of their spiritual life and well-being.

We can regard our talents, our strengths and particular abilities as making us inherently meritorious: I (or we) have this great skill or talent or ability: so if I make a great deal of money or am given praise or have a higher social status as a result, we think; 'I deserve it'. 'I have achieved this'. Well, yes, in one sense, it is your achievement and deserves recognition and praise. But Schweitzer's words remind us that our talents are **loans** rather than outright gifts. They are limited to the period we spend on this earth and they come with a requirement to use them well and use them for the benefit of other people as well as ourselves.

I once was loaned a courtesy car over a weekend, as my own was in for necessary repairs. I wasn't expecting an old banger, exactly, but certainly nothing more than a simple everyday car. Instead, to my amazement (and consternation), it was a brand new, upmarket model, which even then probably cost at least £20,000. Seeing it outside my house, a neighbour even asked if I

had won some money! Some people might have been pleased to have the chance to drive it. I was terrified of getting a scratch on it! Even the insurance had a mandatory excess of £500. For that entire weekend, I used it only to go to church and back, driving it as carefully as if I had gone back in time and become a newly qualified driver again.

Now, if I gave that care and attention to what was after all, only a moving mass of metal, plastic and glass, then surely the talents that we have been loaned in the form of our strengths and abilities are of immeasurably greater importance and need far greater care and handling.

Each of us has something to share, each of us has something to do and each of us has something to give. 'To whom much is given, from them much will be required', says Jesus. May we be faithful in our stewardship of our talents and abilities and may we find joy and peace in using them wisely and well. Amen.

And now a benediction to conclude our worship:

As our worship draws to its close,
and we return to the common duties of our everyday lives,
may we feel God's presence ever close,
so that our lives and our work become acts of loving worship,
each and every day. Amen.