|  |
| --- |
| **Monton Unitarian Church****Reflection 5th July 2020 – Curious about God** |
| **Opening words**I begin with words by Chrystal HoganIn the presence of this fire we hear the voice of our God,Of our Goddess, of our Holy. “You are on Sacred Ground.”In the presence of the flame in me, in you, in us,Moving, resting, gathering— we are on sacred ground.In the presence of this fire we are compelledTo take up a torch, to carry a flame, to seek a sacred ground.In the presence of this spark we are committedTo light the fire of passion, of life, of holy work.To journey towards truth on Sacred Ground.Last week we talked about the curious cat – this week the subject of our curiosity is that highly elusive concept of “God”. For we are a church with many different understandings of “God” – if indeed we accept the very word itself as relevant to our lives. So we shall ask some questions about “God” – and quite probably all come to completely different answers – and hopefully some common ground.  |
| **Hymn**This is a hymn by William Herbert Carruth, entitled “Others call it God” – these are the first three verses, and they speak for themselves.A fire-mist and a planet, a crystal and a cell,A star-fish and a saurian, and caves where cave-folk dwell;The sense of law and beauty, a face turned from the clod – Some call it evolution, and others call it God.Haze on the far horizon, the infinite tender sky,The ripe, rich tints of cornfields, and wild geese sailing high;And over high and lowland, the charm of golden rod – Some people call it nature, and others call it God.Like tides on a crescent sea-beach, when the moon is new and thin,Into our hearts high yearnings come welling, surging in,Come from the mystic ocean whose rim no foot has trod – Some people call it longing, and others call it God.  |
| **Prayer** God, what you really are we only dimly apprehend and rarely experience.Sometime we think we know your vastness and your distance in the night sky with its host of stars. Sometimes we think we feel your power in the roar of great winds and the sweep and crash of waves. Sometimes we think of your beauty in the snow of sunlit mountains, and the perfection of tiny flowers at the edge of the snow.Because we need the comfort and strength of a parent’s arms, cradling us like a child, we make a parent of you. Because we need people to understand us when it is too difficult for us to explain, we make you all-knowing. Because we need you to fulfil our humanity, we make you a superhuman standard to aspire to. Because we need to see purpose in life and creation, we make you a Supermind, with a plan and a will for us. We are often hurt, and seek compassion in you. We are often blundering and officious and destructive, and seek mercy in you. We often do things we wish we had not done, and neglect the things it were better we had done, and we seek forgiveness in you. We often hate, and are hated, and we seek love from you.Sometimes we speak to you, like this, as if you were a person, because it is easier, and this is how it seems to us. Sometimes we think far and wide about the mysteries and possibilities and ecstasies and griefs and awakenings. Sometimes we are full of happiness and joy and delight, and we need to shout and sing how good it all is. Sometimes we withdraw into quiet places, and wait for awareness. We may never know who you are, or what you are, or even perhaps, if you are; but all our lives we shall go on finding out. May we be content with what we find, for whatever we make of you, you are what you are. And for this, we give thanks. Amen. |
| **Story – God's Hat, by Christopher Buice** Once upon a time, there was a village with a road that went straight through the centre of town. One day, something strange happened. God walked down the road . . . and oh my word, she was beautiful! She wore a long flowing robe and on top of her head there was a wonderful hat. All the people stopped to stare at God as she walked by, and they kept staring until she disappeared in the distance.“Boy, God sure was beautiful!” said one man. “And what a beautiful blue hat!”“Yes, God was beautiful,” said a woman from the other side of the street, “but it wasn’t a blue hat she was wearing. It was a red hat!”“You are wrong,” said the man. “It was definitely a blue hat!”“No, you are wrong,” said the woman. “It was definitely a red hat.”As the two argued, others joined in the dispute. Soon the whole village was arguing. All the people on one side of the road were certain that God was wearing a blue hat. All the people on the other side of the road were certain that God was wearing a red hat. People got mad and started screaming at each other. Finally, the people got so angry that they decided to build a wall that went straight down the centre of town. From that point on, the people on one side of the wall were enemies with the people who lived on the other side of the wall, and they never spoke to each other. On one side of the wall, the people built a church where they worshiped a God that wore a blue hat. On the other side of the wall, the people built a church where they worshiped a God that wore a red hat.Many years passed, and the people were still enemies. Then one day, God came walking back through the village. She was smiling and balancing on top of the wall that the people had built many years ago. This time she was wearing no hat at all. All the people ran to the wall and cried, “You must settle our argument!”“Yes,” said one man. “The people on that side of the street say that when you walked through the village many years ago, you were wearing a blue hat! But we know better. We know you were wearing a red hat. So tell us, God, what colour was your hat?”God looked puzzled for a moment and began to scratch her head in thought.“I think I remember walking through this village many years ago,” said God. “And on that day, I believe I was wearing my hat that is blue on one side and red on the other.”And saying nothing more, God continued walking down the wall until she disappeared off in the distance.It was very quiet for a moment. Suddenly there was the sound of one child laughing. Then another child started laughing, and another. Soon the whole village was roaring with laughter. Everyone was laughing because they realized how foolish they had been. As the sound of laughter grew louder and louder, the wall began to shake and crumble until, finally, it came tumbling down to the ground.For many, many years after that day, the people told the story of God’s hat, and how laughter had torn down the wall between a divided people. |
| **Reading – Utterance of the Timeless Word, by Angela Herrera**You bring yourself before the sacred, before the holy, before what is ultimate and bigger than your lone life. Bigger than your worries, bigger than your money problems, bigger than the fight you had with your sister and your aches and pains, bigger even than your whole being, your self who is part of and trapped within and blessed with a body that does what you want, and doesn’t do what you want, and wants all the wrong things, and wants all the right things…You stand at the edge of mystery, at the edge of the deep, with the light streaming at you, and you can’t hide anything – not even from yourself, when you stand there like that, and then … what?Maybe you call your pastor and say, what is this, what am I looking at, what do I do? And your pastor comes and stands at the edge with you, and looks over. She can’t hide anything either, she thinks, not even the fact that she doesn’t know the answer to your question, and she wonders if you can tell.She thinks of all the generations who’ve come there before you, and cast words out toward the source of that light, wanting to name it. Somehow, she thinks to herself, the names stayed tethered to the aging world and got old while the light remains timeless and burns without dimming.Meanwhile, the armful of worries you brought to the edge of mystery have fluttered to your feet. Unobscured by these, you shine back, light emanating unto light. You, with your broken heart and your seeking, you are the utterance of the timeless word. The name of the Holy is pronounced through your being.  |
| **Reflection – Curious about God**John Shelby Spong, a liberal Christian theologian, once wrote: “God is not a Christian, God is not a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist. All of those are human systems which human beings have created to try to help us walk into the mystery of God. I honour my tradition, I walk through my tradition, but I don't think my tradition defines God, I think it only points me to God.”Celia Midgley, former minister of Monton church, and now retired, also wrote about what God might be, saying, “God of a thousand names, how shall we describe you, who are awesome, fascinating mystery? Shall we call you power, force, creator and sustainer of the world? Are you tenderness, mercy and compassion? Are you justice, wisdom and all knowledge? You are all of these. And if you are our friend, our guide and comforter, our father and our mother, you are also formless, bodiless, that which cannot be described, can never be known until we truly know ourselves, as we cannot know ourselves until we know you.” There are many different depictions of God. From the jealous Jewish God of the Old Testament, to the forgiving father-figure that Jesus talked about in the New Testament. The many different aspects of God each with their own name and appearance in Hinduism, the Greek Gods and their intrigues, love affairs and very human attributes, the nature gods of the pagans and so many more. God is a word that for many is a word of strength, of comfort, of meaning – they live with a faith that God is all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, and that they, as believers in this God, will be blessed, whether with prosperity and health in this life, or with life in heaven after death. God for others is a word that comes with huge amounts of baggage. Imagine growing up in a fearful world where you were constantly being told that God was watching, that God knew when you were being bad, and that God was lining up your punishment for you. Religious abuse is no folk-lore. Even without that, for many it’s a word that no longer has meaning – life is a rat-race with no real winners, and “God” – or any form of spirituality, faith or religion – has no part in it. In Unitarian circles, it’s a very confusing word. Because many of us will not have given huge amounts of thought to what we think it means – most of us if pushed would give a different definition than the person sitting next to us – and ask us in a year’s time for our definition and it would probably have changed a bit. So when the word is used in services, we each of us put our own interpretation on it. Our prayer showed how we can regard God as different things depending on our need, our mood, our location even – God as parent, God as nature, God as mystery beyond the stars. Other prayers that I often share do not use the word God at all, but are still prayers seemingly directed to a being, or consciousness – the Spirit of Sacredness, or of Life and Love. And yet I do not believe in God, or Spirit, as a being, that can change the course of history, change our circumstances, change anything, simply by our asking it in prayers. Why then would I speak of God at all?Good question. I will state here and now for the record that I am almost a humanist – almost. I sometimes use prayers or readings that indicate that “we are the hands, the voices, the minds that must do God’s work” – and the focus of my life is serving other people, you could say worshipping – giving worth to – other people, rather than worshipping an external God who may or may not bother listening to me. But I still speak of God, of Spirit of Sacredness, and still address prayers to that Spirit of Life and Love. Because while I do not believe in ‘a being’, I do believe that life on this planet is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. To use that biblical phrase, “when two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I”. Though I’d add, and even when sat alone in your room or under a tree or on a tram, there I am.For me, when I use the word God, I am thinking of that strength, that confidence, that calm that comes when people are in right relationship – with themselves, with the people around them, with nature if that is their focus at the time. If they are focused on living with compassion, on serving others, of nurturing the life around them, then that light that our second reading talked about, the light of mystery that streams over you and through you when you stand on the edge of the abyss, becomes part of you. And as Angela Herrera said, “you shine back, light emanating unto light. You, with your broken heart and your seeking, you are the utterance of the timeless word. The name of the Holy is pronounced through your being.”Divinity is within us. And for me, and I suspect countless others, one word defines divinity better than any other. And that is Love. To love is to worship the life and breath that we have been given, to give thanks for the beauty we see, the companionship we find, even the pain we suffer. To love is to want to be the best we can be – and give the best we can give. To love is to know that we are but specks of dust in the grand scheme of things but that when we reach out to others in love that dust becomes electrified, and more powerful than we could ever dream. We have seen the miracles that love can perform, in so many different ways. Love can help children brought up in terror-filled war zones laugh and dance. Love can help ill, elderly, lonely people in our own community feel whole. Love can build bridges and shelters, find cures for diseases through long hours of painstaking research, create works of art and beauty. And love can build community. When two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I. When two or three are gathered together to stand on the side of love, there is God, there is Spirit, there is sacredness – there is the power of humanity and divinity merged. From the tiny actions of us, helpless human beings, specks of dust in an infinity universe, God is created, time and time again. Many of you will know Psalm 23, in part at least – The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. In the language of its time, that psalm speaks of God as he, as Lord. Kevin Tarsa has written “Psalm 23 For this Moment” – and for him also, it would seem that God is Love. And so I share it with you, to close. Psalm 23 for This Moment , by [Kevin Tarsa](https://www.uua.org/offices/people/kevin-tarsa) May I remember in this tender moment that Love is my guide,always shepherding me toward ways of openness and compassion.I have what I need, really, with Love at my side,above me, below me, in front of me, behind me,inside every cell of me, Love infused everywhere!Just when the weight of the world I inhabit threatens to drop me in place and press my hope down into the ground beneath meLove invites me to rest for a gentle while,and leads the centre of my soul to the quiet, still, restoring waters nearby that, somehow, I had not noticed.And so, Love, quietly, sets me once again on its tender and demanding path.Even when the walls close around me and the cries of death echo through untold corners, gripping my heart with fear and sadness,I know... I know that all will be well, that I will be well,when Love whispers near to me, glints at the corner of my eye,rests with gentle and persistent invitation upon my shoulders.Yes, Love blesses me, even as the sources and symbols of my pain look on.Love blesses me from its infinite well, And I turn and notice...that goodness and kindness and grace,follow me everywhere, everywhere I go.I live in a house of Love, Love that will not let me go.I live in a house of love, And always will. Amen. |
| **Blessing**If there is a heaven, it is right here, right now,in this particular arrangement of nature,this happening of earth, moon, and star,this constellation of instants, this laden moment,this flash of recognition, this particle of time. If there is a god, it is all around us, everywhere,in every blinking eye, in every pulsing possibility,in every ugliness, every beauty, in every wholeness, every part.If there is an axiom in the universeit is life, it is love, it is death, it is hatred,it is wanting and needing to be in this crystal of creation.So may we go in peace, and find our God,  |