



**Look**  
unto the  
**Rock**  
from whence  
ye were  
**Hewn**



**Arthur J. Long**



The  
ANNIVERSARY SERMON  
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**“Look unto the Rock  
from whence ye were  
Hewn”**

Preached at  
The SOAR CONGREGATIONAL CHAPEL  
LAMPETER, WALES

by the

**Rev'd. Arthur J. Long M.A.**

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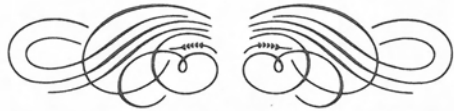
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# “Look unto the Rock”



HERE IS A WELL-KNOWN STORY about a peer of the realm (first told, I believe, of the Victorian statesman Lord Hartington) who once dreamed that he was making a speech in the

House of Lords — and who woke up and found that he *was* making a speech in the House of the Lords!

I feel a bit like him. I have often dreamed (perhaps ‘feared’ might be a better word!) that I would one day be called upon to preach the General Assembly Sermon — and here I am, doing just that!

It is certainly a great honour — but hardly a consummation devoutly to be wished! My difficulty stems from the fact that at any Unitarian gathering, it is quite impossible to say anything which will please everyone!

It is for this very reason that I decided long ago that if ever I *were* invited to preach the GA Sermon, my text would be: *Luke 6.26* — “Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you!” — With a text like that, you just can’t lose!

One could certainly make a good sermon out of that particular text. In this media-ridden age, most of

Introduction. A consideration of texts. Our media-ridden age.

us, I think, *are* far too concerned about our image and our ratings. I am often reminded of that mordant observation by the late Dean Inge, who once said, apparently, "We complain that our Churches are half empty. If the Christian Gospel were really preached from our pulpits, they would be emptier still." I believe it was Kierkegaard who once said that he wanted to make it more difficult for men to become Christians, not easier. Maybe we ought to be looking for ways to make it more *difficult* for people to become Unitarians, instead of spending a lot of time trying to convince them that they really are Unitarians already!

But my actual text is not Luke 6.26. It is something quite different. I am a great believer in texts. A text gives some indication to the congregation of what they may expect — and it helps the preacher to remember what he is supposed to be talking about. My text is *Isaiah 51.1*: "Look unto the rock from whence ye were hewn and the pit from whence ye were digged." Since we are in Wales I think I ought to try to give my text in Welsh:—

"Edrychwch ar y graig y'ch naddwyd, ac ar gendod y ffos, y'ch cludiwyd o houit."

— And since this is Palm Sunday, I want to couple that text with some words from Luke's version of the story of the first Palm Sunday — *Luke 19.44* — where Jesus underlines the tragedy of those who do not know the time of their visitation. ("Jesus wept over Jerusalem ... and he said, You did not know the time of your visitation.")

At the present time, like many other institutions and individuals, we seem to be suffering from an identity crisis. Who are we? — What are we? — Christians or non-Christians? — humanists, radicals, liberals? — heralds of the dawn and vanguards of the age? — or pale ineffectual copies of the past, the last remnants of an insignificant and slowly-dying sect?

Who are we? What, if anything, is there about us which is true and meaningful?

It is a well-known ploy with preachers to suggest that if you want to know what something is, a good place to start is a dictionary. Whenever I am discussing Unitarianism, I do often begin with a dictionary — with the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. This defines Unitarianism as "a type of Christian thought and religious observance which rejects the doctrines of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ in favour of the unipersonality of God." I am well aware that this is the kind of definition calculated to raise hackles in some quarters. Many would object because it appears to suggest that the essence of Unitarianism is a definite doctrinal position. Unitarianism, as they see it, is primarily a free and undogmatic approach, which does not insist on particular doctrines. (The ODCC, incidentally, does allow for this. The writer goes on to say "Unitarians have no formal creed. Reason and conscience are the criteria of their belief and practice.")

But others would object to this initial definition because it links Unitarianism too closely with belief in God and with the Christian tradition.

I still think, however, that the ODCC is a good starting point — *for three reasons*.

In the first place, whether we like it or not, there is no getting round the fact that Unitarianism certainly originated within the Christian tradition. It began in the exciting years which followed the Renaissance, when some earnest Christians were moved to query some of their own traditional doctrines.

In the second place, there is a sense in which it is *not* misleading to define Unitarianism as a type of Christian thought and observance which rejects Trinity and the Divinity of Christ — because, again, whether we like it or not, it is a correct factual description of the way in which most Unitarians in this country and on the continent have always regarded themselves. Most Unitarians in the North West certainly think of themselves as Christians — and I suspect that this is also true of the Unitarians in the 'Black Spot', in Wales!

A definition of Unitarianism, and some objections to it. Three reasons why it is a good starting point.

A second text is proposed, from *Isaiah*. An identity crisis for Unitarians?

Some Unitarians, God bless them, are even inclined to believe that their faith is the original and authentic manifestation of Christianity — “Christianity in its simplest and most intelligible form!”

The third reason why that dictionary definition of Unitarianism is by no means irrelevant, is that it does help to explain that sense of change and movement and onward thrust which has always been so characteristic of our tradition at its best, right from the time of Francis David in Transylvania. It is the clue to the great historic shift from doctrinal Scriptural Unitarianism to the free and undogmatic approach of Parker and Martineau. For if one rejects the notion that God has spoken finally and completely in Jesus, then one is inevitably thrown back on the insights of reason and conscience.

So the ODCC definition *is* a good starting point. In essence and origin, we *are* a Christian group, affirming the unipersonality of God — or shall we say perhaps the unity of the transcendent. Inevitably nowadays, we differ amongst ourselves in the interpretation which we place upon the idea of God. But we do all bow in reverence before the ineffable mystery of being — divine or human. We still affirm in effect the abiding relevance of the ancient insights of Judaism — and most of us do still proclaim, like our Renaissance and Socinian forebears, a God who is not some strange metaphysical abstraction, but who is, in very truth, the Living God of the Hebrew Prophets, or the Holy Spirit of the Nicene Creed — “the Comforter, the Lord and Giver of Life.”

Perhaps many of us, whether we call ourselves Christian or not, have a mistaken idea of what constitutes the essence of Christianity. It is surely significant that most of the great theologians of our day are now suggesting that the essence of Christianity is not to be found in the traditional doctrinal formulations of Christian history. At the present time, there is an increasing repudiation on all sides of the whole idea of orthodoxy and heresy.

I think it was a great Victorian churchman, J. B. Lightfoot, who once said: “I find that my faith suffers nothing by leaving a thousand questions open, so long as I am convinced on two or three main lines.”

“Ah, but,” some will say, “it surely depends on the two or three main lines. What are they? — Jesus Christ as God and Saviour? — the atoning blood freely shed? — the mystical significance of the Eucharistic Liturgy?”

No! most intelligent and perceptive Christians now look elsewhere. I at any rate am going to be rash enough to suggest three simple basic ideas as the essence of Christianity — Incarnation, Resurrection and Liberation. Incarnation, perhaps above all — because in a sense, it contains and encompasses all the rest. Incarnation, as I see it, implies primarily the tremendous concept of the sacramental nature of the material world. Unlike the Platonist, the Christian does *not* affirm the unreality and the insignificance of matter. Christianity proclaims the holiness of the material. It involves the glad acceptance and the consecration of sensuality — including that basic aspect of our fleshly existence, the mystery of sex. This is precisely why the traditional Christian unease about sexuality is so ridiculous and so essentially un-Christian. I suppose we ought to be profoundly thankful that Catholic Christianity, despite its attachment to the ascetic tradition and its strange love of celibacy, has nevertheless always affirmed, unlike some forms of Protestantism, that sexual union is a sacrament — a means of grace whereby the very being of God is affirmed — a supernatural channel by which God’s love breaks through into the world!

Christianity, as Albert Schweitzer was always reminding us, is a world and life affirming faith. As the late C.E. Raven says in his little book *Good News of God*, “We live in a world alive, transparent, sacramental; the work of God, the object of his love, the body of his indwelling. It is for us to enjoy. ‘God saw that it was good’ — that is how the story begins; ‘God so loved the

Three basic ideas. The holiness of the material. The acceptance and consecration of sensuality.

Mistaken ideas of what constitutes the essence of Christianity. Not found in traditional doctrines.

world' — that is the secret of its suffering and redemption."

Here is a timely reminder — especially appropriate for the beginning of Holy Week — that Incarnation includes Passion. I use the word in the special sense which it has in the Christian tradition — something from which Unitarians have often been inclined to shy away. Passion is the supreme Christian symbol, proclaiming the mystery of suffering — and 'mystery' here does not mean an insoluble problem. It means rather a sacred revelation, the transcendent symbol of that unconditioned love and eternal self-giving which lie at the very heart of the being of God.

But may I remind you of that most profound comment on the Passion which occurs in Letter to the Hebrews, where the writer says that it was for the joy — mark that! — for the *joy* that was set before him that Jesus endured the Cross, despising the shame!

This is precisely why, for the Christian, life, for all its tragedy and its enigmas, is still first and foremost a celebration — a glad and joyous celebration and not an onerous burden or a bad joke. Our American friends called their hymnbook, first published in the early 1960s, *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*. No doubt, at the time, it seemed very radical and challenging. But it is, in fact, a thoroughly Christian title. It points to an aspect of Christianity which is often forgotten and overlooked. It was L. P. Jacks, was it not, who once spoke of the lost radiance of Christianity. "Christianity," he said, "is the most encouraging, the most joyous, the least repressive and the least forbidding of all the religions of mankind. ... It has its arduous phrases, of course ... But the end of it all is a resurrection and not a burial, a festival and not a funeral, an ascent into the heights and not a lingering in the depths." .... "I came" says the Johannine Christ, "that they might have life, and have it more abundantly."

Look unto the rock — the lost radiance of Christianity!

And what about the great watch-word of our Socinian forefathers of the Minor Reformed Church of Poland — the key-note of the Recovian Catechism of 1604 — *John 17.3*: "This is life eternal — to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou didst send."

Now I am sure that we must believe — some of us will certainly want to believe — that Eternal Life is something which extends beyond the bounds of space and time. But surely the essence of the great Johannine concept of Eternal Life is primarily that profoundly Christian notion of a sacramental quality of life which can be experienced — which *must* be experienced — here and now. Do you know these lines from John Clare's little poem *The Beanfield*:

"Neither in clouds above our sight,  
Nor in far time above our ken,  
Nor in the darkness of the night,  
Nor in rare moments now and then,  
But at this instant on this spot  
By hearth and heath in old and new,  
The common kind of thing is what  
I see God's glory streaming through." ?

And I am sure some of you will already know the superb prayer which that great scientist and theologian, Teilhard de Chardin, offered up in the wastes of the Gobi Desert on Easter Day, 1923 — a prayer wrung from him, as it were, because none of the traditional apparatus of Catholic devotion was available — but which, for that very reason (as I suspect that even he himself felt) was even more profoundly true than the time-honoured eucharistic liturgy:

"Since once again, O Lord, in the steppes of Asia I have no bread, no wine, no altar, I will

Eternal Life in present experience. A poem by John Clare. Teilhard de Chardin's prayer.

Passion the supreme Christian symbol. The Celebration of Life. The lost radiance of Christianity.

raise myself to the pure majesty of Reality, and I will offer to You, I your priest, upon the altar of the entire earth, the labour and anguish of the world. Receive, O Lord, this host, which the whole creation, moved by You, presents at this new dawn.”

Look unto the rock from whence ye were hewn!

Let us not be afraid to affirm our Christian roots. Many of us are fond of claiming nowadays that we are outside the mainstream — and with that I certainly have no quarrel. The Christianity which we affirm is *not* mainstream Christianity. It is *Radical* Christianity. But may I remind you of something which is often overlooked? The radical is, by definition, one who looks to the roots of his own tradition. I remember a science-lesson in my far-off school days, when the chemistry master, seeking to enliven a dissertation on the scientific use of the term radical, asked: What is the connexion between a radical and a radish? The answer is that both come from the Latin RADIX!

It may be that the idea of Radical Christianity is now less popular than it was in the 60s — but it is still a concept to conjure with. One of the best discussions of what is involved was contained in a radio talk given by John Robinson, the then Bishop of Woolwich, in February 1963, shortly before the publication of his notorious *Honest to God*. Quite by chance, I happened to hear it. It was subsequently published in *The Listener*, and the substance of it also appears in that excellent SCM paperback *The Honest to God Debate*.

Robinson begins by defining radicalism as the built-in challenge to any establishment, institutionalism or orthodoxy. Its key-note, he says, is the famous phrase ascribed to Jesus: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Radicalism believes that persons are more important than principles.

Robinson compares the radical with the reformist

on the one hand and the revolutionary on the other. The reformist, he says, only seeks to overhaul the institution and to titivate the orthodoxy. The revolutionary ruthlessly seeks to overthrow everything (e.g. Robespierre and Lenin). But both the radical and the revolutionary rightly regard the reformist as the enemy. The reformist is the enemy of the radical because he lulls people into believing that a revolution is not necessary.

But Robinson also insists that the radical is the true revolutionary — just because he looks to the roots — especially the roots of his own tradition. He is an insider — not an outsider. He must love his own tradition. He must weep over Jerusalem, even as he pronounces its doom.

I hope I do not need to underline the supreme appropriateness of that last comment as we meet together here on Palm Sunday! Luke tells us, in his account of the first Palm Sunday, that Jesus wept over Jerusalem because he had a perceptive awareness of the tragic situation of those who do not know the time of their visitation. Could this, I wonder, be part of the sad story of the decline on Unitarianism?

On my desk this year, there is a tear-off calendar with a thought for each day. I was recently confronted with this: “There are people who make things happen, people who watch things happen — and people who don’t know anything did happen!” Why have we not seized the God-given opportunity recently presented to us of proclaiming our Unitarian faith as Radical Christianity — explicit and unequivocal Radical Christianity?

I am sure that this is an appropriate enterprise not merely for those who instinctively regard themselves as Christian. The radical theologians of to-day not only challenge all the doctrines attacked by traditional Unitarians (Trinity, unique incarnation, original guilt, etc.); they also insist that we must explore in depth all our traditional images of God (including the prepost-

John Robinson’s definitions: the radical, the reformist, the revolutionary. The time of visitation for radicals?

Radical Christianity.  
Radical-radix-root. The  
Honest to God Debate.

Admitting "Christian Atheism". Socially radical Christianity. Christians and Marxism. The Magnificat as social radicalism.

erous notion of an indispensable maleness). Radical theology is even willing to admit to the paradoxical possibility of Christian Atheism! It also gladly acknowledges the tremendous relevance and importance of the great non-Christian World Faiths.

Let's not forget either that Radical Christianity is socially as well as theologically radical — disturbingly so for the not so silent majority of complacent and conservative Christians. Who was it who provided immediate office accommodation for the London representatives of the African National Congress when their premises were recently bombed? — The British Council of Churches! We Unitarians have always prided ourselves on our radical social witness. In the 18th and 19th Centuries we really were in the vanguard of the age — much less so to-day, I fear. Look unto the rock!

Christianity must mean liberation as well as incarnation. That great 20th Century Christian philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, true representative of the Russian Orthodox tradition, always insisted that Christians need to take Marx very seriously — a theme recently taken up by Mr Tony Benn. And why not? Marxism also is deeply rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Remember the *Magnificat*, the Song of Mary: "He has put down the mighty from their seat and exalted them of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away!" (Longfellow's narrative poem *King Robert of Sicily* relates a timely story of the chastening experience which came to a monarch rash enough to challenge the social radicalism of the *Magnificat*!)

Could this be the way out of our identity crisis? Can we accept the time of our visitation and fearlessly proclaim our Christian roots?

But let me make one thing quite clear. One of the reasons why I am attracted to the ideal of Radical Christianity is precisely because it spurns dogmatism and insists on the inevitability of uncertainty and divers-

ity. My diagnosis and my scenario for advance therefore must inevitably remain tentative. One of the most striking observations in Robinson's defence of Radicalism is the following: "The radical cannot claim to have the whole truth. To remember that should keep him humble, for the besetting sin of the radical is self-righteousness, as complacency is of the reformist, and ruthlessness of the revolutionary."

Yes, alas! Perhaps part of the evidence for the view that we Unitarians are essentially radical lies in the fact that we all are, in our various ways, much given to self-righteousness and to the very illiberal conviction that we — or our own particular group — know all the answers! Surely the essence of our tradition is a willingness to admit the viability of alternatives and the possibility of error. The true radical, if he is honest, will always admit to a certain amount of agnosticism. Perhaps it is not so much Christian Radicalism that we need as Christian Agnosticism. We hear much about man's hunger for certainty — the quest for assurance and authority. Let's not forget that there is also a hunger for uncertainty — or to be more exact — for a faith which admits the possibility of uncertainty. I believe that someone once said, very wisely, that the essence of Protestantism was a willingness to be in uncertainty with God. It is certainly the essence of Christian Agnosticism. I always seem to be reading nowadays articles by wistful agnostics who appear to be searching for a faith which admits the possibility of doubt.

In his recent very striking Ferguson Lectures at Manchester University, which he entitled 'Faith and Ambiguity', Prof. Stewart Sutherland of King's College, London, stressed the importance for our age of those whom he called the men and women on the borders — those such as Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, David Hume, Albert Camus and Simone Weill — who, while searching for faith, admit the possibility of uncertainty and ambiguity.

And can we afford to overlook the amazing

The attractions of Radical Christianity, and the dangers. Admitting agnosticism and uncertainty. Christian Agnosticism. Faith and Ambiguity.



success of Gerald Priestland's recent radio series? He himself has suggested that the clue is to be found in an increasing awareness in our own day that Christianity is not, as used to be thought, a matter of unreasonable certainty, but rather a matter of reasonable uncertainty. Wouldn't this make a great slogan for Unitarian advance? Can we dare to become the Church which proclaims Christianity as a matter of reasonable uncertainty?

But at any rate, let us continue to encourage uncertainty and divergence — and even disagreement. What's wrong with diversity and disagreement? Surely that has always been an essential part of our tradition. I devoutly hope that I shall always be ready to listen gladly to the arguments of those who challenge my own assumptions — especially of those from our own household of faith.

It was St Thomas Aquinas, apparently, who once said: "We must love them both — those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have laboured in the search for truth, and both have helped us in the finding of it." Would that Christianity as a whole had acted in accordance with that principle! But surely *we* can — and must.

At the end of the 18th Century, Joseph Priestley and Richard Price agreed on many things. But they differed profoundly on the question of materialism and freewill and engaged in spirited public debate, remaining all the while good friends and colleagues — good Unitarians. Look unto the rock!

And let us beware of the strange notion that we must never change our views — or even some of our most cherished assumptions. We are fond of quoting — and singing — those words attributed to the other John Robinson — the Pilgrim Father: "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word." We tend to forget that new light and truth can only come to those with open minds.

In the preface to the 1665 edition of the Racovian Catechism, Joachim Stegmann and Andrew Wiszowaty wrote:—

"Let each man be free to express his own mind without wronging or attacking anyone. We do not need to blush if our Church advances in some things. We ought not in every case to cry out, 'We believe, I stand fast, here I plant my foot, I will not allow myself to be moved'."

Ponder those words very carefully! We ought *not*, say these two great 17th Century Socinians "to cry out, we believe, we stand fast, we will not be moved!"

Dare we say this to-day? Could it yet be our task and our privilege to embody the ideal of radical Christian Agnosticism in a living religious tradition — in a faith which, in some words once used by our Young People's League, combines reverence for what is best in the past with an adventurous faith in the future?

That great Unitarian scholar, Earl Morse Wilbur, as we often remind ourselves, found the essence of our tradition in freedom, reason and tolerance — a timely reminder perhaps of the considerable debt which we owe to Renaissance Humanism — to the tradition of that great Christian scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam — far less honoured amongst us than he ought to be. This is why I make no apology for ending with some further words from one who, I suggest, belongs to that same tradition — Teilhard de Chardin. You will find the words in one of his letters:—

"I still see only one way out — to keep going forward, believing ever more firmly. May the Lord only keep alive within me a passionate delight in the world — and a great gentleness — and may he help me to be, to the very end, fully human!"

The Racovian Catechism and daring to accept necessary changes. A debt owed to Renaissance Humanism. Concluding words and hopes.

Reasonable uncertainty.  
Diversity and disagreement  
necessary and  
good. Loving those with  
whom we disagree.

Edrychwch ar y graig y'ch naddwyd!

Look unto the rock from whence ye were hewn  
and to the pit from whence ye were digged!

*Amen*

