

# Ipswich Unitarians

## THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT: WITNESSING TO THE LIBERAL FAITH

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Not counting those who were here on a temporary basis, this congregation has had total of thirty-nine ministers since the first, Owen Stockton, was appointed in 1672. When this Meeting House was opened, three hundred and ten years ago tomorrow on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1700, the second of those ministers, John Fairfax, preached the sermon - which we are fortunate enough to have in its entirety in its published form.

A great many sermons have been preached from this pulpit since then, and if we had them all – and the time to read them! – we would be able to trace the theological and spiritual evolution that took this congregation from a theologically orthodox but relatively liberal, late 17<sup>th</sup>-century English Presbyterianism, through intervening phases such as Arianism and Socinianism, to the Unitarianism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This Unitarianism remains liberal Christian at its roots but is inclusive of a diversity of personal beliefs. Some might find their focus more in a religious humanism, in the encounter with other faith traditions, or in our relationship with the natural world. In some cases – such as my own – faith may well embrace all of these to a greater or lesser extent, and see no conflict between them! But although we don't have the sermons of all those ministers from the past three hundred and ten years, we know enough about them to see how things developed and changed, and how most of them, at least, contributed to the stream in which we still flow.

Stockton and Fairfax were true Dissenters in the original sense – men of principle who refused to conform to the Church of England as it had been reconstituted in 1662, following the Restoration of the Monarchy two years earlier. They were Presbyterians and so declined to submit to the system of bishops and archbishops or to use the 'new' prayer book. They were reluctant Dissenters, though, with no desire to split the Church, but their principles outweighed the very considerable pressures to conform. It is thus to Stockton and Fairfax and their congregation that we owe our distinct identity, not as Unitarians, but as Nonconformists, as Dissenters from an episcopalian national Church 'by law established'. It was the freedom they claimed that allowed us, as a community, to change and evolve down the years in accordance with the promptings of conscience.

I think it is fair to say that we have moved a very long way from the theology of John Fairfax, but the impetus for that process of change had already begun. Although he was not a Unitarian and, by our standards, occupied a clearly orthodox position theologically, there were aspects of what he said in that opening sermon that show the distinction between his liberal Presbyterianism and the more conservative Calvinistic form that prevailed elsewhere, such as in Scotland, at the time.

When Fairfax talked about the Fall of man in Eden – of 'original sin', as it is known – he was quite orthodox. But whereas the Calvinist believed that only the Elect, the pre-destined few, would be saved and the rest irredeemably damned, Fairfax clearly implies that salvation is possible for all – not only through the sacrifice of Christ but also through the agency of another aspect of the Divine. He wrote of,

*'The other [Promise] of the Spirit, to work effectually in the Hearts of Sinners, whereby they might be renewed again after the Image of God in Holiness, and made meet to be Partakers of the Glory to which he did design them.'* ('Primitiae Synagogae', pp. 10-11)

# Ipswich Unitarians

Salvation as a universal possibility is thus affirmed, so giving hope to all. And it is not only in their hearts that God is at work among men and women. Fairfax also says,

*'God by his Spirit, ...enlighteneth dark minds, humbleth proud hearts, persuadeth unbelieving and disobedient Sinners and bringeth them into the bond of his Covenant, that they may be Saved.'* (ibid. pp. 11-12)

Not only is the Spirit at work in all human hearts, but what Fairfax calls, 'the light of reason' – divinely given – is at work in our minds too. This liberal stance, by the standards of the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century, seems to be confirmed by some words spoken at Fairfax's funeral, in the autumn of 1700, by his friend and colleague, Samuel Bury:

*'Let us never impale religion within parties...Let religion in its own latitude be the common bond of all union, and whatever differences may be amongst us in smaller matters, yet let us be lovers of all good men.'*

John Fairfax, minister to this congregation for twenty years, was succeeded by Samuel Baxter, who has the distinction of having been minister here for longer than anyone else – a total of thirty-nine years!

The next 'landmark' ministry here that I want to mention is that of Thomas Scott, from 1737 to 1766. During Scott's ministry we see clearly that the shift towards Unitarianism was already under weigh in the congregation, and that even if Scott himself didn't necessarily share it, he didn't oppose it either. Around 1740 a man named John Notcutt joined the congregation. His father was the distinguished minister at the theologically orthodox Congregationalist Meeting House in Tacket Street. John himself had entered the ministry, serving a congregation in Cambridge, but he had resigned when his increasingly unorthodox beliefs were no longer acceptable there. He had become a Socinian. That is to say, he had become Unitarian in his theology. Returning to Ipswich, he didn't rejoin his father's congregation in Tacket Street but came here, beginning a family association that continues to this day.

What we learn from this is that Unitarian beliefs were held and at least tolerated here by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1750s, when the young Joseph Priestley was struggling through a disastrous first ministry in nearby Needham Market and was feeling his way towards a clearly Unitarian belief-system, it was again Thomas Scott who gave him a welcome (albeit cautious!) here while virtually every other minister in the area gave him the cold shoulder. Scott's ministry, then, not only saw the beginnings of the shift to Unitarianism in this congregation, it also saw the manifestation of that spirit of tolerance which we prize as one of our principal values. And one other interesting point about Thomas Scott. He was, apparently, an Arabic scholar who studied the scriptures of Islam, so showing an interest in other faiths that later became characteristic of Unitarians.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and even before the legal penalties for being a Unitarian were repealed by Parliament, ministers here like Thomas Drummond and Thomas Rees were avowedly – even aggressively – Unitarian. Rees later translated the Racovian Catechism, one of the most important of historic Unitarian texts, from Latin into English.

The ministry here had its ups and downs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One minister was dismissed, probably because of gambling debts, but stubbornly refused to go! Another very publicly and very embarrassingly renounced Unitarianism, leaving it to his very capable successor, Thomas Felix Thomas, to get things back on an even keel. These aberrations apart, though, things seem to have proceeded steadily enough in this 'age of Martineau'. At the end of the century, one of our ministers, William Jellie, left to become the first Unitarian minister in New Zealand.

# Ipswich Unitarians

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the minister here was the artist, Lucking Tavener, one of whose paintings hangs in our Upper Room. To judge by the hymn books and other worship material in use here at the time, ministers and congregation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were well within the broad Unitarian consensus – liberal Christian and Theistic – that had emerged from the theological debates of the 19<sup>th</sup>. By the 1930s, though, following the crisis of liberal theology after the horrors of the First World War, new political factors were affecting the ministry here.

John Lewis, with his strongly left-wing views, attracted people with similar political opinions, but this had the effect of alienating many existing members of the congregation. After he had left, not only to leave the Unitarian ministry but to become a prominent Communist, his successor, Joseph Burton, also caused a rift in the congregation. His publicly expressed pacifist beliefs upset many after the outbreak of the Second World War and he was dismissed by the trustees. This, in turn, caused some members to resign, believing as they did that Burton's right, as a Unitarian minister, freely to hold and express his opinions, had been denied.

Into this unhappy situation came a minister who was to break the mould in another way - and that related to gender. Unitarians in this country have had women in our ministry since 1904. One, Rosalind Lee, although never minister here, was a member of the Notcutt family, and also served as General Assembly President in 1940-41. But in 1943, Winifred Brown was appointed minister here – the first and, so far, the only woman to be so. She had a tough time, it must be said, with a congregation struggling under wartime conditions and still suffering the aftermath of earlier problems. But her appointment was witness to the congregation's willingness to affirm its support for women in ministry at a time when few, if any, other denominations did so. Winifred Brown was the first woman minister of any denomination in Ipswich.

The immediate post-war period saw something of a crisis here, with short ministries and much reduced numbers in the congregation. As the 1950s progressed, though, the determined efforts of Philip Hewett and then of Nick Teape – along with those of the congregation – began to turn things around. And as that brings us well within living memory this historical overview can go no further.

Three hundred and ten years of ministry have seen personal crises, just as they have seen crises arising from points of principle, but they have also seen the steady development of a tradition. Theology has changed and broadened without breaking continuity with the liberal Christian roots from which we sprang. A commitment to upholding the Radical Dissenting principles of freedom, reason and tolerance has – although sometimes tested – remained firm. The affirmation of the rights of conscience and the building of loving community have been maintained and strengthened, and we have played a part in creating a wider society in which religious diversity is respected as never before.

But there is no room for complacency. Forces are at work that would set people against each other on the grounds of religion. Faith itself, including – perhaps especially – liberal faith, struggles to make itself known and heard in a climate of widespread indifference and increasing secularist hostility. And yet, both for the values and vision derived from Christianity and for the willingness to look beyond it and find common cause with all people of goodwill, that witness is as necessary now as it ever was. As a community of the liberal faith, let us reaffirm that witness and commit ourselves anew to creating here an outpost of the Kingdom of God, a forerunner of the Commonwealth of Earth.

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