

Warwick Unitarians High Street Chapel December 2022

As we drift into December's chill and mists, let us not forget the truly terrible conditions that the battered people of Ukraine are already experiencing. The aggressors, having retreated to the far side of natural borders like the Dnipro River, have cleared the way for some extraordinarily violent bombing of the rest of the country. They thought less than a year ago that they would be able to convince the civilian population to prefer life under their benign control. But now they find that they can only resort to callously bombing them into submission and then blaming the weather if people die of cold and starvation as their power supplies are wrecked and heating and lighting fail, in a country where the temperatures can fall way lower than ours ever do. Despite any privations that our own crises and disastrous cost-of-living problems are causing us here, we must think of the oppressed in war-torn Ukraine with love and offer them all our prayers and our ardent good wishes for their safety during a long and bitter winter. And ask ourselves what more we can do to help them.

But Christmas is coming again here too. Despite the cost-of-living crisis, children's expectations always rise at this time of year. In the good years many parents felt able to be generous and responded positively to the barrage of advertising and resultant pleading. The advertising is no less dramatic this year, and the clamour for happiness no less loud. But the family wallet is much more stretched, so finding that thing that will bring smiles to young faces will be that much harder. The congregation managed a small collection of Shoebox Gifts to contribute to the Helping Hands campaign to provide some semblance of a present for some of the homeless and the most deprived families in Warwick and Leamington, and HH was very grateful, though they never have enough to satisfy demand.

Christmas is often a bit of a challenge for Unitarians, but we tend to bury our doubts about the literal truths of the Biblical story, preferring to follow the symbolism and the allegories that are implied in all the different stories and parables that we read there. Sometimes it is hard to focus on the meaning of the original stories that we celebrate with carols and readings at this time of year as we are besieged by a rather more commercial spirit round about us. The Census returns for last year have just been published and reveal that that Christianity would appear to be somewhat in retreat in the UK. Much has been made of the fact that such a large percentage of the population now does not describe itself as Christian or even a believer at all. Yet Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ, envelops everyone.

A dramatisation of the 1843 Dickens novel *A Christmas Carol* has been produced as the brilliant centrepiece of the Royal Shakespeare Company's programme in Stratford this winter. The story is supposedly well known – though what we tend to remember are only parts, often the more moving scenes, of a more complex book. Dickens was responding to the social changes of his time, including the effects of industrialisation on the poorest. And he was also writing at a time of increasing questioning of the absolute *truths* of the Bible. Charles Darwin (another Unitarian associate) rocked that boat when he presented his

evolutionary theories just a few years later after many years of study, totally at odds with a literal reading of, for example, the Book of Genesis. Dickens was closely linked to the Unitarians, and was a member of an important London Unitarian Chapel. Unitarians believed that religion should make a difference in the world and were often at the centre of social justice and community work. “Deeds speak louder than words” was a common Unitarian saying. Dickens involved himself with many of the most prominent Unitarian thinkers of the time and their projects. Indeed, the central philosophy of much of his work at this time was of charity and altruism, highlighting the effects of poverty in an uncaring society. He was “critical of any religion that did not seek to relieve poverty”.

So where that does that leave us this Christmas? Do our deeds speak louder than our words?

At the very least we should be thinking of our friends in Ukraine and of the increasing numbers of people in our own country who face levels of poverty and destitution that even Dickens would have criticised. And we should be doing whatever we can to alleviate their situation.

As a Unitarian Chapel, we need to look for ways to do more.