

**SERMON**

**"THE EMPTY SPACE IN THE MIDDLE"**

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[This is an edited version of the sermon delivered by the Rev Dr Phillip Hewett on 26 March 1989 in the Auckland Unitarian Church during the Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Association.]

Come back with me in imagination more than two thousand years to a distant country, in the days when the Roman Empire dominated Europe and was extending its influence into Africa and Asia. The Roman Empire's armies had swept through one country after another - sometimes easily, sometimes only after overcoming strong resistance. Pompey had had to fight a surprisingly difficult campaign as he moved down the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean Sea into the small Jewish state which had maintained a precarious independence for only a few years. But, eventually, Roman might had crushed the opposition, the city walls of Jerusalem had been breached and Pompey's men moved in.

There remained only the inner citadel, the fortified Temple hill on top of which stood the Temple itself, the centre and focus of the people's life and religion. After a desperate struggle this too was taken by storm, the last resistance was beaten, and Pompey stood at the Temple doors.

He knew: inside the Temple would be the secret of the stubborn resistance these people had put up against overwhelming odds. He had seen many temples in the course of his career. Most of them had been imposing structures. Most of them had been built with no expense spared so that the gods of that particular people could be provided with a fitting abode. No doubt he wondered what kind of god he would find in this temple in Jerusalem. Would it be cast in human form? Or would it be a fantastic representation of animal forms, as in the temples of Egypt?

He gave the signal, his men burst open the doors, and he strode in. They moved through the outer court, to the holy place, the centre of sacrifices, the sanctum to be entered only by the priests. Beyond it lay the Holy of Holies, separated by heavy curtains. This inmost part was to be entered only by the High Priest on the most solemn occasions.

The Romans went over to the great curtains and swept them aside, to let Pompey walk boldly in. A gasp went up from everyone as they saw what was inside. Nothing. No image. No statue. Not even a picture. Nothing. The Holy of Holies was empty - quite empty - and there was no evidence that it had ever been otherwise. This great temple, which had been defended so tenaciously, had nothing but an empty space at its centre.

There is some powerful symbolism here. It reflects something that has recurred time and again in human history and experience. It recurs especially in those aspects of human history and experience which we today are most likely to find helpful as we make our own way through life.

The Meditation Room in the United Nations Headquarters in New York is notable in that, although not entirely empty, it is devoid of human artefacts. At the centre of the United Nations Headquarters Meditation Room there is simply a rock, an uncarved rock. That's all.

Think of a Roman Catholic church, and the kind of niche on the front of its building which is likely to have in it a statue of the Virgin Mary, or perhaps of Mary and the infant Jesus, or of the crucified Christ, or of Christ exhibiting his sacred heart.

The old Unitarian Church on Sherbrooke Street in Montreal, Canada, was destroyed by fire in 1987. It had been built in the traditional mock Gothic style reminiscent of the Middle Ages. High up on the front

of the building was a niche, the kind of niche which one might expect to see on a Catholic church. But on the Montreal Unitarian Church, the niche did not have any statue in it.

On the Montreal Unitarian Church, the niche was empty. Notice: empty, not vacant. There is a difference. The Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem also was empty, not vacant.

There is a powerful, meaningful symbolism in both cases.

Pompey had expected to see something in the Holy of Holies - in much the same way that a casual passer-by looking up from Sherbrooke Street in Montreal might have expected to see something in the niche on the front of the Unitarian Church. But the symbolism of the forms of worship in both these very different places did not include seeing something. There was nothing there to be seen.

The empty space does not appear only where some people might expect to see something. It also appears where they might expect to hear something.

People who visit Unitarian churches only occasionally, perhaps for the first time, having been accustomed to the observances in churches where the word "God" is heard many times in the course of every service, sometimes comment that it seems to be used much less often in Unitarian worship services, as though we went out of our way to avoid it. They notice its absence.

Words, of course, are symbols, just as pictures and statues are symbols. And there **is**, so to speak, an empty space in the middle of our religious vocabulary. That empty space exists in the middle of our religious vocabulary for much the same sorts of reasons as there was an empty space in the Holy of Holies in the Temple

in Jerusalem, or in that niche on the front of the Montreal Unitarian Church. Whether Pompey noticed this in his rather crude religious explorations is not recorded, but it is possible that he might have done.

In their more stringent forms of religious observance,

the ancient Hebrews had a much stricter taboo on the use of the word "God" than we have. Their taboo was expressed in the third of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." In other words, be extremely careful where and when and how you use it.

In traditional Judaism, those who took their religion most seriously avoided the use of the Holy Name completely. They used circumlocutions such as "The One Who Is". Even the expression "The Lord" originated as a way of evading the use of the word "God", although "The Lord" had all the drawbacks of being a metaphor drawn from the social structures maintained by human beings. A verbal idol can be just as dangerous as a visual one. It narrows and constricts one's field of vision, one's range of thinking, one's depth of worship.

The Meditation Room at United Nations Headquarters in New York likewise maintains silence where words might be restrictive, might create division. We Unitarians have chosen the same path.

In recent years, concerns among Unitarians over the use of words that connote only one gender - usually the male -- are only the latest in a long series of attempts to avoid being confined within a restrictive framework by the use of words.

The front covers of the blue service books of Upper Chapel, Sheffield UK - *Unitarian Orders of Worship* - had a note explaining that, where appropriate, the

language was changed in order to make it more inclusive.

We can't avoid words completely, although the sharing of silence is an important part of the worship in many - perhaps most - Unitarian congregations throughout Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

We can't avoid words altogether, but we do well to remember always that our words are no more than nets which we cast into the vast ocean of life in our attempts to capture meanings. And we do well to remember that any success we achieve in our endeavour to capture meanings will depend upon the strength of the nets and upon their mesh. We must not suppose that in that way we will find all the answers. Nor must we suppose that by the vain repetition of words we shall attain to greater meanings.

The Indian poet Kabir wrote:

That which you see is not:  
and for that which is, you have no words.  
Some contemplate the formless,  
and others meditate on form,  
but those who are wise know  
that Brahma is beyond both.  
The divine beauty is not seen of the eye; the  
divine metre is not heard of the ear.

And Goethe wrote:

With the people, and especially with the clergy, who have Him daily upon their tongues, God becomes a phrase, a mere name, which they utter without any accompanying idea. But if they were penetrated with His greatness, they would rather be dumb, and for very reverence would not dare to name Him.

And D H Lawrence:

Forever nameless  
Forever unknown  
Forever unconceived  
Forever unrepresented  
yet forever felt in the soul.

This is where the heart of religion is: not in words or pictures or images, but in the feeling in the soul. People may argue endlessly about words and about dogmas expressed in words. They may argue about the appropriateness of pictures and images and symbols. What it all comes back to eventually is the feeling in the soul.

It comes back eventually to the ways in which we can express and share the feeling in the soul. In the words of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Christian classic The Cloud of Unknowing: "Thought cannot comprehend God. ... So, then, ... reject all clear conceptualisations whenever they arise, during the ... work of contemplative love."

"The work of contemplative love." That's really a prescription for the practice of prayer.

Martin Buber asserted that we cannot talk *about* God; we can only talk *to* God. We must use the second person, **Thou**, not the third person, *He (or She or It)*.

There is more - much more - in the nature of ultimate reality, the ground of all being, than can ever be encompassed within any word or image. That was the insight that guided the Jews of more than two thousand years ago when they constructed their Holy of Holies.

It was empty, but it was not vacant. It was certainly the shrine of the Most High, but they **did** not dare to name the Most High; nor did they dare to make any graven image of it.

I hope that we might have a glimpse of that insight here, when we do not constantly talk about God but are nevertheless aware of being in the presence of - and surrounded by - a sense of the mystery and the wonder of being, transcending all our little human schemes and systems, "yet forever felt in the soul."

We need to be clear about what we are doing. There are dangers. One danger is something which has often been encountered in the history of our Unitarian movement. That is the danger that some people will say that, because we do not give our assent to their picture of God - I might almost say their caricature of God - then we do not have a God; we are atheists. Christians have often said that about Buddhists.

Paradoxically, the same thing was said by the Romans about both the Jews and the Christians. A further aspect of the same danger is that some Unitarians seem to suppose that the popular pictures - the caricatures - of God are the only ones which might be used to fill the empty space, and in rejecting those pictures/ caricatures call themselves atheists. It all becomes an argument over words and pictures, and we need to try to move beyond the limitations of such symbols.

There is a second danger. As a famous metaphor puts it, symbols can be a finger pointing the way. Without something to point the way, we may too easily become lost.

Throughout the history of religions, the desire for pictures and images and definitions keeps appearing. Even while Moses was up on the mountain, to return with the Ten Commandments - one of which prohibits the making of graven images - what were the people down on the plain doing?

They were busy making an image of the Golden Calf.

Is there something in our human nature that leads us to do this? Are the realms of nameless contemplation, the concepts of love and compassion and beauty and truth too abstract and rarefied, so that we feel a need to have something more concrete and visible?

That's a question we need to take seriously. We can't avoid symbols completely; nor would we wish to. But there is a danger of dwelling on the symbol itself, and getting no further. One way to avoid this danger is to change the symbols frequently. We can use different pronouns when speaking about God: He, She - even It - or Martin Buber's Thou. Some people suggest that we should use the word "God" as a verb rather than as a substantive noun.

Or we can use silence: wordless contemplation, aspiration, meditation.

Silent worship - the "worship" is as important as the "silent" - can unify rather than divide; it can bring people into full community rather than separating us into sects and parties.

Although the temptation to make a Golden Calf is always there, we should try to maintain our Holy of Holies as an empty space in the middle.

Not only in the space outside us, which we see and inhabit; but also in the space within us: there needs to be an emptiness that is not vacant, an emptiness that is full of potentiality or the actuality of the presence that will activate and vitalise our



Within our souls there needs to be an empty space that responds to the emptiness of the Holy of Holies as a magnetic needle responds to the north pole.

As Henri-Frederic Amiel wrote, more than a century ago:  
Let mystery have its place in you. ... Leave a little  
fallow corner in your heart ready for any seeds the  
wind may bring. ... Keep a place in your heart for  
the unexpected guest, an altar for the unknown God.

Amen.