

SERMON

"JAN HUS AND THE FLAMING CHALICE:  
THE STORY OF OUR SYMBOL PART 1"

The Unitarian symbol is usually referred to as the "Flaming Chalice". Some people prefer the name "The Chalice and Flame".

It comes in many sizes and shapes. In Britain, what is often called the "chunky chalice" was adopted by the person who was in charge of General Assembly publications in the 1960s. It is the one with which I was most familiar, and it was the one which I used on my own stationery and for the Sydney Unitarian Church and the Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Association.

Some people consider the chunky chalice to be undignified and even uninspiring. At the same time as the chunky chalice appeared in Great Britain, the British Gas Board adopted a little chap with a similar cheeky flame as its symbol and called it "Mr Therm".

The Flaming Chalice which is used for my pendant, and on my tie, has a much more elegant slim stem and a shallower cup, and a nearly straight flame.

The general shape - whichever one is used - conveys the impression of a cross, to remind us of our roots in the Christian faith. Some people who know I am a minister assume that my pendant is a crucifix. Some who know of my involvement in the Air Force and the Air Training Corps assume that it is an aeroplane.

The chalice signifies sharing and fellowship. Some - not all - Unitarian congregations hold communion services (the "shared breaking of bread"), either occasionally or regularly. Most Unitarian congregations - in my experience - seem to enjoy eating and drinking together: the cup of tea/coffee after service; afternoon tea as part of meetings; pot-luck meals. We share as part of our fellowship.

The flame can symbolise a number of things:

- aspiration, and the lifting of hands and hearts in prayer
- links with other faiths, including the Zoroastrian, in which fire has been used as part of their ritual
- sacrifice - a crude ancient practice, but in its spiritual sense one of the finest ingredients of human character
- the warmth of love
- the light of truth for which we seek
- the inner light of conscience and reason and individual religious experience.

So, the combination of the Chalice and the Flame - the Flaming Chalice - provides a fine logo for Unitarians. However, the historic origin is not widely enough known even among our own congregations. It is something which we should remember, and talk about, and cherish and celebrate, and teach to our children.

The Unitarian Church in the Czech Republic has not forgotten its origin, for the story of our Flaming Chalice starts in Czechoslovakia six hundred years ago.

Jan Hus (Jon/John Huss) was born in 1369 in the village of Huscinez in Bohemia from which his name is derived. We know very little about his family background or his early life, except that apparently he worked his way through the University of Prague by singing in the streets. Busking by university students is nothing new. Martin Luther did the same, a hundred years later.

He was not much of a scholar. In fact, his professors complained that he wasted too much time playing chess. (When I was at university and teachers college in Adelaide, I wasted time playing bridge, and being involved in theatre.)

He graduated in philosophy and theology, and was ordained as a priest in 1401. He entered the priesthood, not from any great sense of vocation or excess of idealism, but because he considered the office one in which he could pursue his studies and interests. He wrote to a friend: "I choose the office of priest because I have in mind a safe shelter, and goodly apparel, and a comfortable living." Ah, those were the good old days, perhaps!

Hus was later made Rector of the University of Prague, and appointed University Preacher. That meant that he preached in the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, which had been founded ten years before his appointment as a place for preaching in the Czech language. The word Bethlehem was used, not in its geographical sense as the place where Jesus was born, but in its literal meaning: House of Bread.

The Bethlehem Chapel was indeed a House of Bread, because in it the people were to be nourished: nourished by learning the Bible stories, hearing the Bible itself and being taught about God and religion in their own native language, so that they might really understand. In other churches, the services and the sermons were all in Latin, by and for the priests alone.

In Bethlehem Chapel, the preaching was for all people. Jan Hus spoke to the people's hearts, and they thronged to hear him. He became very successful and the chapel was often crowded. Some records refer to people climbing up to the rafters, so that they could find a place from which to hear him.

Perhaps those were, indeed, the good old days.

Part of Jan Hus's success probably has something to do with the fact that, as well as preaching in everyday Czech, rather than in incomprehensible or unfamiliar Latin, he talked about everyday things. In modern parlance, he talked about the here and now.

He spoke to the age in which he lived, and to the feelings and concerns of the people who gathered there in the Bethlehem Chapel - the House of Bread.

He did not give dreary sermons about theology or official church doctrine. In the copies of his sermons which have been preserved, there is hardly any mention of theological matters. Hus himself said: "If God had intended himself to be revealed through theology, we would all have been born with doctors' degrees."

His preaching in the Czech language was not only an attraction to the ordinary people. It was also a bold political statement. The University of Prague, of which he was Rector (like Chancellor), was run under an ancient system. Students and faculty members were organised according to their country of origin: university officers were also chosen proportionately by national origin. (Proportional representation existed that long ago!)

At the beginning of the 15th century, the University of Prague had predominantly German, French and Italian students. So, their ethnic compatriots ran the university itself. Of the ten Trustees, only one was Czech. The interests of the Czech students had been usurped by western European scholars; both the university and the town were seething with unrest under this divided and foreign rule. The Czechs were pushing for control of the university, and Hus championed their cause; and eventually the Czechs were able to assert themselves and gain control.

The Germans, the French and the Italians, enraged, walked out. They packed up and left. Their departure meant that Hus was Rector of a mere shadow of a university, but under his leadership it regained its former size within a few years and became a Czech university for the Czech people.

The issue at the University had been one of self-determination, of community control. At the same time, self-determination was an important issue in other ways. Hus challenged the stranglehold which the Roman Catholic Church was exercising in religious and intellectual circles, so he also became unpopular with Church authorities.

The Roman Catholic Church still owned over one-half of all land in Europe, and it imposed heavy taxes. The peasants had begun to notice their tax burden, and to care about it enough to start getting organised against the financial drain.

Matters were made worse by the scandal of the Papal Schism. The Pope had moved from Rome to France. There were actually two rival Popes. Indeed, throughout the whole of Jan Hus's life, there were at least two popes (or claimants to the position) at any one time. And of course, each Pope sent to every city his own bishops and archbishops.

That meant that there were two church establishments to be supported in every city. If you lived on one side of town, but supported the other Pope, you could end up paying two lots of church taxes. It was a mess.

Even within families, there was often division over which Pope to support - a precursor to the Cavaliers and Roundheads, the war of the Roses, and American Civil War.

It was a mess, and various attempts were made to correct the mess. The Council of Pisa in 1389 was one such attempt, when the Church fathers came together to solve the problem by electing one new Pope to replace the two. The only problem was that the other two refused to resign; so, by 1410 there were three Popes.

Not surprisingly, this confusion led many people to question the state of their church. By 1410, the Church itself was worried, and ordered that all books which contained such questionings of her authority and behaviour had to be burnt. That included several books by Jan Hus, because as well as his challenges to the Church's stranglehold on religious and intellectual matters, Hus and his followers had exposed the way the highest authorities in the Church - cardinals, archbishops and bishops - were exploiting the poor by encouraging superstition and the fear of hell, and exacting payment from them in exchange for forgiveness of their supposed sins. At the same time, those authorities did little to teach the people the elements of Christianity.

A century later, Martin Luther acknowledged his debt to the teachings of Hus.

All the authors of the banned books, including Jan Hus, were declared excommunicated. That was not a popular decision. It was greeted with uproar when it was announced in Czech churches.

In Hus's own church, the Bethlehem Chapel, one Sunday morning the archbishop himself came and stood up in the middle of the service and began to read the decree of excommunication. At that, the congregation picked up the archbishop, complete with robes and mitre, carried him outside and dumped him in the street.

That was hardly the way to win friends and influence people. A papal edict declared that, if Jan Hus did not stop preaching, every bishop and every priest in Prague would be executed. So there! Hus was not prepared to provoke such widespread bloodshed, or to have so many murders on his conscience, so he went into exile. Bethlehem Chapel was torn down by his enemies, but most of the stones were taken from the rubble at night by Hus's supporters. Many of those stones were later built into the walls of Protestant churches in Czechoslovakia, including some which are now Unitarian.

what did Hus say that was so bad, so dangerous?

First: It was a time of great social upheaval. There were many people prophesying the end of the world, and many more people who believed them. The Church itself was teaching that the end of the world was both near and real. After the end of the world there would come the resurrection, which would be limited to the elect sons of God. The Church doctrine was that nobody could tell who were the elect sons of God until the end of the world came, when we would all find out. It was all predestined, but nobody knew just who would be in and who would be out.

Hus taught that the elect sons of God were recognisable here on earth; that they were recognisable now; and that they were recognisable by their morality, by the goodness of their lives.

Moreover, as John Calvin would do later, Hus taught that it was these elect sons of God - these recognisably moral men, who ought to be the rulers here on earth, in preparation for the kingdom.

No wonder the Church authorities - corrupt and power hungry - felt threatened and angered by this Czech preacher.

Second: Hus challenged the Church doctrine on communion. He taught that the communion wine and bread did not magically change into the very blood and body of Christ, but that communion was simply a symbolic memorial meal - a rite of remembrance. Transubstantiation was a myth.

Third: Hus insisted that when Communion was given to his congregation, they should each drink the wine from the chalice as well as take and eat the bread. He had the chalice passed around among the people, symbolising fellowship and his view that every person was as good as the priest. The church had decreed that priests alone should drink the wine, and it had become the standard practice that only the bread was given to the lay-folk, while the priests had to drink up all the consecrated wine. Hus claimed that this was unscriptural. The Church wanted to preserve the priests as superior to the lay people. Hus said that all children of God were equal, and all should share the bread and wine.

There was an added subversive element: passing the cup represented a return to the old Eastern rite of sharing the bread and wine, before the Roman Church had taken over.

An irate prominent churchman named Gerson set out four major objections to Hus's idea of distributing the wine to laymen. (If you listen carefully, you may hear the distant rustle of a stuffed shirt.)

1. Some of the precious blood might be spilt by clumsy laymen. (Priests weren't clumsy.)

2. The blood might become contaminated by coming into contact with the beards of laymen. (The beards of priests were all right because priests were consecrated.)

3. It might become frozen as it was passed around a large church on a cold day.

4. The practice might be seen to indicate that priests and laymen were equal. Which, of course, was exactly what Hus intended it to indicate: that priests and lay people were equal.

Hus wrote:

God needs people who will  
Seek the truth,  
Listen to the truth,  
Teach the truth,  
Love the truth,  
Abide by the truth  
And defend the truth  
Even unto death.

In 1414, Hus's enemies made their move, having amassed as much evidence against him as they could - even spying on him wherever he went, in exile.

He was given a promise of "safe conduct". They would guarantee his safety if he would appear before the Council of Constance. This Council was not so much a court as a conglomeration of a thousand committees, set up as a deliberative body to come up with suggestions for resolving the conflict within the Church - within Christianity as a whole.

Hus arrived in the town of Constance with his safe conduct pass, prepared to offer his reasoned testimony in defence of his teachings.

It is impossible to know just how much faith he had in the value of his safe conduct pass. He had been told that if he refused to go to Constance, the land of his exile would be attacked by the forces of the nobles who supported the Pope. Once again, Hus could not stand by and allow other people to be butchered over his own fight with the Church. So he went.

As soon as he arrived, he was taken directly to a dungeon, and chained hands and feet to the wall. He told his friends that he was not surprised.

The authorities would not allow Hus to make even one appearance before any of the committees of the Council of Constance. His friends did manage to get him a series of hearings in court, but it was a sham - a kangaroo court, where the enemies included some of the foreign teachers who, years previously, had been removed from

power in Prague University, by the self-determination policies of Jan Hus and his supporters.

250 nobles signed a petition pleading for his release. The court was forced to admit that wine had in fact been given to all men and women in the early Christian Church. But Hus was doomed. His trial was not so much a trial as a dramatic performance to discourage his followers from having anything more to do with him, or with his ideas.

The last of the three court hearings was on 6 July 1415. Hus was forced to dress in his full priestly garments, and handed a communion chalice of wine. The charges were read, and Hus was condemned. Then came the dramatic touch: as they tore the priestly robes from his body, the accusers grabbed the chalice out of his hands, with the words: "We take from thee the cup of redemption."

It is one of the set pieces - the dramatic scenes - in the dramatic history of the Christian Church.

At this point the drama turns into bitter farce - a tragi-comedy. They wanted to cut Hus's hair, to disfigure the traditional monk's tonsure, but they fell into a heated argument about whether it was theologically proper to use a razor or scissors for the purpose. Since they were not able to agree on this important question, they dropped the idea.

So, his hair intact, Jan Hus was taken out and burned at the stake six hundred years ago. The story goes that, as he burned, Hus made a pun on his own name, which means "goose" in Czech. "Today," he cried, "you are burning a goose, but out of my ashes in a hundred years will be born a swan, whom you cannot burn." Martin Luther was that swan.

And so, the flame joined the chalice to become a symbol of a great movement in Bohemia and Eastern Europe. The chalice of communion and respect for all people as equals; and the flame of the death of Jan Hus. More than 450 nobles joined the movement to keep Hus's flame alive, and they deposed the treacherous king and established Tabor, a city of 40,000 Hussite followers. In 1433 they forced the Church to a treaty which allowed the giving of the wine in communion, in the chalice, to all people, not just priests.

The Hussites, living in their city of Tabor, and many of their followers across Europe, wore the symbol of the flaming chalice as a badge on their cloaks. It was a means of recognition, a sign of who you were and what you believed. It became an increasingly common sight.

Martin Luther adopted most of Hus's ideas. He acknowledged his debt, and once declared: "We are all Hussites without knowing it."

Jan Hus and the flaming chalice are not forgotten in the Czech Republic today. His statue stands in Old Town Square, and his birthday is commonly celebrated with bonfires.

The modern history of the symbol of the flaming chalice is another part of the story, to be told another time. Let me end this part of the story by repeating Jan Hus's words:

God needs people who will  
Seek the truth,  
Listen to the truth,  
Teach the truth,  
Love the truth,  
Abide by the truth  
And defend the truth  
Even unto death.

May we be such people.

Geoffrey R Usher