



**Auckland Unitarian Church**  
*Love beyond belief*

## **It's all Greek to me**

5 May 2024. © Rachel Mackintosh

I first came to this church in 2014 because I had met someone during a residential training course on community organising. The course participants came from community organisations, from trade unions (me), and from faith groups (the person I met).

He and I discovered that, not only did we have shared values and a shared vision for a better world, but that the internal dynamics and politics of trade unions closely resembled the internal dynamics and politics of churches. So much to talk about!

Some months later, the politics of the Anglican Church spat him out and he fell on his feet here, in this church, as your minister, Clay Nelson.

Over those months we became increasingly drawn to each other and fell in love.

So I first came here for love.

And I was deeply interested in what Clay had to say, in his vision and in the depth of his theological, political, social and organisational view of the world.

Over time my reasons for coming developed ... it became the rhythm of my life — contemplating wonder every Sunday, and

carrying that wonder through the week. I came to enjoy participating in working bees, the service auction, church events outside Sunday. From time to time I would speak from the pulpit. After some years, I realised that I had come to value the community ... people coming for all their own reasons, bumping up against each other, and finding things to appreciate about each other. We were more than the sum of our parts.

I found that it was important to me to be part of a religious community. Yet, religious communities, in our secular age, are becoming increasingly distant for many people.

Religion is not a language we speak any more.

It's all Greek to us.

Though that might be cute, as a hook (I hope), there is one actual Greek word I would like us to consider this morning: *adiaphora*, a word for which there are several translations. Approaches to the word have changed over time from the concept of “indifferent things” where it started. For today, I choose the understanding of *adiaphora* that came in early Christian times, for the early Christians were Greek speakers. *Adiaphora*: “that which is not necessary for salvation.” *Adiaphora* are things that are neither commanded nor forbidden. It is the stuff we spend our time on that is morally neutral. It does no harm, but is irrelevant to salvation. More on that later.

In preparing for today, I went back and read [Clay's sermon from winter 2018 about \*adiaphora\*](#). I discovered that what had caught in my branches was some merest kernel of what he said, while much of the depth and texture and brilliance had been carried off in the winds. Luckily the internet means we can recover it, and I recommend anyone here does a search on the Auckland Unitarian website after this for *adiaphora* — *A-D-I-A-P-H-O-R-A*. What I found in Clay's sermon was a word study. He gave a history of the word that began with the Stoics and had a long journey through centuries of historical theological debates over what should be included in scripture and doctrine: over what *is* necessary for salvation.

We Unitarians don't really deal in salvation, because we don't (in general) believe in a Heaven of the fluffy clouds and harps variety.

Earlier this year I had a conversation with Helen Mason, the Director of the Unitarian College in the UK. She said that someone had asked her the question: What in Unitarianism has saved your life?

That might be a bit grand for some, especially if you are new here.

Related questions might be, what here has saved you from sadness? From complacency? From loneliness? From purposelessness? From shopping?

The theme of this service is *adiaphora*, for sure, but the theme is more what is *not adiaphora*.

Once again, Unitarians talking about what we are not. This morning's special music hymn and the reading are examples of what is *not* adiaphora; they are examples of what is *not* not necessary for salvation. Welcome to my double negative.

The parable of the lost coin and the exquisite moral tension of celebrating the heron and the frog *are* necessary for salvation. For salvation it is necessary to find a love so precious that even angels will hear the news. For salvation it is necessary to dress in black and to dance, to mourn and to celebrate — to inhabit the entire possibility of our humanity.

My experience of Unitarians in this community is one of rationality, atheism, humanism, escape from toxic dogmatic religion, and with some progressive Christianity too. My experience of our discussion questions on a Sunday morning is that we are much more comfortable in our heads than in our hearts. As we quite rightly reject dogma and the impossibility of believing as “fact” stories that offend our intellect, we risk getting stuck in our heads.

It is a conundrum that Unitarians are not really comfortable in questions of salvation; whereas experiencing that discomfort, knowing deep love, and living in the exquisite contradiction of the inherent value of both the heron and the frog is where we will find spiritual transformation.

I propose that our version of salvation is both individual and collective. Our salvation is what we get when we are achieving our vision. I propose that our vision is something like this: we are

a beloved UU faith community where we experience personal and communal transformation so that we may act to make the world a better place.

What is necessary to realise that vision — what is necessary for our salvation — and what might the role of each of us be?

And what gets in the way?

We may feel uncomfortable contemplating salvation, and like everyone else we can easily get caught up in the things that aren't necessary for it. *Adiaphora* is morally neutral and can be alluring. After all, since it's morally neutral, it does no harm, and since it's *adiaphora*, it doesn't require anything of us, spiritually. Phew. Let's stay here.

What matters might be considered *adiaphora*?

We might spend a lot of energy discussing the form of worship — does it really count if it is online? It might become so consuming that we think the question is necessary, if not for salvation, at least for our ability to participate. We value transparency and democratic process. Because of this we might spend a long time having a congregational discussion about the wording for a sign outside the church or on our website. We might debate for hours about whether the annual fee should be \$132 or a multiple of the actual cost of keeping the lights on, or anything a person can give. We might have many people give their top-of-the-head opinions about how best to arrange the chairs, fix the dishwasher or keep the rodents out of the organ ... When we decorate for Christmas it takes a long time, as every ornament is put up by someone and

moved by someone else. We might spend so long on these debates and activities that we make no progress towards those goals, let alone the goal of communal and societal transformation, let alone the goal of living in a better world.

Because we are human, we will continue to occupy ourselves with matters of *adiaphora*; after all they give us a base and a place to work for our salvation. There is nothing wrong with that.

And, as I said, *adiaphora* doesn't require anything of us spiritually. Phew! Let's stay here a while.

I suspect that too much *adiaphora* is a risk to us. We have limited energy and if too much goes on *adiaphora*, there will be little left for salvation.

Worship may be our way out of being stuck in our heads or stuck in *adiaphora*.

A quick word study shows that worship is the acknowledgment of worth, the contemplation of what we value. Our Unitarian Sunday worship is open to all, and it is an experience all of us can share.

For Unitarians, worship is our space for spiritual growth, for individual and communal transformation, for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Worship is not *adiaphora*, it is necessary for Unitarian salvation. It strengthens us as a community, it strengthens our members and visitors spiritually. It is part of the spiritual and social rhythm of the congregation. Worship is our centre. It is our springboard to faith in action. Worship is something we must do well. It is something

we must do every week. Sunday morning brooks no extensions. If we are prioritising what is necessary for salvation, I put our weekly worship, where we hold space for our congregation, at the top of the list.

Our Sunday mornings are our hope for salvation. Our Sunday mornings are how we can achieve a very Unitarian salvation.

If not us, who? If not now, when?

Amen

### **Meditation / Discussion questions:**

What *adiaphora* keeps you from salvation?

What contributes to your salvation, and what is your role in the purpose of Auckland Unitarians?