

## **Observations on Sunday Assembly – Newcastle. February 23. 2014**

I attended the Sunday Assembly at The Stand, High Bridge Street, Newcastle upon Tyne on Sunday at 12 noon.

The venue was a night club bar in the basement of a café. The rows of chairs were set in a few long rows facing a small raised dais. I was near one end of a row, and it was difficult to see people at the far end of these rows. It was bright and cheerful. There was a screen on the wall behind the dais for projecting photographs.

It was very informal. The two people who presented the event were Carl and Bev – skilled entertainers. There was a mix of ages with quite a collection of young children, mostly pre-school, young parents and other adults, and a fair number of people aged 50+. I couldn't see enough of everyone present to judge percentages well.

The theme for the day was "Family". The emphasis was on encouraging those present to value their own family links, and to see those present as a wider supportive family.

The format was like a hymn-sandwich, with three speakers. After the general welcome we sang: "You've Got a Friend in Me" by Randy Newman. It was led by a female vocalist, accompanied by a keyboard player and a guitarist.

The first speaker was a young Mum, a poet, who does work as an ambassador for young people who have had a difficult life. I was confused because I wasn't sure when she went on the speak and read her poem whether she was reflecting her own personal experience as a child in a dysfunctional family who ended in foster care, or whether she was presenting a case study in the first person singular. (I was distracted by the little chap sitting on the next seat to me spilling his picnic at a crucial moment.) It was moving, sad, loving, and hopeful. She was certainly celebrating her relationship with her own partner and her three children.

The second song was "Stand by Me" by Ben E. King - its theme asking a loved person to stand by me in dark times. This was followed by a young Dad – it was his birthday so we all sang "Happy Birthday Dave" to him before he began. He showed a photo of himself at about 9 years old, with his brother, and three other children. His Mum, a single parent, lived with them and other families in a large Georgian house in the 1980s. They were all very close – but had not seen each other for something like 30 years, until they went to a funeral recently and met again. He was emphasising the need to stay in touch. It was rather rambling, but heartfelt.

We were told there would be three groups at the end of the event: one with children to construct a story to tell next time, and in response to requests for a name and an animal – Adrian called for his name, and someone asked for a rabbit – so the children's story next time will be constructed by children and adults about a rabbit called Adrian. Another group was to discuss how the members of the Sunday

Assembly might address needs of lonely older people in the community. The third group was to discuss “atheism”.

The third song was “You’ve got a friend” by Carol King - when you need a friend “think of me” and “ain’t it good to know you’ve got a friend”. This was followed by a young woman, an actor, pregnant with twins, who told us the story of her pregnancy, with humour, and drama, and varied experiences of medical and nursing care. Very personal, touching, funny, and full of the promise of the expected births of identical boys.

There was a short silence for us to reflect on all that we had heard. It might have been longer but a very young voice broke the silence with “Mummy, why has Uncle Carl stopped speaking?” We were all invited to stay behind at the end, and talk and meet people, share cake and drinks. There was a collection of tinned and other goods for a local Food Bank.

The cash collection was to defray expenses, and the rest to help a homeless blind man who had been befriended, invited into someone’s home to live, and was badly beaten up by his “hosts” and is currently in hospital.

Afterwards I joined the group to discuss atheism. There were 16 of us – we were invited to introduce ourselves. A number of the group are members of the British Humanist Association (BHA). Some of the people in the group had grown up in a family who attended a church. I introduced myself as a Quaker, a member of Progressive Christianity Network, and of Nontheist Friends Network, and explained that theism/nontheism was a current debate among Quakers, but emphasised the Quaker testimonies, fellowship and business methods we all share.

I also explained about the planned visit of Greta Vosper to Newcastle in September. Later in the discussion I explained I joined the BHA some years ago, but did not renew my membership as I found it a mirror image of evangelical Christians – primarily concerned with denouncing any aspect of religion. I did not find the shared focus on humanism I was expecting.

A couple of the BHA members said they welcomed the lightness, friendliness and informality of the Sunday Assembly, in contrast to the rather dull and formal meetings of BHA. This group exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers, planned to meet for a fuller discussion one evening in a pub. If I am able to, I intend to go back and join in that discussion.

I left just before 2.p.m. and felt I would be glad to go again, and very much shared many of the values and attitudes of other people there.

Michael Wright