



SUNDAY 24 MAY 2020
ALDERSGATE SUNDAY

WORSHIP & REFLECTION

The Invitation to Worship

When we are happy,
when we are full of fun and laughter
GOD WELCOMES US
When we are angry,
when people let us down and make us sad
GOD WELCOMES US
When we are tired,
when we need to stop and curl up and rest GOD WELCOMES US

God of welcome,
God whose door is always open
WE ARE GLAD TO MEET YOU HERE

In a quiet moment, reflect that before you offer any thoughts or speak any words, God's presence enfolds you and the words of Jesus welcome you - 'Come to me and I will give you rest.'

Charles Wesley had a profound spiritual experience on Pentecost Sunday, three days before John's Wesley's spiritual awakening. On the first anniversary of this experience, Charles wrote the hymn - 'O for thousand tongues to sing My great Redeemer's praise, The glories of my God and King The triumphs of his grace'

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

God of all time,
we give you thanks for your servants, John and Charles Wesley, raised up by you to proclaim anew the gift of redemption and the life of holiness.
Pour out your Spirit,
and revive your work among us;
that inspired by the same faith,
and upheld by the same grace in word and sacrament, we and all your children may be made one in the unity of your Church on earth, even as in heaven we are made one in you.
We offer our prayer in the name of Jesus.
Amen.



Words of Confession

Loving Father, we confess how much we have failed you and each other.
You have given us tasks to do-
but we have not done them.
You have taught us to love one another-
but our love has been cold.
You have bidden us hope-
but we have despaired.
You have shown us the humility of Christ- but we have been proud.
You have given to those in need-
but we have ignored them.
You have called us to trust-
but we have not listened.

And yet we still have hope, and our hope is in Jesus.
By his incarnation and sharing our lot, forgive us our sins.
By his death on Calvary's cross, which was for us, forgive us our sins.
By his rising again and pleading for us in heaven, forgive us our sins.
Make us anew, in the image of the living Christ, to your praise and glory.
Amen

Reflection - Fingerprints

Gently working,
potter's hands;
kneading, shaping,
softening clay.
Moulding, flexing,
changing form,
with skilful eyes the guide
to see
beyond the lump of lifeless clay
a vision of what lies within:
potential yet to come to birth,
created from his loving touch
and his fingertip imprints
on the clay.
Lord, let me be
as clay within your hands,
that you may shape
the me you hold within your dreams
and I may know
your fingerprints
upon my life. *Pat Marsh*

Scripture: Psalm 130
 2 Corinthians 5: 16 - 21
 Mark 12: 28 -34

Prayer

Life- giving God,

Startle us with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your word, that hearing we may believe, and believing, trust you with our lives. We pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen

Sermon

'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new' 2 Corinthians 5: 17

282 years ago, on this day, 24 May 1738 a young man John Wesley, almost 35 years of age and ordained for 10 years, had a spiritual experience that not only changed his life forever but altered the course of history.

He had not long returned from a two year appointment as a missionary in the American colony of Georgia. For many reasons, this had ended in failure. It led to John Wesley not only questioning his vocation in ministry but whether he was truly a Christian.

On 24 May 1738, as was his custom, he woke at 5am to pray. Later that day he wrote to a friend, "I see that God's law is holy, righteous and good. I know that every thought, every movement of my heart should bear God's image. But how deep I have fallen! How far I am from God's glory! I feel I am sold under sin. I know I deserve only wrath....God is holy, I am sinful. God is a consuming fire; it must devour me the sinner".

On the afternoon of that day, John Wesley, the Anglican priest, went to evensong in St. Paul's Cathedral. The anthem sung by the choir reflected his feelings. Based on one of our readings today, Psalm 130, he heard the words- 'Out of the depths have I cried unto thee'. John Wesley had been influenced by the Moravians who he encountered on the sea journey from America. In the midst of a fierce storm he was fearful while they sang their hymns of trust in God. Later in the day on 24 May 1738, he went to a Moravian meeting in Aldersgate Street. He describes in his own words - 'In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death'.

An experience which Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:17 as a ' new creation'.

John Wesley was so joyful that he went to share with his brother Charles only to discover that three days before his experience of grace, Charles too had a similar experience. He was recovering from pleurisy and from his bed he had written an hymn to describe his spiritual awakening and his brother and friends sang it together- 'Where shall my wandering soul begin? Where shall I all to heaven aspire?

So the heart of what would later become the Methodist movement was rooted in the theology of transformation as the story of the Wesley's centred on 'O let me commend my Saviour to you'. They experienced what led them from having the faith of servants to knowing that it was now that they were sons of God.

What lies attend the heart of our life and practice as Methodists?

(1) The Wesley message appeals to heart and mind.

One of the key words in Wesley's journal is the word 'trust'. John Wesley had already believed in his mind. He knew all the doctrines and he preached them. It was the Aldersgate experience which rooted them in his heart. Head and heart were in harmony at last. The great Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, reason, tradition and experience was united and it was experience which was the spark that ignited the flame. One of Charles Wesley's hymns speak of it - 'My God, I know, I feel thee mine'.

It is at the deep levels of emotion and feeling, in the realm beyond intellectual reasoning, where our reactions to life show themselves in courage and despair, anger or fear, love or resentment. Wesley discovered that the strangely warmed heart gives fuller meaning to what we think and how we act. The great revival which brought deliverance to England and far beyond was born in the heart and soul of a man. The tablet which stands at Aldersgate Street bears the words - 'This experience of grace was the beginning of Methodism'. Faith is not just an expression of intellectual reasoning - it is an invitation to trust. While John Wesley was a great scholar he was essentially a preacher of the good news. There are the frequently quoted words describing his preaching in the open air - 'I offered them Christ freely'.

(2) The Wesley message is a message for all.

There are no limits or restrictions in God's grace revealed in Jesus. One of the greatest gifts to the world church which Methodism offers is in the hymns of the Wesley. They are sung in many Christian traditions and all over the world. Charles was the prolific hymn writer while John translated many hymns from the German language. The preface to the 1933 Methodist hymn book begins with the words - 'Methodism was born in song'.

If you look carefully at the hymns which Charles Wesley wrote, over and over you will discover the word 'all'. The Methodist gospel preaches a Christ whose love reaches all. There is no Calvinist limit which suggests that some are predestined to salvation and others are rejected. The same hymn which Charles wrote on the anniversary of his spiritual awakening has the verse - 'Outcasts of men, to you I call, Harlots and publicans and thieves!

He spreads his arms to embrace you all:

Sinners alone his grace receives.

No need of him the righteous have,

He came the lost to seek and save.'

The welcome of grace is unlimited - there is no barrier which it will not cross. John Wesley spoke of 'prevenient grace' which means that grace is reaching out to us before we know we need it or can respond to it. It breaks every barrier down. What does grace mean for you in your life?

(3) The Wesley message is not just for the church but for the world.

Methodism began as a movement where there were many societies within the Church of England. Wesley's great desire was to see the church renewed for mission. He was greatly influenced by his friend George Whitefield who encouraged him to preach and live the message beyond the church. Preaching in the fields, in the market squares, in the coal mines of Durham or the tin mines in Cornwall. He became a field preacher.

He noted in his journal entry for 2 April 1739 - 'At 4 in the afternoon I submitted to being more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in the ground adjoining the city (Bristol) to about 3000 people.'

The scripture on which I spoke (is it possible any one should be ignorant that it is fulfilled in every true minister of Christ?) was 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the year of the Lord'. That is still our task. Every congregation is invited to turn outwards in compassion and love towards the broken and hurting in our communities - to be welcoming signs of grace and to show in practical ways how they are loved by God.

Wesley reached out to prisoners, to the poor and uneducated, to the sick and dying. There is a great heritage in Methodism of schools, Central Missions, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Action for Children and many other signs of a God who cares for every part of life. To save is to heal. This is the challenge for every congregation - what is your mission to the community in which you live?

At the heart of Methodism is a passion about transformed lives showing practical love. The words of Jesus, not only to Peter, but to us - Do you love me? And the answer - 'Feed my sheep'. Care for my wandering ones. It is false to think of Wesley as an evangelist whose only task was saving souls. One of his famous sayings was 'There is no holiness but social holiness' - a reminder that Christ touched every part of life - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. One of the last letters Wesley wrote was to William Wilberforce to encourage him to work until slavery was abolished.

John Wesley came to Ireland twenty one times and travelled all over the island. Facing opposition in many places, he continued to preach the message of Christ's redeeming love. In Dublin, in 1749 he wrote 'A Letter to a Roman Catholic'. He sought to bring healing in every division. In this letter he wrote - 'We may not in all things think alike but may we not love alike? If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand'. The Methodist people are called to be the friends of all and the enemies of none. That is still our task.

John Wesley preached his last sermon on 1 March 1791. His text was 'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near' and the words he spoke just before he died were 'The best of all is God is with us'.

He lived to the glory of God and for the salvation of humanity. The words he had written are on his tombstone - 'Reader, if thou art constrained to bless the instrument, give God the glory'. The challenge to you and me is to live for God and for others!

Amen

Prayers

Let us pray for the world named by John Wesley as his parish.
We pray for those with power in the world, that in the exercise of their powers over others they may be ruled not only by their heads but by loving hearts.

We pray for the peoples of the world. We bring to God concerns for those who suffer:
Those suffering with Covid-19, for those who care for them and for all who mourn the loss of those they have loved.

We pray for the hungry and broken, for victims of war, for immigrants and asylum seekers, for the homeless and lost. Fill our hearts with such love that we may work with you to bring the love and peace of your reign into this suffering world.

We pray for the Methodist Church in Ireland and in all the world - almost 80 million Methodists in the world in 138 countries. We pray that we will remain faithful to the gospel and be those who practice the ministry of reconciliation. We pray for the Methodist congregation in Ballymena, that united in love and action, we shall reach out to build community and to share your love with all.

In the passing of Jimmy Anderson, we pray for Jean, his wife and John, his son, that they will know God's peace and comfort at this time.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.
Amen.

The Blessing

May God to whom night is as clear as day guide your feet as you go.
May God who is with you when you sit and when you stand, encompass you with love and lead you by the hand.
May God who knows your path and the places where you rest, be with you in your waiting, be your good news for sharing, and lead you in the way that is everlasting.

The blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you and all God's children everywhere,
now and always.
Amen
