

## Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> May 2023 – Service at Home Aldersgate Sunday

Today is Aldersgate Sunday, the day when Methodists give thanks for the life and work of John and Charles Wesley, and especially recall the experience of the grace of God which inspired them. Called Aldersgate because it was on Aldersgate Street that Wesley had a life changing experience of the grace of God in Christ. It is also the Sunday after Ascension Day when we celebrate Jesus return to his Father, and the assurance that He is freed from the limitations of his earthly life and lives for ever, pouring out the Holy Spirit to be with us for ever.

### Prayer

Gracious God,  
Open my mind to receive your Word.  
Open my eyes to see You in my life experience  
Open my heart to receive your love and grace,  
and show me how to share your love and compassion in whatever way I can. Amen.

**The story** Let me outline key events in John Wesley's story up to the event we celebrate today. John Wesley was born in 1703. His father was an Anglican parish priest, the vicar of Epworth. His mother, Susannah, was a formidable personality from a Puritan background, ensuring all her 16 surviving children were well educated and brought up on a strict regime of prayer and Bible study.

When John was six years old, their house caught fire. John was trapped upstairs and a ladder had to be fetched to rescue him. His mother felt this was an indication he had been saved for a purpose, that God had plans for him.

Both John and Charles went to Oxford University reading theology, and they were ordained into the Anglican priesthood. At Oxford they discovered many of their fellow students, mostly much wealthier than them, were only there for a good time with no real interest in their studies. So they met together with like-minded students, having a regular routine of prayer, Bible study and good works.

They were mockingly known as The Holy Club, or Methodists.

After a while working in Oxford as a Fellow of Lincoln College (a tutor), and as his father's curate, John went to America to lead a church in the American colony. The ship he sailed out on had been caught in a severe storm and most of the passengers, John included, had panicked, fearing for their lives. But a small group of Moravian Christians impressed John by their calm confidence in God.

John's work in America was a total disaster. He was a fish out of water, unpopular, soon in trouble, and returned home a disillusioned, disappointed man. He had genuinely tried to serve God, but found no peace of mind, just a sense of failure and uncertainty. He remembered those Moravians and somewhat reluctantly went with friends to a Moravian Bible study group.

And whilst there, listening to someone reading from Martin Luther's writing about Paul's letter to the Romans, he had an overwhelming experience of the presence of God. He called it conversion, but we use that word rather differently now. I think the Quaker word enlightenment conveys it better to us.

This is how he described it:

"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. At about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change God works in the heart through faith in Christ I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, in 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."

He did not become perfect overnight, but he was freed from the burden of feeling a worthless, complete failure – of having to struggle and getting nowhere. And he found his life's work. His brother Charles had a similar experience a few days earlier.

Now we have some Bible readings. It was Paul's letter to the Romans that spoke powerfully to Wesley. I have chosen a short passage from Romans 5, and then a much loved Gospel reading that sums it up.

### Readings

Romans 5: 1-2, 6-11 (if you have *The Message* it's worth reading it there)

John 3: 14-17

### Explanation.

What we have just heard is very much the Christian message we are familiar with. But at the time it took people by surprise, as a much narrower idea of God's grace was generally accepted then. But there were some theologians who said: "Look at the life of Jesus, his love and forgiveness included the most unlikely people: enemy soldiers, collaborators, prostitutes, even the most arrogant, violent persecutor of the early Christians. That proves beyond all doubt that the grace of God is freely available to all who accept it." That is the understanding that inspired the Wesleys, and which they proclaimed powerfully.

### Hymn 345 And can it be

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dC8HSEKtuio>

And can it be that I should gain  
an interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died He for me, who cause his pain,  
for me who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love, how can it be  
that Thou, my God, should'st die for me?

'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies,  
who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first born seraph tries  
to sound the depths of love divine .  
'Tis mercy all, let earth adore,  
let angel minds enquire no more.

He left his Father's throne above,  
so free so infinite his grace,  
emptied himself of all but love  
and bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,  
for O my God it found out me.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's night.  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,  
I woke the dungeon flamed with light,  
my chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose went forth and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread,  
Jesus and all in Him is mine!  
Alive in Him, my living head ,  
and clothed in righteousness divine.  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
and claim the crown through Christ my own.  
Charles Wesley

### Prayer of praise.

"'Tis mystery all, let earth adore,  
let angel minds enquire no more."

God most high, as we recall your love in Jesus,  
we are filled with wonder. All our attempts to  
put it into words fall far short of what we want  
to say ...

How can it be that He who was with you from  
the beginning, who shared your plan from the  
dawn of time, limited himself to human frailty  
in one time and one place, living a vulnerable  
earthly life for ordinary people like us ...  
How can it be that he accepted such suffering at  
the hands of ordinary people like us?...  
How can it be that now victorious, free from the  
limitations of time and space. He still goes on  
loving us, still pours out the gift of the Holy  
Spirit even when we go our own way ignoring  
Him?...

We cannot explain it. We rejoice in it, offering  
you our praise and worship Rejoicing that this is  
your way of perfect love, your plan from the  
dawn of time till time shall, be no more...

All glory to You, Father Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen

### Prayer of confession

We confess that we often fail to live in the light  
of your Cross,  
we lose sight of your victory, and your promise,  
and at times we ignore your call to serve gladly.

We fall so far short of what you have called us  
to be.

We ask your forgiveness and your renewing power, your promise of a fresh start in the name of Jesus. Amen

### **Returning to Wesley's story.**

To get a sense of what was so remarkable about Wesley, you need to know a bit about social life in the eighteenth century – as well as the theology of the time. Much of England was agricultural, most of the land was in the hands of wealthy landowners, and most people worked for them either as tenant farmers, agricultural labourers or servant in their big houses and estates. Think Jane Austen novels, or Poldark. The wealthy landowners appointed most of the clergy, and they often appointed the younger sons of families of their own class. Whilst some did a good job, others wanted the income to support their lifestyle, and spent a little of it on paying a curate to do the work of the parish. Going to church was part of your routine duty, and you were encouraged to do as your betters instructed you, and accept your station in life.

Another problem was that, as the shared fields were enclosed, poorer people migrated to the mining villages and towns springing up around new industries, and there was not enough church provision for them there.

One of Wesley's friends, George Whitefield, hit on the idea of preaching in the open air to bring the Christian message to people who did not have the chance to go to church. John had been reluctant to join him, but after his own wonderful personal experience, decided to join his friend, and there he found his mission.

For the rest of his life Wesley would preach to crowds, often numbering many thousands, throughout Britain and Ireland. He is said to have preached 40,000 sermons and travelled 250,000 miles, mostly on horseback. He was not popular with the church authorities who feared these mass gatherings would lead to revolution.

But Wesley wasn't interested in political revolution, his calling was to give ordinary people an experience of the love of God in

Christ. And his experience of the love of God led him to care about people's practical needs too. He cared passionately about addressing poverty, about education and medical care, prison reform, about enabling everyone to have access to the church. And he spoke out on these issues, as well as taking practical action.

He began to organise his converts into groups to meet for prayer and Bible study, as well as encouraging them to attend church. It was from those groups that the Methodist Church developed, as the established church often did not welcome these loud, enthusiastic newcomers.

So what does this have to say for us today? Firstly, it challenges us to take time to ponder the wonder of God's love. We may not have had the sort of life-changing moment Wesley experienced. For many of us faith has developed gradually over a long period, with no outstanding milestone moments. But that is no excuse for taking it for granted. It seems to me that a sense of wonder is an essential part of Christian experience.

Secondly it challenges us to be ready to speak about our faith. Not ramming it down people's throats, but ready to give a thoughtful answer when people ask questions, ready to include our church experience in our conversation about what we did at the weekend, and that is something most of us find difficult.

Thirdly it reminds us that the love of God is for everyone, not just the people we feel at ease with, but everyone – including the people we do not relate to so easily.

Finally, we are called to show something of that love in how we care for others, especially for the less fortunate. We are called to respond to the needs we see around us in our world where there is so much suffering.

## **Prayers**

So we come to our prayers for others, and for ourselves.

Gracious God we bring our concerns to you now.

As our country commits to providing long range weapons to Ukraine, we are fearful of the future. We long for justice for the people of Ukraine; we long for peace, for them, for the people of Russia and for ourselves, and for the people of other war-torn lands. And we feel powerless. So we pray for wisdom for United Nations, for the governments of the Western European countries most affected, and for a change of heart in the leaders of Russia.

I invite you to bring before God one item from the news headlines that particularly concerns you.

We pray for asylum seekers, and especially for the group who have just been suddenly moved from near Winchester to London. May they find a welcome wherever they are sent

In quiet we pray for people we know in particular need at this time, that they may find peace of mind and the assurance of God's presence whatever their circumstances. As we have prayed for them, we pray that we too may know the presence of God through the Spirit in the week ahead. Amen

### **A prayer for Aldersgate Sunday**

Revd Dr Martyn Atkins

Resourceful Holy Spirit of God,  
We thank you for your servants, John and Charles Wesley.

That you fuelled their zeal  
and tempered it with divine grace;  
brought them through dark times,  
enlightened and renewed.

That you warmed their needy hearts,  
assured and shaped them by your active holiness.  
That through their willingness,  
you worked out Your purposes of hope, mercy,  
and justice.

Somewhat daunted, we stand today in their deep footsteps, In a world of new challenges and old needs, in a time like no other. But undaunted, we humbly ask you to do in us, what you did in and through them. May we know both your infilling and outpouring, that whatever our situation or condition, we will serve and honour Christ, and in these, our days, know and believe that the best of all is "God is with us." Amen.

### **Hymn 564 O thou who camest from above**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ6pmSEzJ5A>

O thou who camest from above  
the pure celestial fire to impart  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
on the mean altar of my heart.

There let it for thy glory burn  
with inextinguishable blaze  
and trembling to its source return,  
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire  
to read mark learn and speak for thee,  
still let me guard the holy fire  
and still stir up thy gift in me.

Ready for all thy perfect will,  
my acts of faith and love repeat,  
till death thy endless mercies seal  
and make the sacrifice complete.

Charles Wesley

### **Blessing**

May the God who is patient with us bless us we carry our journey of faith into the week ahead. May the Son who redeems us bless us as we admit our need of healing. May the Spirit who brings us together, even though we are in different places, bless us as we seek to live in the light of God's love. Amen

CCL 30794

sources: The Message.

The Methodist Church website: Aldersgate Sunday. Thanks to Rev. Dr Howard Mellor for his Notes on Wesley.

Further reading: Philip Yancey: What's so amazing about Grace.

Prepared by Pat Fry