
"The world is my parish" : a celebration of the life and work of John Wesley,

with hymns by Charles Wesley

[the italic passages are words by John Wesley himself

[bold italics identify the sections see order of service sheet

[Short organ voluntary by Samuel Wesley

[Choir introit Lead me Lord

Tonight we are celebrating the life of John Wesley. Our bible readings underline two themes of his life and work his lifelong commitment to share the Gospel, and his recognition of the centrality of love, Gods love for us and our love for Him and for each other.

[Bible reading : Matthew Chapter 28, verses 18 to 20

Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

[Bible reading : Matthew Chapter 22, verses 35 to 40

Then one of them asked him "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?". Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

We will hear the story of John Wesley's life, learn from hymns written by his brother Charles, and hear John Wesley speak to us across the years in words from his Journal, sermons and letters.

I look upon all the world as my parish; this far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work I know God has called me to; and sure I am that his blessing attends it.

[Hymn Christ whose glory fills the skies

[The arms of love that compass me

John Wesley was born on 28th June 1703, nearly 303 years ago. His father was Samuel Wesley, the Rector of Epworth, in Lincolnshire. His mother Susannah was a firm disciplinarian the children were punished for any misdemeanour, and they all had to memorise the Bible from the beginning, reading a verse at a time.

When John was 6, there was a terrible fire at Epworth Rectory. All but John managed to escape he was trapped in his attic bedroom. There was no time to fetch a ladder but one man standing on the

shoulders of another managed to reach him in the nick of time. This early experience of salvation had a great effect on John, who later called himself:

"a brand plucked from the burning."

He was a remarkably thoughtful child for 6, later describing himself at this age as

"serious in religion"

Four years later he was sent away to Charterhouse School in London he had won a free place as one of its "poor scholars". Although adhering to Bible reading, prayers and church attendance, he felt guilty of shortcomings in his spiritual life while at school.

This then was John Wesley at 16, ready to leave Charterhouse and start at Oxford University he was an orderly, logical boy with a strong attachment to his family; clever and, hardworking, pious and of high moral standards, but with a consciousness of having fallen short; a young man needing, perhaps, a "fire of sacred love" within his heart.

[Hymn O thou who camest from above

[The pursuit of holiness

John Wesley enrolled at Christ Church College in Oxford 5 days before his 17th birthday. He graduated at 21, and stayed on to study for a Masters degree.

For men of Wesley's background, with an education but no capital, the choice of a career was restricted it was the priesthood or education. John's mother was pushing him to be ordained. Despite worries about the doctrine of pre-destination, he was ordained as a priest at the age of 22. He longed for a new level of holiness in his life. He worked out a programme of self-discipline by which he believed he could achieve this, writing himself rules to live by. His general rule was:

Whenever you are to do an action, consider how Christ did, or would do, the like and you are to imitate his example.

He started shunning what he called "idle pleasures" such as dancing and games. He later said of this time

I executed a resolution which I became convinced was of the utmost importance, shaking off at once all trifling acquaintance. I began to see more and more the value of time. I applied myself closer to study. I watched more carefully against actual sins; I advised others to be religious, according to that scheme of religion by which I modelled my life.

John's brother Charles had by now come up to Oxford too. Up to now, Charles had never been much interested in religion, but, encouraged by John, he started taking Communion every week along with 2 friends. With John, they met 3 or 4 times a week, and they began to eat and pray together as well, and to keep apart from other people. Soon they had earned themselves the title of "The Holy Club". More people joined them. They began visiting prisoners and spending their own money to relieve the sick and needy. By now, their strict and methodical spiritual life had earned them the nick-name of Methodists.

At 30, John concentrated more and more on analysis of his motives and on self-discipline, which he believed would make him worthy of salvation.

Our next hymn recalls that, through his struggles to find salvation by his own efforts, he was striving to learn the true nature of God. The choir will sing the first four verses now and later we will all sing the final verse, which celebrates his great realisation.

[Choir Hymn Come, O thou traveller unknown

[While the tempest still is high

In the summer of 1735, aged 32, John Wesley left Oxford for America, accompanied by Charles, who by now was also ordained. They were going as missionaries to the new British settlement of Georgia. Their brief was to assist with public order and morals, and to convert the natives. John hoped that, in the simple society of the settlement, he would be able to achieve the two goals he had set himself at Oxford: forcing himself to be holy and thereby saving his soul; and moulding others into holiness.

On the voyage, there were terrible storms, and death often seemed imminent. John felt himself afraid to die. He was drawn to a group of Moravians emigrants, who sang hymns and held services in all weathers

In the midst of the psalm, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks as if the great deep has already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began.. They calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward "Were you not afraid?". He answered "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?". He answered, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."

It seemed to John that their assurance must come from some knowledge of God which had so far eluded him.

America was a disaster for both the Wesley brothers.

Charles was very soon criticised as an impossibly pedantic priest. Matters came to a head, and he resigned his post and returned to England

John started well, by gathering the keenest settlers into groups for weekly study and discussion, and by publishing his (and America's) first hymn book. But his ministry was tainted by an incident in which he barred from communion, amongst others, a lady he had previously thought of marrying. Consequently, his congregation dwindled away, he was convicted by the courts for defamation of the lady's character, and as a result he fled ignominiously from America just 22 months after the start of his ministry there.

Here is what John wrote in his Journal on Tuesday 24th March 1738 as his ship approached Lands End

I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay and believe myself, while no danger is near; but let death look me in the face and my spirit is troubled. Oh, who, what, will deliver me from this fear of death? What shall I do?

The tempests of failure, despair and the fear of death were overwhelming John's good intentions. Where could he find a refuge?

[Hymn Jesu, lover of my soul.

[My chains fell off, my heart was free

John Wesley's voyage back to England was a miserable one, plagued by sea-sickness and oppressed by a sense of desolate failure in his work and in his spiritual life. At this crisis, he remembered the Moravians he had met on the voyage out, who had seemed to have a different sort of knowledge of God and of salvation. Back in England he sought help from Peter Bohler, a Moravian missionary. Bohler showed both John and Charles that, although they believed intellectually that Jesus had died to save them, they still hoped to win their salvation by virtue of their own deeds they had no real *faith* in salvation as a free and unmerited gift from a loving God. When John realised this,

he longed to experience the joy such faith would bring, but he also felt like giving up preaching altogether.

The hymn, "O Love divine, how sweet thou art" reflects John's longing for faith in God's love, a longing that was soon to be answered

[Choir Hymn "O Love divine, how sweet thou art"]

Charles Wesley too came to realise that he lacked faith in free salvation. He was very ill with pleurisy and in this weakened state he prayed for faith to be given to him. As his illness subsided, he knew his prayers were answered he tells us : "I found myself at peace with God and rejoiced in the hope of loving Christ." He soon wrote his first hymn, about his conversion some say this was "Where shall my wondering soul begin", others think it was "And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Saviour's blood" which we shall sing later. This was the beginning of a lifetime of hymnody.

Shortly after this, on Wednesday 24th May 1738, John records the following in his journal

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.

Being again in St Paul's in the afternoon, I could taste the good word of God in the anthem which began "My song shall be always the loving-kindness of the Lord: with my mouth will I ever be showing forth thy truth from one generation to another." This I know, I have now peace with God.

The words of that anthem were to characterise the rest of his life he recognised the loving kindness of the Lord, and his whole life was spent with this truth in his mouth, the truth which is the same for our generation as for his. He knew at last that he did not have to earn salvation, it was a free gift from his loving God. God was to use him to the uttermost, with all his strengths and despite his weaknesses, and John knew that he was no longer reliant on his own strength his chains had fallen off, his heart was free.

[Hymn And can it be

[And spread through all the earth abroad the honours of thy name

John at once began to preach a new message in prisons, in meetings and in churches:

I began to declare .. the glad tidings offering free salvation, .. and preached repentance and remission of sins

People flocked to hear him in very great numbers and many lives were changed forever.

The love of God, whence cometh our salvation does not depend on any power or merit in man; no, not in any degree. .. it does not depend on his endeavours, his good tempers, or good desires, or good purposes and intentions they are the fruits of free grace and not its root. The love of God.. is free for all.

Many in the established church took his fervour for unseemly madness, and dismissed the emotion with which he was heard as dangerous hysteria. John commented :

If you talk of "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost", then it will not be long before your sentence is passed, "Thou art beside thyself."

Those who would dismiss the effect of Wesley's preaching as religious hysteria were and are confounded in that so many lives were changed permanently and radically. Wesley called the converts:

my living arguments for what I assert, namely, that God does .. give remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost will show you him that was a drunkard and is now sober; the whoremonger that was, who now abhors the flesh. I have seen very many persons change in a moment from a spirit of fear, horror, despair, to the spirit of love, joy and peace, and .. to doing the will of God. These are matters of fact whereof I almost daily am an eye-witness.

His message of universal forgiveness quickly made him unwelcome in many pulpits - so he preached in the open air but nevertheless he was careful to arrange his gatherings at times that would not interfere with church services.

I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields.. I had been all my life(till very lately) so tenacious on every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church I proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence on a ground adjoining the city, to about three thousand people. The Scripture on which I spoke was this .."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 recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

He began to travel across the country to spread the message, and his unstinting preaching journeys were to continue for the next 53 years. He was to preach 42,000 times that is an average of more than twice every day. John discipline in prayer, fasting, meticulous order and self-denial were now transformed into an invaluable resource for his new life - not to earn himself salvation but to help him fulfil God's calling . He was determined never to waste a moment of time he arose at four every day, his first preaching was often at 5 in the morning; he read as he rode on horseback, and prepared his sermons in the saddle. He was no emotionally manipulative rabble-rousing preacher: he was a sober and fastidious Anglican clergyman of high-church persuasion, dedicated to carrying out the task assigned to him. *I would encourage them.. . without thundering hell and damnation in their ears I will endeavour to point out to them what is in every respect "a more excellent way" the way of love.*

His sermons are a wonderful mixture of intellectual argument and warm love for God and for humanity.

The choir will sing for us a hymn by Charles Wesley about the proclamation of the gospel.

[CHOIR HYMN My heart is full of Christ

By preaching anywhere that people would gather, John Wesley was able to take his message to all groups within society, and by his travels to reach all parts of the country he records his concerns for the heedless rich, as well as his words for miners and sailors. Many to whom he preached were from the poverty-stricken multitude ill-clothed, poorly housed, literally starving, and often seeing refuge in drink; some were involved in crime, violent and subject to violence. The task was immense; nothing daunted, John commissioned men to preach as he did himself wherever there were people to listen. He sent them on horseback and on foot to prepare the way, and to follow up on his visits. One of them commented "We enjoyed great poverty and great peace". Others he appointed to preach to local congregations on Sundays but continue their trades in the week.

Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth

John and his fellow preachers needed to be fearless as well as the literally thousands who wanted to hear them speak of salvation and forgiveness, there was also dangerously violent opposition to their denunciation of smuggling, drunkenness and worldliness, at times egged on by those who rejected

John's theology. John was pelted with mud and dead cats, cut in the face by flying stones; pushed off walls. His assurance, his tremendous courage, and the force and calmness of his character to impress even the wildest enemy were shown many times - this was no longer a man afraid to die.

A mob of opponents from Walsall came pouring in like a flood and bore down all before them. .. They dragged me along a man catching hold of me by the hair pulled me into the middle of the mob. .. It came into my mind that if they should throw me in the river, it would spoil the papers that were in my pocket I continued speaking all the time and asked "Are you willing to hear me speak?" Many cried out "No, No! Knock his brains out! Down with him! Kill him at once!" Others said "Nay, but we will hear him first". I continued speaking for above a quarter of an hour ..and I broke out aloud into prayer. And now the man who just before headed the mob turned and said "Sir, I will spend my life for you: follow me, and not one shall touch a hair of your head" God brought me safe to Wednesbury, having lost only one flap of my waistcoat and a little skin from one of my hands.

How could he be resolute and calm and continue to preach in the face of such danger? Here is part of one of his sermons which gives a clue:

Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul? as Christ loved you?

As well as the force of his presence and the directness of his preaching, John had a genius for organising and inspiring and, indeed, commanding others. He knew that converts needed the support of local societies to sustain their new life he ordered that they were each assigned to a group or class, with a leader, where they met regularly for bible instruction and spiritual development.

Sir, you wish to serve God? You cannot serve Him alone. Find companions. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.

He travelled ceaselessly, in conditions of great hardship, to encourage local societies by words, by example and by his presence, and to preach the Gospel to all, especially those who had still to hear or to accept it.

At Gwennap.. there were ten thousand people, to whom I preached Christ our "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption", my favourite subject till it was so dark we could scarcely see one another. There was on all sides deepest attention; none speaking, stirring, or scarcely looking aside I was awakened between 3 and 4 by a large company of tinnners who, fearing they should be too late, had gathered round the house and were singing and praising God. At five I preached once more on "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved". They all devoured the word. Oh, may it be health to their souls!

He made collections for the relief of poverty, he set up dispensaries to provide medicine and he sought out doctors for the sick. He urged his followers:

Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.

Historians tell us that, by bringing to the most destitute in society the gospel of God's acceptance and forgiveness, John Wesley and his followers did more than transform many individual lives: the message of hope and salvation for all, combined with Wesley's insistence on practical measures for the relief of want, were significant reasons why there was not a revolution here such as there was at this time in France, because tens of thousands across Britain received inspiration, hope, comfort and strength.

His own life was not an untroubled one. Prevented from marrying the woman of his choice by the intervention of his brother, his eventual marriage was to prove a stormy and unhappy one. He was prey to worries and even despair at times, but he allowed nothing to deflect him from carrying out his mission. There were clashes and splits with the more extreme of his followers and with Charles too. Although he never intended that the Methodist societies should break from the Church of England, his own actions, culminating in consecrating a bishop for America, made such a split inevitable.

John's preaching journeys included Wharfedale; on July 26th 1766 240 years ago - he writes that, after a large gathering in Grassington,

I preached at Addingham at about nine.

On one of his journeys here he had tea with Mrs and Mrs Moon of Ling Chapel Farm at Langbar on the far slopes of Beamsley Beacon.

John Wesley preached the gospel of life and health and peace to his generation that message is for us, too

[Hymn O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise

[Bold I approach the Eternal Throne

When he was 86, John Wesley's wrote

I am now an old man, decayed from head to foot. My eyes are dim; my right hand shakes much... However, blessed be God, I do not slack my labour: I can preach and write still.

He certainly could: in 10 days in October, aged 87, he records in his Journal that he travelled to 12 places, all over East Anglia, preaching to large numbers at least once each day and sometimes more.

The wind, with mizzling rain, came full in our faces, and we had nothing to screen us from it; I was thoroughly chilled from head to foot before I came to Lynn. But I soon forgot this little inconvenience, for which the earnestness of the congregation made me large amends.

A description of him at the time said "The happiness of his mind beamed forth in his countenance." Indeed, his personal gentleness and warmth, his kindness to children and young people, and the charm of his conversation, remained features of his character all his life after Aldersgate, alongside introspection, decided convictions, and a steely determination which made him capable of the sustained and remarkable actions through which he fulfilled his calling at whatever cost to himself.

His final public preaching was at Leatherhead in February 1791. He travelled there even though he could no longer climb into a pulpit without assistance. After this, he became rapidly weaker, but found strength to astonish friends gathered round his bed by singing

I'll praise my maker while I've breath (sing to tune Monmouth)

And when my voice is lost in death

Praise shall employ my nobler powers.

My days of praise shall ne'er be past

While life or thought or being last

Or immortality endures

He asked his friends to pray and to praise God; he directed that his burial should be very simple, and he requested that his sermon on the love of God should be widely distributed. He said

The best of all is, God is with us

and thus he entered the nearer presence of his Maker and Saviour.

[SHORT SILENCE]

John Wesley began his life striving to atone for his sins: he realised at Aldersgate that Christ had made the atonement for him he learned the nature and the name of God, and he spent his life in sharing that knowledge.

Tis love! tis love! Thou diedst for me!

I hear Thy whisper in my heart!

the morning breaks, the shadows flee;

pure universal Love thou art:

to me, to all, thy mercies move;

Thy nature and Thy name is Love

Hymn last verse of Wrestling Jacob

[Prayer of Thanksgiving for Wesleys, and for Pentecost]

Father, we thank Thee for the life of John Wesley, through whom the message of Thy loving kindness has transformed the lives of so many people. We thank Thee for the words of his brother Charles, which help us in good times and in bad to recall and to hold fast to Thy promise of love. On this day of Pentecost, please grant that we too may be set on fire with Thy spirit, strengthened by Thy power, and go forward by Thine aid to fulfil our own calling in this age. Amen

The task assigned to John Wesley, and the strength in which he was able to achieve it, are in our hands now ye servants of God, your Master proclaim

[Hymn Ye Servants of God]

[Blessing (written by John Wesley)]

Now, to God the Father, who first loved us, and made us accepted in the Beloved;

To God the Son, who loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood;

To God the Holy Ghost, who sheddeth the love of God abroad in our hearts, be all love and all glory in time and to all eternity.

Amen

[Organ voluntary by Samuel Wesley]