

17th July – Morning Service

Rev Helen Croft

Call to Worship - Psalm 100

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures for ever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

StF 83 – Praise my soul the King of heaven

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| 1) Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
To his feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like thee his praise should sing?
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise the everlasting King! | 3) Father-like, he tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame he knows;
In his hands he gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Widely as his mercy flows. |
| 2) Praise him for his grace and favour
To his people in distress;
Praise him, still the same for ever,
Slow to chide, and swift to bless.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Glorious in his faithfulness. | 4) Angels in the height, adore him;
Ye behold him face to face;
Sun and moon, bow down before him,
Dwellers all in time and space.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise with us the God of grace! |

Henry Francis Lyte CCL No. 515642

Prayer¹

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we praise you for the hope, joy and peace with which you fill our lives and overflow our days. We live in a rapidly changing world. Every day the things we had long taken for granted are questioned, the assumptions we had made are undermined and those on which we had relied are being washed away in the flood-tide of progress. Again and again we are reminded of our human frailty, our mortality and the fickleness of human nature. Each day and in every twist and turn of life we discover that nothing and no one can be trusted completely.

We praise you for Christ; for his life, death and resurrection and for the assurance that he is the solid rock on which we can build our lives in confidence; that in the midst of the chaos we call life he is for ever the same. In the midst of our unreliability Christ stands firm as our unchanging Saviour. In the midst of our confusion and disillusionment Christ remains our unchangeable living Lord.

We praise you for Jesus Christ, the one through whom we have confidence to enter your presence; that he lifts us when we fall, holds us when we are hurting and loves us even when we are in the wrong. We praise you for making us to be your special possession. We praise you more that being your people does not depend on our goodness, our worthiness or even our usefulness, but on Christ, the King of Glory and the Head of the church. Lord, we bring our praises in the name of our changeless Saviour. **Amen**

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, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 156 – From the breaking of the dawn

- 1) From the breaking of the dawn
To the setting of the sun,
I will stand on every promise of your word.
Words of power, strong to save,
That will never pass away;
I will stand on every promise of your word.
For your covenant is sure,
And on this I am secure:
I can stand on every promise of your word.
- 2) When I stumble and I sin,
Condemnation pressing in,
I will stand on every promise of your word.
You are faithful to forgive,
That in freedom I might live,
So I stand on every promise of your word.
Guilt to innocence restored;
You remember sins no more.
So I'll stand on every promise of your word.

- 3) When I'm faced with anguished choice
I will listen for your voice,
And I'll stand on every promise of your word.
Through this dark and troubled land,
You will guide me with your hand
As I stand on every promise of your word.
And you've promised to complete
Every work begun in me,
So I'll stand on every promise of your word.
- 4) Hope that lifts me from despair;
Love that casts out every fear
As I stand on every promise of your word.
Not forsaken, not alone,
For the Comforter has come,
And I stand on every promise of your word.
Grace sufficient, grace for me,
Grace for all who will believe.
We will stand on every promise of your word

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Reading: Mark 3:7-19

Jesus went off with his disciples to the sea to get away. But a huge crowd from Galilee trailed after them—also from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, across the Jordan, and around Tyre and Sidon—swarms of people who had heard the reports and had come to see for themselves. He told his disciples to get a boat ready so he wouldn't be trampled by the crowd. He had healed many people, and now everyone who had something wrong was pushing and shoving to get near and touch him. Evil spirits, when they recognized him, fell down and cried out, "You are the Son of God!" But Jesus would have none of it. He shut them up, forbidding them to identify him in public.

He climbed a mountain and invited those he wanted with him. They climbed together. He settled on twelve, and designated them apostles. The plan was that they would be with him, and he would send them out to proclaim the Word and give them authority to banish demons.

These are the Twelve:

Simon (Jesus later named him Peter, meaning "Rock"), James, son of Zebedee, John, brother of James (Jesus nicknamed the Zebedee brothers Boanerges, meaning "Sons of Thunder"), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Canaanite, Judas Iscariot (who betrayed him).

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago, I attended the Methodist Conference as a District representative. What I'm about to share, is what I'm calling a post-conference reflection. Why? For many of us, Conference is something out there and not relevant to us but as the decision making body of the Methodist Church, it is very relevant. Also, much of the conferring we did shows that it's not just Circuits and Churches that need to rethink how they do mission and work together but also District and Connexion.

Story

The out-going President of Conference Rev Sonia Hicks at her final address to the Presbyteral Session of Conference told this story. A young boy of about 7 years was out with his dad for a walk. As they walked through a park he spotted a huge stone. Looking at his dad he asked: "Do you think if I try with all my strength I might be able to move that stone?" "Certainly," replied his dad, "if you try with all your strength." So the little boy put his back into it, but, try as he might he couldn't move the stone. "You said if I tried with all my strength I would be able to move it" he complained. "And so you would, if you'd asked me to help. I am here, and if you want me to join in I can be part of your strength too."

Picture

One of the big bits of liturgical and worshipful business is the reception into full Connexion and ordination of our latest Presbyters and Deacons. As we did, I was reminded of my own Ordination 5 years ago and a photo I had taken of part of a stone pillar not far from where I was seated, and if you take a careful look at it you will see the chisel marks still in the stone from where the stone mason has worked away to make the lump of stone he was given into the right shape to form part of this pillar in the church.



Reflection

This year's Methodist Conference met all together physically, it is the first time in 2 years – 2020 was all on zoom and last year was hybrid. So there was a real sense of us all being in the room together. It does make a difference to our conferring when we're all together. You can feel the way things are going in a way you just don't in zoom meetings and because there wasn't a difference in participation between those on-line and those present like last year, everyone was able to be fully included in the same way.

We had a lot of discussion about the shape of the Conference in the future. Does it need to be so big – 300+ people? Does it need to be physical, think of the expense and the environmental impact of all that travel, especially as we seek to be a carbon neutral church by 2030? But all of those considerations need to be held against the benefits of being together not just in Conference but in the break times, and at fringe events and over breakfast and dinner. There is a lot of 'business' that goes on outside the Conference hall. So, there are no easy answers to the question of the shape of Conference but I'd say our being together was a good thing.

The other reason for coming together apart from the business side of things is to mark some significant events with liturgy and worship. In presbyteral session we said farewell to the outgoing President and Vice-President, Rev Sonia Hicks and Barbara Easton and we held a memorial service for all the presbyters who have died since the last Conference, a total of 75 this year. In representative session, Sonia and Barbara handed over their mantles to the new President and Vice-President: Rev Graham Thompson and Anthony Boateng, a local preacher from the London District. Their themes for this year are, respectively: Love God and love your neighbour, and Revival. They are very different as people (and I think theologically) so it'll be interesting to see how they work as the Presidency together and how their 2 messages overlap and inter-twine with each other. Representative session remembers all the local preachers who have died along with those lay people who have served the Conference and the names of deacons are brought from Diaconal Convocation.

And, of course, the other big bit of liturgical and worshipful business is the reception into full Connexion and ordination of our latest Presbyters and Deacons. When I tell you that there were 22 ordinands this year, 21 presbyters and 3 deacons, against the 77 who Conference gave permission to sit down, or retire you'll understand immediately the kind of pressures we're under with regard to ordained ministry in the Methodist Church. But the ordinations were not an occasion to bemoan those kinds of issues it was a really joyous day and the sun shone, which is always a good bit of symbolism as we send them out fully fledged into Circuits.

All of these actions, the changing of the presidency, ordaining and remembering can be, for me, all tied together into one. Because they are all about individual people who, together have contributed something to the life of the Methodist Church and to the work of God, each of them in their own ways and places, but together being part of a bigger whole. And, that's what Conference is, at its best. All the reps, lay and ordained from different parts of the Connexion, the members of the Connexional team, representatives from the world church, ecumenical partners, Methodist Homes, Methodist Insurance, Methodist Schools, Methodist Heritage sites. We are a strange and mixed bunch, but together we hope that what we do is God's work, each in our own ways.

So our business was wide and varied, as ever:

- We did theology together in a bible study on 1 John 4: Love one another for love is of God.
- We considered homelessness and the cost of living crisis and other justice issues.
- The dreaded Oversight and Trusteeship of the church in a number of different forms.
- The organisation of Conference.
- Conversion therapy policy.
- Safeguarding.
- 3Generate.
- Statements on Marriage and singleness.
- Justice, Diversity and Inclusion issues.
- The Covenant relationship between the church and her ministers.
- Local Lay Pastors ministry.
- Streamlining the candidating process for those thinking about ministry in various ways
- What 'membership' means in the C21st.
- Environmental issues with our Action for Hope agenda
- The Connexional budget, pensions, and questions around the ethics of how and where we invest our money.
- And confirming the Face of the Stations, which is just about the very last piece of business we do. So that, by the end of Conference all the presbyters and deacons know where they are going to be based in the coming 12 months from September this year.

Some of these things will filter their way down into Circuits and Churches over the coming months. One of my tasks in the coming weeks will be to sift back through the agendas and see what was passed which needs to be passed to the leadership team and addressed at our levels in the church and help begin the discussions to think about how that may happen.

As well as all of that there were notices of motion brought from the floor of Conference on tenant farmers, Israel/Palestine, the system for bringing Ukrainian refugees into the UK, which is taking ponderously long and a statement on the government's policy of shifting on people seeking asylum in this country by sending them elsewhere to be processed.

And then, finally, in this romp through Conference I want to mention this lanyard.

Some of you will have heard about the God for All Strategy, the strategy for mission and growth in the Methodist Church. I hope all of you have heard of The Methodist Way of Life, a tool kit of material helping us to be better disciples of Jesus. The 2 have been brought together. And so the God for All stand at Conference issued a challenge to all the members of Conference. There was a list of the 12 areas of the Methodist Way of Life with some suggestions about what you could do, during your time at Conference to achieve them. Things like:



- Praying in a way you've never tried before.
- Have coffee with someone you've never met before.
- Ask 3 different people for feedback on a burning question you've always had about God or your faith.
- Speak to someone who isn't a member of Conference about your faith.
- Go vegan for the day (health permitting.)
- Tweet your MP about an issue on the Joint Public Issues team stand.

If you did manage to do something suggested you got a badge. As you can see, I managed 7 of the 12. Some people did all 12.

I hope this gives you a little bit of a taste. But now I want to take you back to where we began, with the calling of the disciples from Mark's Gospel, the story of the little boy, the chisel marks in the stone. Jesus didn't call one person, Jesus called many. The 12 disciples are just the ones that get named, remembered, singled out for significance. A bit like the presbyters and deacons we ordained, the local preachers and other particular lay people we remembered. But Jesus called others too. Elsewhere in the Gospel the figure of 72 is mentioned, as being those sent out, 2 by 2 to do God's work. We don't know their names, but they are just as much a part of the work as the 12.

So while Conference might be seen by some as being removed from the life of the Church, or only for a particular bunch of people, we are all called to be Christ's disciples, we are all called to play our part. And we are called to do this together, not in splendid isolation but lending each other our support, strength, wisdom, prayers, whatever is our particular gift to bring. And, while the work seems big what we are asked to do is to chip away at it. Not at everything, just at the particular block of stone that's in front of us. There's no point in having 97 different lumps of stone all on the go at once, a little bit here and another little bit off that one, we'll never get any of it done. But if, little by little we chip away at the stone in front of us then we will make a difference. The point is we chip away, not that we stand back and do nothing and somehow miraculously hope that things will get done, things

StF 664 – Lord you call us to your service

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| <p>1) Lord, you call us to your service,
Each in our own way.
Some to caring, loving, healing;
Some to preach, or pray;
Some to work with quiet learning,
Truth discerning, day by day.</p> | <p>3) Seeing life from your perspective
Makes your challenge plain,
As your heart is grieving over
Those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion,
You may fashion hope again.</p> |
| <p>2) Life for us is always changing
In the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
To the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us,
As you need us, anywhere.</p> | <p>4) Lord, we set our human limits
On the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit,
Pour your power through,
That we may be free in living
And in giving all for you.</p> |

Prayers of Intercession²

God of wisdom and understanding, be with your Church as we seek to understand your purposed and will. Nurture and tend our faith. By your Holy Spirit, bring to fruition the seed of your word.

God of endurance and reliability, be with your world obsessed by many cares and short-term gains. Renew the face of the earth. By your Holy Spirit, inspire all people to sustainable living.

God of seedtime and harvest, be with all who tend and manage the land for food to nourish and spaces for recreation. By your Holy Spirit, open our hearts to share the fruits of the field in their seasons.

God of hope and consolation, deal tenderly with all for whom life is full of struggle. Give them strength and patience in their sufferings. By your Holy Spirit, bring us to rejoice in your presence.

God of life and peace, you set your creation in motion. Bring to fulfilment the purpose you set for each one of us. By your Holy Spirit bring us to dwell with you for ever. **Amen**

StF 351 – In Christ alone

- 1) In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, my All in All,
Here in the love of Christ I stand.
- 2) In Christ alone! who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
The gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save:
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied -
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.
- 3) There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine-
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.
- 4) No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand!

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Closing prayer and blessing

God give you grace, to become the people he has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory; And the blessing of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and always. **Amen**

¹ *500 Prayers for All Occasions* by David Clowes (2003: David Clowes, Eastbourne)

² *Intercessions for Years A, B and C* by Ian Black (2009: SPCK, London)