

24th May 2020 – Morning Service

“What is Church” Mini Series - Week 2: Church - a Witness to the World

Rev Michael Payne

Call to Worship - Psalm 86:12

I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.

StF 565 – Only by grace can we enter

Only by grace can we enter,
Only by grace can we stand;
Not by our human endeavour,
But by the blood of the Lamb.
Into Your presence You call us,
You call us to come.
Into Your presence You draw us,
And now by Your grace we come,
Now by Your grace we come.

Lord if You mark our transgressions,
Who would stand?
Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed
By the blood of the Lamb.
Lord if You mark our transgressions,
Who would stand?
Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed
By the blood of the Lamb.

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Prayers of Adoration

Lord, we praise you that you have called us to be your faithful people; To remember the story of our faith; to hold fast to all that is true; To keep you at the centre of all things; To build each other up in hope and love; To sing your praises and to make time for prayer; To stand firm no matter what the cost. Lord, we praise you that you have *not* called us to be your faithful people within the safety of the closed doors of the church building, or inside locked minds or barricaded hearts. Each day you require us, your people, to live out our faith beyond the doors of protection. You have appointed each of us to speak of Christ and to do so in words and ways that everyone, anywhere, can understand. We praise you that you are calling us now to be a listening people, always listening as we journey as pilgrims of faith, relying on your Spirit to enable us to be faithful to Christ. By your grace and for your glory may we live for Him in our world of uncertainty and discomfort. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
We confess with shame that we have sinned against you and against our neighbour.
We have not loved you with all our heart and soul and mind and strength;
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
But while we were yet helpless, Christ died for the ungodly and we trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation. Grant to us, we pray, the assurance that Christ has taken away our sins and saved us from the law of sin and death. We ask it in his Name. **Amen**

Aldersgate – Wesley’s conversion

In response to last week’s service and the conversation about tradition, I am a traditionalist; my traditions may not be as old as some others or the same as anyone else’s but a traditionalist I am, as are you though you may well dispute the description. On a date such as this I have to draw to mind the event of 282 years ago. It was 32 years ago I was in London, at St Paul’s Cathedral and in Aldersgate later that evening on the 250th anniversary of a life, and perhaps a world, changing event. I refer you to the words of John Wesley’s own journal for May 1738 :-

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, I had continual sorrow and heaviness in my heart. Wednesday May24, I think it was about five this morning that I opened my Testament on these words, "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Just as I went out, I opened it again on these words, "Thou are not far from the Kingdom of God."

In the afternoon I was asked to go to St. Paul's Cathedral. The anthem was, "out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord...." 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 alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

To Quote John Pollock from his biography of John Wesley; -

On his way to Aldersgate Street he was in the Company of James Hutton, with whom he lodged when in London, They walked through mean streets and past alleys and brothels. They stepped over men and women lying drunk from cheap gin; and waved away harlots; and kept an eye for pickpockets and thieves – all the very outcasts who, until lately, the Wesley's had believed could never be forgiven before prolonged penitence; nor be intimate with Christ, nor have power to live like him.

Wesley was seeking at that time a true understanding and experience of salvation by faith. Through reading the Scriptures he saw that instantaneous conversions did take place in the New Testament Church. It was on the 24th May that as one had put it, Wesley "broke the faith barrier". That experience was to change his life, his relationship with God, his relationship with others and his expectation of what God could do in the life of others.

Have we broken the faith barrier? Has our faith become real and personal?

StF 456 – And are we yet alive

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| 1) And are we yet alive,
And see each other 's face?
Glory and praise to Jesus give
For his redeeming grace! | 5) Then let us make our boast
Of his redeeming power,
Which saves us to the uttermost,
Till we can sin no more: |
| 2) Preserved by power divine
To full salvation here,
Again in Jesu's praise we join,
And in his sight appear. | 6) Let us take up the cross,
Till we the crown obtain;
And gladly reckon all things loss,
So we may Jesus gain. |
| 3) What troubles have we seen,
What conflicts have we passed,
Fightings without, and fears within,
Since we assembled last! | Praise ye the Lord, alleluia!
Praise ye the Lord, alleluia!
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,
Praise ye the Lord! |
| 4) But out of all the Lord
Has brought us by his love;
And still he does his help afford,
And hides our life above. | |

Reading: Matthew 5:13-16 - Salt and Light

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Reading: Acts 11:19-26 - The Church in Antioch

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Reflection – Church a witness to the World

Wesley From Pulpit to Paddock

John Wesley was born in 1703, ordained deacon in 1725, priest in 1728. He was a learned man, a man of letters and intellect; he taught he preached, he went to be a pastor to the settlers in America in 1735 and desired to be a missionary to the native population his ministry was not very successful despite what he knew he didn't know the love and grace of God for himself. His ministry changed when he'd experienced the grace of God for himself, he could then preach, speak and witness with the authority of experience. At the time of Wesley there was another great preacher and evangelist by the name of George Whitfield, at the age of 25 he had become a national celebrity through his preaching, rich and poor alike flocked to hear him speak. By the beginning of 1739 his strong Christian message led him to being banned from every Church in London and Bristol. Undaunted, at the end of February, George preached for the first time in the open air; to the rough coal miners of Kingswood outside of Bristol. The impact of his message on the miners was dramatic and led to many conversions. A great religious revival was beginning in Bristol but Whitfield wanted to return to America. He invited John Wesley to continue his work.

There were two difficulties – Wesley was not sure about whether it was right to preach outdoors and his congregation in Fetter Lane, London was anxious not to lose him. Through the guidance of drawing lots Wesley was led to go – is this a method Stationing Committee should consider? And so on the 2nd April 1739 John Wesley stood on a small mound in the brickfields outside Bristol and preached his first open-air sermon to a crowd of 3000 people; so began the open air ministry of the man who went on to say "the World is my Parish."

There is the link between May the 24th 1738 and the theme for today's service, "I look upon the whole world as my Parish" (June 11 1739) " and "Church a witness to the world." As a result of John's open air preaching there were many small groups of believers in various parts of the country; to ensure these new converts did not drift away from their new found faith he set up classes with leaders who met regularly. They met to encourage faith growth, reformed living and bearing witness to neighbour through a growing confidence of faith, "So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.' At the heart of the Methodist movement was the class meeting; small groups meeting together to learn more about Jesus and support each other in the growth of faith and the journey with Jesus. What has become of such groups? – they are now called

house groups and are at the heart of many growing church communities. Yet where they were at the heart of a movement they have so often been abandoned.

Stourbridge from Pew to Public Park

We have heard so often it said that Church is the people and not the building. At the moment we are excluded from our buildings, Church still exists. Meanwhile the building still stands there.

At Gigmill Chapel a young chap was seen in the gardens – when approached he explained what he was doing. He had asked at the shop opposite what was wrong with the Church. It was explained to him that we had to be closed because of the virus. His response – he wanted to help the church so he was tidying the grounds for us. A Good Samaritan? Here was a person who over the years had seen the building and the grounds being well maintained – he saw a difference and wanted to know why and help; a link is made, who knows where with the grace of God it can be developed. We never know what people notice – the cared for became uncared for and a helper came found. Not that I am condoning not looking after our premises for our buildings do bear witness.

The old wayside pulpit can be of use if not too corny – In Bradford one read “Live the sort of life that means they can tell the truth at your funeral.” It was outside a church that most funeral processions went passed on the way to the Crematorium. When the minister saw it he had it taken down quickly.

Our buildings do bear witness and many people have been thinking about how to use our closed premises as channels of mission. Josephine has been looking at Gospel Gardens – using our church gardens to share the gospel. Our Church noticeboards can carry messages of hope; bright pictures from young people in our community and no doubt many have come up with very creative and effective uses. There is a suggestion of having a “Thank you tree” in communities where people can place messages of thanksgiving. But we can go further. The “Love Stourbridge” event – was started by Chawn Hill Church a number of years ago taking the Church into the park for a time of fun and witness; they invited others to join them as Churches Together In Stourbridge– the church people getting amongst the people for a time of free fun for the community; later on in the year Carols in the Park. The Christians of the town sharing with others can give an opportunity to share faith.

You from Patio to Pavement – being out front with your faith.

What about using our homes and gardens to bear witness? Everywhere we walk now we see rainbows in the windows of houses. On Easter Sunday we were encouraged to put a decorated cross in our windows. We see teddy bears in windows. Can we come up with ways of using our windows and our house frontage to raise conversation about our faith? One of the members at Wollaston has a shared garden with the neighbouring bungalows, during Holy Week she placed her cross for decorating and reflection in the garden for others to see; a starting point for conversation. What are we a witness to? We can only honestly be a witness to that which we have experienced; it is an eyewitness who is believed not the bearer of hearsay. It is why the 24th May 1738 is such a significant date; it was from that moment John Wesley could speak about what he knew rather than what he had been taught. Many have no confidence in sharing their faith and that needs addressing if we are to be a people of witness. Does this bring us back to Wesley and his Class Meetings? As I wrote to some this last Wednesday we need to bear witness in a language that can be understood and which makes connection with people where they are.

I quote **Meg Prowting, the Youth and Young Adult Development Officer in the Methodist Church**

“We no longer live in a society where people have a background and basic understanding of Christianity. Our challenge as individuals, and a Church, is to speak of God in ways that make sense to those around us, recognising the different backgrounds and cultures in which they dwell”

The Church is a witness to the world.

What is the world? It is our parish, our area for care and area in which love is to be shared. We are to love without limit of borders and boundaries. We cannot solve the world’s problems on our own, but that does not mean we can ignore the worlds problems.

That is why we are a Connexional Church; it is why each member of the Methodist Church is a Member of the Methodist Missionary Society, we support others who are tackling issues and reaching people far away with Good News in the name of Jesus.

While they do that far away we do it on our communities, in our paddocks, parks and pavements, being light and salt as people of Christ worth of that name.

StF 409 – Let us build a house

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| 1) Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: | 3) Let us build a house where love is found
In water, wine and wheat:
A banquet hall on holy ground
Where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
Is revealed in time and space;
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us: |
| Ch) <i>All are welcome,
All are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.</i> | 4) Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
And live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger: |
| 2) Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
Where all God's children dare to seek
To dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
And as symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: | 5) Let us a build a house where all are named,
Their songs and visions heard
And loved and treasured, taught and claimed
As words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
Prayers of faith and songs of grace,
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: |

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Prayers of Intercession

L: Lord in your mercy: **R: *Hear our prayer***

Let us pray for the world named by John Wesley as his parish.

Lord, we pray for those with power within the world, that in the exercise of their powers over others they may be ruled not only by their heads but by loving hearts: that wisdom may be informed by compassion; that justice may be tempered by mercy; that policies may be determined by human need.

L: Lord in your mercy: **R: *Hear our prayer***

Let us pray for all humankind for whom we believe Christ died.

Lord, we pray for the peoples of the world. We bring to you our concern for those who suffer; the persecuted and the oppressed; the hungry and the destitute; the victims of warfare; the many whose plight has been withdrawn from our news by our focus on one issue. We pray for those who have been at the forefront of our news in recent months, the sick and the dying, the bereaved and isolated. We pray for those seeking to give support, comfort, help and healing in difficult and trying times. And we ask that you will 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.

L: Lord in your mercy: **R: *Hear our prayer***

Let us pray for those who, like John Wesley, seek a deeper relationship of faith with God:
Lord, we pray for those who seek to know you better: for those looking for a purpose in life and those who feel attracted to the Christian faith. We pray for those overcome by doubts over your existence or the power of your love; We pray for those who doubt their own commitment or their own claim to be followers of Jesus; We pray for the newly born babes in Christ, the mature in faith facing new challenges and all who seek to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus.

L: Lord in your mercy: **R: Hear our prayer**

Lord we pray for the Methodist Church founded by John Wesley.

Lord, we pray for the Methodist Church throughout the world, that it may remain faithful to its calling to bring salvation and love to those it meets. We pray for the Methodist Church in this land; For its ministers, leaders, preachers, stewards and all volunteers; For congregations in city, town and village. We pray for the congregations here in our Circuit, rejoicing in our shared mission, our partnered church in Lye and the other churches of our communities as we seek to share the same message, may we be united by our faith in you and our service to the people amongst whom we live and work.

L: Lord in your mercy: **R: Hear our prayer**

In the name of Jesus, our Lord and Master we bring our prayers uniting them in the prayer he gave to his disciples:

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 478 – Thank you, O God, for the time that is now

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| 1) Thank you, O God, for the time that is now,
For all the newness your minutes allow,
Make us alert with your presence of mind
To fears and longings that move humankind. | 3) Thank you for hopes of the day that will come,
For all the change that will happen in time;
God, for the future our spirits prepare,
Hallow our doubts and redeem us from fear. |
| 2) Thank you, O God, for the time that is past,
For all the values and thoughts that will last.
May we all stagnant tradition ignore,
Leaving behind things that matter no more. | 4) Make us afraid of the thoughts that delay,
Faithful in all the affairs of today;
Keep us, Creator, from playing it safe,
Thank you that now is the time of our life! |

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Closing Prayer

Send thy Holy Spirit to be the guide of all my ways and the sanctifier of my soul and body. Save, defend and build me up in thy fear and love. Give unto me the light of thy countenance, peace from heaven, and the salvation of my soul in the day of the Lord Jesus. **Amen**