

9th July 2023 – Morning Service

Action for Children Sunday

Margaret Bradley

Introduction

The second Sunday of July has traditionally been set aside by the Methodist Church to remember the work of its children's charity, which began 154 years ago today, on 9 July 1869. It was first called the National Children's Home, but this was changed to Action for Children when it was felt that its image required a re-vamp to something which more closely described its current work, rather than putting an emphasis on residential home care. Our worship will be on this theme.

Call to Worship

God says, you are never too old, never too young, to be part of my work. Come near, all who are weak, all who are afraid, all who know their need of me. Shake off the dust of tiredness: come and be refreshed. Shake off the dust of complacency: come and be challenged. Shake off the dust of hesitancy: come and be encouraged to be Christ's hands and feet in the world today.

StF 81 – Now thank we all our God

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1) Now thank we all our God, With hearts and hands and voices, Who wondrous things has done, In whom his world rejoices; Who from our mothers' arms Has blessed us on our way With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today. | 3) All praise and thanks to God The Father now be given, The Son, and him who reigns With them in highest heaven, The one eternal God, Whom earth and heaven adore, For thus it was, is now, And shall be evermore. |
| 2) O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; And keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed, And free us from all ills in this world and the next. | |

Martin Rinkart translated by Catherine Winkworth

Prayer

Holy God, we gather together to join as one in worship to you. You have assured us that we can approach you, unworthy as we are, and that, in our imperfection, you will make us more perfect. We have come to demonstrate how highly we value you, all that you are and all that you do. You brought everything into being and gave us life. In Jesus you came as one of us, born a vulnerable infant, threatened with violence from King Herod. In Jesus you revealed your care and concern for each child and for each adult. Through him you taught us to reflect your respect and compassion in our relationships with one another. Yet there are babies and young people, in our country and abroad, who suffer neglect. Save us from closing our eyes to their need. Quicken us to take action to help them. Move us to give generously so that those who are vulnerable, at risk, isolated and hopeless might be enabled to know life in all its fullness, which you came to offer everyone, in the name of Christ. **Amen.**

How the charity began

'Do what you can for us, sir.' That was the plea Rev Thomas Bowman Stephenson heard from a boy living under the arches of Waterloo Station 154 years ago. At that time there were a lot of poor, homeless children and young people who were in danger of falling into a life of crime. Rev Stephenson wanted to do something to help them and save them for a different kind of life.

With two friends he set about renovating a disused stable where children could be cared for in a loving, safe environment, so that it was a home rather than an institution. On 9 July 1869 two boys, called Fred and George, were admitted into the first Methodist Children's Home in London. Later on, other homes were opened up all over the country, including Princess Alice Home in Birmingham. These were financed by the giving of Methodist members. One of the old ways of fundraising that I remember was the books of 'Sunny Smiles' containing small pictures of children which we sold on to our friends and work colleagues. Money was handed in at a 'Festival of Queens' at Dudley Town Hall.

Stephenson hoped that things would improve and that his homes wouldn't be needed for long. But still today, over 150 years later, there are a lot of children who are vulnerable and at risk, so the work he began continues. Nowadays residential care is only a tiny part of a whole range of services that are provided and the emphasis has shifted away from care homes towards more community-based projects which support families and try to prevent potential problems, to encourage 'early intervention' where support is given before things spiral out of control.

StF 239 – Sent by the Lord am I

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Sent by the Lord am I; | The angels cannot change |
| My hands are ready now | A world of hurt and pain |
| To make the earth the place | Into a world of love, |
| In which the kingdom comes. | Of justice and of peace. |
| Sent by the Lord am I; | The task is mine to do, |
| My hands are ready now | To set it really free. |
| To make the earth the place | Oh, help me to obey; |
| In which the kingdom comes. | Help me to do your will. |

José Aguilar © 1991 Jorge Maldonado CCL No. 515642

The work done today

Nelson Mandela famously said, 'There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children.' Children flourish best where they are able to grow up in a secure and loving family environment. But they don't choose the circumstances they are born into and unfortunately some are born into families where they are sexually and physically abused, neglected, or at risk from their parents' alcohol and drug addiction. Not all of these are in areas of poverty. Affluent homes can have social problems too. AFC finds carers for children who need to be removed from their families, or whose parents are splitting up. This might be in a residential home, or through a foster scheme, or the adoption agency. It specialises in placing children who might not otherwise get a chance to be adopted, maybe because there are brothers and sisters to keep together, or because they have a disability, or because they are older.

There are 6 AFC schools, 4 of them are residential and 2 offer day care. These are for children with emotional, social, physical or learning difficulties. They also provide alternative education for young offenders. When young people get to an age where society deems that they are capable of coping on their own, then AFC assists by helping them to find accommodation. It is the biggest provider in the voluntary sector for leaving care service.

Some children are born with a disability. Almost a third of these are in families who aren't able to buy the extra support and adjustments to make their life easier that wealthier families can afford. So, another part of the work of AFC is providing specialist help and support and respite care for families that feel under high levels of stress and isolation. Short-break care, specialist education, leisure activities are some of the things that are on offer. Our nearest centre is at Walsall, where play schemes and activities are provided for children with disabilities.

Sometimes children are in the position of having to care for parents that are ill or handicapped. The usual caring roles are reversed and young people carry an enormous responsibility of looking after the home and for younger brothers and sisters. Support centres have been set up for them. A Family Centre at Stourbridge offers support for young people aged 8 to 18 living in the Dudley Borough who are young carers. They published a book 'Smiling is Allowed' containing their contributions about the positive side of caring.

An increasing number of teenagers have mental health problems. This hasn't been helped by social media and Facebook, where bullying takes place. So, a new aspect of AFC work is running a 'Blues programme' in selected schools, which helps young people who are starting to show depressive tendencies. Jo Cox, the MP whose life was cut short by an attack, identified loneliness as a serious problem in her constituency. A project that she set up to combat this has been carried on by AFC.

Another aspect of AFC's work involves carrying out research and campaigning on behalf of vulnerable families. The current cost-of-living crisis is affecting everyone, but some are suffering more than others. They have identified our region of the West Midlands as having the highest rate of child poverty. Work isn't always a simple route out of hardship, as one in eight of all workers are paid less than the living wage. The charity makes representations to those in Government who are responsible for framing policy and passing Acts of Parliament.

Over 7000 staff and volunteers operate around 500 services in the UK. In the past two years they have served over 671,000 children, young people and families, of all faiths and of none. The aim is to ensure that those who are most in need can have the opportunity to reach their full potential, despite difficult circumstances and no matter what they have done. Outside the UK there are 23 other countries where AFC is active, particularly in Southern Africa and the Caribbean.

StF 398 – There's a spirit in the air

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1) There's a spirit in the air, Telling Christians everywhere: Praise the love that Christ revealed, Living, working, in our world. | 5) When a stranger's not alone, Where the homeless find a home, Praise the love that Christ revealed, Living, working, in our world. |
| 2) Lose your shyness, find your tongue; Tell the world what God has done: God in Christ has come to stay; Live tomorrow's life today. | 6) May his Spirit fill our praise, Guide our thoughts and change our ways: God in Christ has come to stay; Live tomorrow's life today. |
| 3) When believers break the bread, When a hungry child is fed, Praise the love that Christ revealed, Living, working, in our world. | 7) There's a Spirit in the air, Calling people everywhere: Praise the love that Christ revealed, Living, working, in our world. |
| 4) Still his Spirit leads the fight, Seeing wrong and setting right: God in Christ has come to stay; Live tomorrow's life today. | |

Brian Wren © 1995 Stainer & Bell CCL No. 515642

Reading: James 2:14 - 17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Reading: Matthew 25: 31 - 40

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

The motivation behind the work of Action for Children

Rev Stephenson was moved by a sense of compassion, and his faithfulness and obedience to the way of Jesus, to respond to the desperate situation of destitute and unloved children. He said, 'We believed that God's hand was in the enterprise from the moment we commenced it. Here were my poor little brothers and sisters, sold to hunger and the devil. How could I be free of their blood if I did not try to save some of them?' As Christians we believe that every single person is precious and of value to God, regardless of their situation, their age, their ability, their race or nationality, their economic status, their gender and sexuality. God's love embraces all. That is the Gospel message. It can be received as wonderful news, or it can be an uncomfortable and challenging message to those who are suspicious of people who are not like themselves.

God's intention in creating the world and in giving us life, setting us in families and communities, was that we should live together for mutual support. God's vision is far removed from a society where people are out to obtain the best for themselves and protect their own interests – where the focus is on 'me'. That is our sin, from which Jesus came to save us. Jesus taught that those who are weaker, poorer, needier, have a special place in God's heart. A woman I trained to be a worship leader at one of the churches in our circuit moved to the Potteries to be with one of her sons. She had two children, one of whom was doing very well. He had a steady job with a good income and a settled family life and she knew that she didn't have to worry about him. The other wasn't so fortunately placed and he was struggling. She therefore decided to sell up and live near him so that she could support him. She loved both her children equally, but the one who was in greater need had a particular claim on her attention. And so it is with God.

Matthew's Gospel shows Jesus as a teacher who calls for a new awareness of what it means to do right. He says that he is present in our daily encounter with those who are in need, in those who are weak and vulnerable, and that whenever we feed the hungry, receive the foreigner, give to those who can't afford clothes, care for the sick and visit prisoners, then we are doing it for him. In ignoring them, we reject him.

In the reading from a letter of James, we hear that it's no good having faith if you show no concern for those in need. Such faith is DEAD.

We all share in the responsibility and privilege to provide the best quality of care we can to the thousands of children, young people and families who come through the doors of AFC projects every day. The organisation is one of the UK's leading children's charities and it draws a considerable amount of funding from sources outside Methodism. But it has maintained its independence as a Methodist charity and today I want to encourage you to give generously to it. Today we acknowledge this arm of the church's work, and we pray for a time when it will no longer be needed.

StF 403 – God is love

- 1) God is love: his the care,
Tending each, everywhere.
God is love - all is there!
Jesus came to show him,
That we all might know him:
- 2) None can see God above; neighbours here we can love;
Thus may we Godward move, finding him in others,
Sisters all, and brothers:
- 3) Jesus came, lived and died
For our sake, crucified,
Rose again, glorified;
He was born to save us
By the truth he gave us:
- 4) To our Lord praise we sing -
Light and life, friend and king,
Coming down love to bring,
Pattern for our duty,
Showing God in beauty:

*Ch) Sing aloud, loud, loud!
Sing aloud, loud, loud!
God is good!
God is truth!
God is beauty! Praise him!*

Percy Dearmer

The Action for Children Covenant

Every child has the right to live, to be safe and to be loved. Every young person has the right to be housed, to have enough money to live in dignity and to have enough support for the future. Every young person had the right to justice, to realise their full potential and to be given the space to become independent. In an often cruel and imperfect world, we uphold the work of Action for Children with children in danger, in need and at risk. We support the growth of this work and the pursuit of all these rights for the young, the discounted and the vulnerable. We make this covenant with Action for Children for the sake of all God's children. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

We thank you, God, for your mighty acts in creation and redemption and for the many ways in which you continue to bless our lives. Especially today we thank you for the vision of Thomas Bowman Stephenson and for all those whose work and dedication since 1869 has made possible the continued development of this great enterprise of care.

Prayer of Concern

God of compassion, we pray for those in our society who are under stress and fearful. For those living in tense relationships; for parents who are exhausted and isolated and wondering where to turn; for children who are at risk and afraid. We pray for AFC's many family projects, for its work with victims of abuse, for its youth support and advocacy work for children's rights. We pray for those in AFC schools, residential care, respite care, foster care and adoption schemes. We hold before you Claire Biggs, our Circuit AFC Secretary, and the secretaries of our local churches, as we commit to you this arm of Methodism's work and those members of staff, volunteers and supporters who enable it to continue. May we all express our faith by demonstrating real care for others.

Through our lives and by our prayers: **may your kingdom come.**

God of unity, we pray for the life of your church on every continent, especially today for AFC international work in 23 countries beyond the UK, including the Caribbean, Belize and Southern Africa. In our own land we pray for those who have the responsibility of implementing policies made at the recent Methodist Conference held in Birmingham. We pray for our newly-elected President Rev Gill Newton and Vice President Deacon Kerry Scarlett and for our Youth President Thomas Hart. We commit to you the activities of our circuit in the coming week. May this, and every congregation, be a community of love and a witness to your grace. Through our lives and by our prayers: **may your kingdom come.**

God of hope, we pray for children and young people in every nation, growing up in a dangerous world. We continue to pray for peace and stability in Ukraine, Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, and other places where conflict has led many families and unaccompanied children to flee and seek sanctuary in safe countries. We pray that they might receive the welcome that the holy family received when they fled to Egypt. We pray for those in the Methodist Liaison Office in Jerusalem, who have appealed for our support to persuade the Israeli Government to end its Occupation of Palestinian territories and its policy of incorporating these into the State of Israel. We commit ourselves to praying for strength and perseverance to all Jews, Christians and Muslims who are working for a just and peaceful resolution to the ongoing crisis in this region, and we share your longing for the time when all will live in harmony together. Through our lives and by our prayers: **may your kingdom come.**

God of love, we pray for those know to us who are ill or anxious about their health and for those who have recently been bereaved. Strengthen and uphold them. Through our lives and by our prayers: **may your kingdom come.**

Merciful God, accept these prayers, offered in the name of Jesus. **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 693 – Beauty for brokenness

1) Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in Your suffering world, this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset Your kingdom increase.

3) Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing fields, scorched
earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, His cross for the pain.

2) Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills.
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those
who can't speak.

4) Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams,
Plundered and poisoned, our future,
our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed,
Make us content with the things that we need.

*Ch) God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray,
Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain,
Come change our love from a spark to a flame.*

5) Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
Until Your justice burns brightly again;
Until the nations learn of Your ways,
Seek Your salvation and bring You their praise.

Graham Kendrick © 1993 Make Way Music Ltd CCL No. 515642

Sending out and Blessing

Go forth into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold fast to what is good. Return no-one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the suffering. Honour all men and women. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the blessing of God, Creator, Saviour and Sanctifier, be with each one of us, this day and always. **Amen.**