

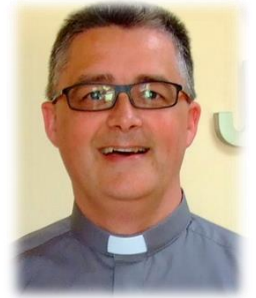


- Safe spaced carol singing across the circuit
- Christmas Day – Pre-Record at Providence



- New Road Christmas Candles!
- Claire's Heart Message from Christmas eve prayer meeting
- Wreathes made by Birch Coppice Youth Group
- Snow, snow, snow!

## January 2021 Letter to the Vale of Stour Churches



Locked down again... Not a great start to the new year but hope is on the horizon and I am glad to hear that some of you have even had your first injections! We rejoice with you at this news. Indeed, brave Brierley Hill Methodist has become a vaccination centre with over 500 people visiting every day. It's great to see such community work done via one of our churches.

As we step into the new year I find myself reflecting on that wonderful verse in Hebrews; ***“Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful”*** (Heb 10:23). I enjoy reading of the Great spiritual Awakening of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the birth of Methodism. It is a fascinating story that shook foundations far and wide as those before us held onto their faith and professed it to others. What a wonderful message to pass forward to us in the face of this current darkness.

This rebirth of evangelicalism was characterised by a renewed sense of conversion – of coming to faith, rooted in a realisation of our position before God, a conviction of our unworthiness and so our need of God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, enabling entry into a new covenant relationship with God.

Some emphasised this 'personal salvation' and created a view of Christianity that isolates us from the world. Thankfully, in the Methodist evangelical tradition, conversion was accompanied by 'a commitment to being active in the world' – seeking the benefit of others, sharing in prayer, bible study and worship thus taking the Good News of Jesus Christ and expressing it physically as we accompany those on the margins of society.

This fresh sense of conversion led to a re-commitment to exploring God's Word. Wesley created 'class' meetings where folk met to pray, study the Bible and be accountable to one another in the journey of faith. And, if it were not for Covid, it had been our intention to launch some new Methodist materials that bring 20<sup>th</sup> century insight into this 'Methodist Way of Life.'

Methodists believe that Christ is God's living word and the Bible, as a collection of books gradually compiled over time, records God's action and voice spoken to and through God's people. The writers express themselves according to their own language, culture and point in history and in different ways they all bear witness to their faith in God and record God's self-revelation ultimately expressed in Jesus.

It is therefore Christ who we follow and this revelation is made new in each generation by the Holy Spirit. This is a subtle but important distinction about the emphasis placed on scripture alone vs 'the interpretation of scripture in the light of tradition, reason and experience.' For me it is about not locking the Bible down to one answer, imagining that this will never change in future generations. We cannot tie the hands of God and there are many examples such as 'women in leadership' where the interpretation of previous generations has now changed.

Finally, the birth of evangelicalism was characterised by a particular focus on the cross, the place where our sin and divine love meet, the wisdom of God that is foolishness to us, the means by which our salvation is made possible through the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection and the lens through which the Bible and all life are truly understood. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:23 "we preach Christ crucified."

In the end I find myself drawn back to Hebrews and the idea that our **hope must be professed**. For it is the very act of sharing Christ crucified that we see God at work in our lives and in the world. It is in the expressing God's love that the grand words above find true meaning. As we dive into a world of need we cling to God's holy and living word seeking the comfort, guidance and encouragement that only Christ can bring.

May we profess our hope for 'he who promised is faithful.'

*May God bless you and keep safe*

**Rev Alan Combes**

*Be still. When words just won't come, Lord, listen to our silence. When the sadness in our hearts feels deeper than the sea, when grief overwhelms us in the maelstrom of life and death, breathe your calming peace into us. Amen*

*Rosalind Parker – Local Preacher*

## Circuit News

**WE PRAY** earnestly for all those known to us who are sick at this time, especially because of Covid and we remember their loved ones who may not be allowed to be with them.

Over the Christmas period we have seen much good work despite the challenges of Tier 4.

- Claire and our youth team continue to support families facing so much time at home and needing creative resources.
- Brierley Hill became a vaccination centre – what a sacrifice and contribution to the community – bless you.
- Birch Coppice Young people went out safe-spaced carol singing to five different locations in one night – BRAVO!
- Overend and Providence also ran safe carol singing outdoors, much appreciated by those who came.
- Methodists across the circuit joined the **Christmas Lunch Project** and helped deliver vital food to families across the area.
- We received greetings from Rev Hustler – Secretary of Conference who reflects on the current debate on same sex relationships and the troubles in America by calling all to see dignity in difference as we seek to live with diversity and live together even though sometimes we disagree.

As we re-enter lock down we continue to provide on-line worship and full text service sheets to keep faith alive and people connected.

- We give thanks for the circuit on-line platform.
- We rejoice at Kinver who have planned and offered Epiphany on-line as well as sustaining old and young through their regular online videos.



Black Country - 800 Christmas Hampers for those in need this Christmas. People across the circuit helped with some of the deliveries.

