

Wesley Day 2020 **Trumpington Parish Church (via Zoom)**
Revd Stephen Burgess

(I suppose I could be described as a cradle Methodist (actually the only one in my own family, but therein is another story), and I am honoured to have been invited to play a part in this Wesley Day service. I trust that for all of us, and not just for quite a few with a Methodist background, our focus this morning on John and Charles Wesley will interest us, and even challenge us in our own journeys in faith.)

John & Charles Wesley: Evangelists and Hymnwriters; there could be much to say about the two brothers in the C18th, but Gareth has already shared something of their role as evangelists in that era. And with a spoiler alert, in a little while Alan Howard will address the Methodist penchant for rousing singing.

I have chosen to concentrate on three accounts, each accompanied by an image – just occasionally Zoom worship has an advantage over being in our own church building.

Firstly, in 1709 the rectory at Epworth, in Lincolnshire, caught fire late one evening. The house was all but destroyed and in the mayhem most of the family escaped, except five-year old John who was seen at an upstairs window. He recalled this event later in his life, that he woke and yelled for help. With no ladder available, parishioners formed a human pyramid and he was pulled clear. It was his mother Susannah, very influential in the children's lives and well into one of her many pregnancies, who regarded John as "a brand plucked from the burning", quoting Zechariah 3:2. Copies of this painting have traditionally hung in numerous Methodist vestries, presumably to inspire ministers and local preachers as they prepare to face their congregations.

(More than 100 years after the fire, Henry Perlee Parker painted "The Rescue of John Wesley from the Epworth Rectory Fire" (1840). This famous illustration matches the basic facts of the family's description of the fire, but Parker also used the illustration to tell another story.

The Reverend James Everett, a well-known Methodist preacher, not only helped Parker with the idea for the painting, he also posed for the artist's depiction of the man ready to receive Wesley from the rescuer at the window. Everett, a critic of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of his day, felt the church was not being true to Wesley. His participation in Wesley's rescue in the painting was a symbol of the role he saw himself playing in the church.

In case anyone missed the not-so-subtle subtext, Everett wrote a booklet sold at viewings of the painting, which drove the point home.)

Secondly, we turn to 1738. By then John was a graduate of Christ Church, Oxford, a priest in the Church of England, and a fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. He had also ministered in America, somewhat unsuccessfully in his view. Aged 35 he was at a low point in his life and records in his extensive journal that on the 24th May he went

to evensong in St Paul's Cathedral where the anthem was Psalm 130: *Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice....* And then he writes:

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.

A conversion experience – often referred to as such – but more sensitively some say his *Aldersgate Experience*. Hence, this Sunday is often called Aldersgate Sunday in the Methodist calendar – and it's why Common Worship places our celebration of John and Charles on 24th May. An ecumenical gesture in some ways, but let's not forget they were both Church of England priests until they day they died.

The large bronze flame stands outside the Museum of London, close to the location of that formative experience in Aldersgate Street, nearby. It contains the excerpt from his journal which I have just read; and on each 24th May, after attending evensong in St Paul's, members of Wesley's Chapel in City Road process there to pray.

Thirdly, a contemporary painting of the event we celebrated last Thursday, Peter Rogers' *The Ascension* from the Methodist Modern Art Collection. I've chosen to show this to bring us into our era, on a foundation from just after the resurrection of Jesus.

Today's gospel reading is from John 17 where Jesus as it were anticipates the story of the ascension. In his *Notes on the New Testament* (alongside his *44 Sermons*, foundation documents for Methodism, together with holy scripture of course) in those notes, John Wesley states enigmatically that this chapter contains the easiest words and the deepest sense of any in scripture – so what a lectionary reading for this day.

And Charles was deeply committed to expressing an ascension theology in his collection of *Hymns for Ascension Day*, one of which is contained in the Ascension Day section of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, i.e. *Hail the day that sees him rise*.

However, in Rogers' painting, based mainly on Acts 1: 6–11, in the centre of the picture Jesus ascends in a whitish-gold cloud, his body already off the ground, arms raised upwards and his head thrust back, almost horizontally, in profile, in a style reminiscent of William Blake. On the left, the two men clad in white are standing in the embrace of a deep-red flame that descends from the heavens and curves beneath them, while on the right a group of disciples, undifferentiated except perhaps for Mary in a brown robe, gaze upwards as Jesus is lost to view within the cloud and ascends to heaven. This all takes place against a black and inky background with a faint glow on the horizon.

Three events, accompanied by three images – each one based in our shared history, but hopefully encouraging us today in our own faith journeys.

Together, we now wait in that in-between time, between Easter and the Ascension, and looking forward to the coming of the Holy Spirit, always present with us yet especially inspiring and challenging us at Pentecost.

We are with those disciples, represented in the painting, gazing upwards – hopefully, expectantly, apprehensively, poignantly; I wonder what our own emotions are.

And in the interim period, as we look back, on events within the histories of our own church traditions, on the events of the earthly life of Jesus. This morning we have pondered:

- That moment when Susannah Wesley felt that John was saved for something special
- That moment when John felt “his heart strangely warmed”, having been reluctant to even attend the meeting
- That moment when Jesus challenged his disciples to continue the Father’s work on earth, as he himself was raised above the whole world.

What moments has God used in your lives and mine, so that we might indeed glorify God in this present age. In Charles Wesley’s words in one of his hymns (not in Hymns A & M, but we’ll forgive the compilers on this one occasion):

*To serve the present age,
my calling to fulfil:
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master’s will*

and looking forward in our troubled world, we pray with so many other Christians:

Thy kingdom come

Next Sunday, Pentecost, we will be celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit – let’s make sure we’re ready!

Amen.