**Dorset South and West Circuit**

Service for Sunday 24 May 2020 by Tony Boyden .

This is ‘’Aldersgate Sunday”, commemorating 24 May 1738 when John Wesley felt his ‘heart strangely warmed’ at a meeting in Aldersgate Street in London. He felt a personal sense of assurance of God’s love. He had known God in his mind but now he experienced him in his heart. This Sunday provides a great opportunity to celebrate the work of God in our lives and to reflect on how we should respond to everything that God has given us.

We begin our worship by singing a recently-written hymn about our new home worship experience.

**Hymn: In our homes we meet to worship.** (R G Huff 2020) *(Sung to Abbot’s Leigh. ‘Lord your Church on earth is seeking’)*

2. If this time indeed is holy, we must keep it truly so.

Even in our isolation, God's rich blessings overflow We avoid the world's distractions, set our minds on things above: Patience, kindness, goodness, mercy faith, joy, peace, abiding love.

1. In our homes, we meet to worship,

far away from sacred space. By the Spirit, Christ is with us, making this a holy place.

In these days of social distance we are called to meet apart.

Still we pray for one another, hold each other in our heart.

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**Prayer of adoration and thanksgiving**

**Prayer of adoration and thanks**

Loving God, it is good to meet through the media to celebrate our life together as your people.

We thank you for lighting a spark of love and commitment in those like John and Charles Wesley who blazed a trail in promoting new approaches in their churches. They showed an evangelical fervour in relaying your word matched by a burning compassion for the least fortunate in society.

We thank you that we can learn from the diversity of tradition across our churches whilst we never forget we are all committed to communicating God’s love in whichever way we worship.

We welcome the insights of faith which are unfamiliar to us and ways of witnessing which challenge us, so that the love of Christ may shine in our lives towards all who we meet. Amen

**Prayer of confession**

Forgive us, loving God,

when we do not accept the diversity of the world; when we forget that we are all your people, loved equally and known to you by name.

for when we thoughtlessly abuse the gifts of your creation

for when we neglect you, and fail to care for others,

for when our prayers are focused on our own selfish concerns

Here is good news for all who put their trust in Christ. Jesus says: ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Amen. Thanks be to God

**Reading:**

In our reading Paul writes to the Roman church about the peace we have with God and the grace and the hope of sharing God’s glory. These have come to us through Jesus Christ and we have received God’s love through the Holy Spirit. It is a love we can trust and is worth suffering for.

**Romans 5:1-5 (from New Revised Standard Version)**

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, wehave peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,**2**through whom we have obtained accessto this grace in which we stand; and weboast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.**3**And not only that, but wealso boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,**4**and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,**5**and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

**Reflection**

It’s often been said that 24 May is the nearest you get to a holy day in Methodism. Listening to a reading from Martin Luther on St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Wesley felt transformed. As he wrote: “I felt I did trust 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.”

The profound change in Wesley was not simply about his personal salvation but also about him committing to bring salvation to others. Thus was set in train a course of events which was to have a world-wide impact. First in Britain Wesley journeyed the length and breadth of the kingdom to evangelise alongside fellow Methodists (as they came to be called. Then Methodism spread to other countries.

The world and time in which Wesley lived was in some ways similar to our own. It was one of rapid change: overpopulation, disease, unemployment, poverty, alcoholism (gin was the drug of choice back then), oppression (particularly in child labour), and high illiteracy. His ministry strung out a net for those who were falling through the cracks of society; the lower classes of people. He was a man motivated by Matthew 25:31-46. He knew the heart of Jesus for the poor and oppressed. His theology was not too heavenly-minded that it was no earthly good. Rather it was a religious framework through which anyone could find God’s love.

It would be incredibly insensitive of me to play down the impact of the current pandemic which has turned so many lives upside down in such a devastating way; the loss of loved ones quite unexpectedly and often without the opportunity to say proper ‘good byes’; the isolation and loneliness of lock-down. Many people will ask, understandably, “Where is God in all this? How could God have allowed this to happen?” And there will be some folks who interpret COVID-19 as a plague visited by God on the world. To me that is not the God made manifest in Jesus Christ. The God I worship would never work in so cruel and indiscriminate a way.

But within this current crisis I have seen God at work in what I can only describe as an outpouring of love from people in all walks of life; church members and those who are not. Of course I am referring to members of our wonderful NHS and care system and all those carrying other essential services. But there’s also the host of volunteers eager to help in whatever way they can; and the many people, the Captain Toms, seeking sponsorship to improve service provision or to help the poor and the marginalised in society who have been particularly affected at this time. And let’s not forget the many small acts of kindness shown by neighbours and total strangers to those finding life a particular struggle.

We all have times when our faith totters along and we experience the kind of doubts that Wesley experienced prior to the Aldersgate meeting. But then, quite suddenly, our eyes can be opened to God at work in the world witnessed in the love and committed service of so many people. That warms my heart- and hopefully yours too.

God never leaves us to suffer alone but stands alongside us even if sometimes unseen or at first unrecognised. In a later chapter of his letter to the Roman Church, Paul talks of a God who loves us with empathy (Romans 8: 22-23) because in Jesus he too had experienced terrible suffering- on the Cross. But we must also remember that Jesus’ resurrection brought reconciliation with God. Through that, Paul assures us, nothing will ever again separate us from his love (Romans 8: 38-39). Despite our current difficulties, what a joyous and inspirational, heart -warming, message of hope and optimism that is! Amen.

**Prayers of intercession**

Let’s focus for a time on issues of concern to us. *(Time for silent reflection and prayer))*

Loving God, in these difficult times, help us to be a light to those who are bereaved, afraid, confused, full of uncertainty and doubt, the lonely and the hungry.

Warm our hearts and inspire us to embrace new opportunities to witness to our faith

Help us through that committed witness and worship to grow the seeds of compassionate love in our communities.

Nurture in us a generous and hospitable approach to all people when we relay the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.

“And can it be that I should gain” was a hymn penned by Charles Wesley in response to his heart also being “strangely warmed” at Pentecost, three days prior to his brother’s experience. What a hymn of rapturous joy it is!

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Hymn: And can it be that I should gain .** (Charles Wesley 1707-88)

4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature’s night; thine eye diffused a quickening ray- I woke, the dungeon flamed with light, my chains fell off , my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

5. No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine! Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine, bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ, my own

1. And can it be that I should gain

an interest in the Saviour’s blood?

Died he for me, who caused his pain?

For me, who him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be

that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

1. ‘Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!

Who can explore his strange design?

In vain the first-born seraph tries

to sound the depths of love divine.

‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,

let angel minds enquire no more.

1. He left his Father’s throne above-

so free, so infinite his grace-

emptied himself of all but love,

and bled for Adam’s helpless race.

‘Tis mercy all, immense and free,

for, O my God, it found out me!

Thank you for being part of worship across the Methodist Circuit by using this service.

May the love of the Father enfold you

The love of the Saviour uphold you

The love of the Spirit surround you

And may you and all those you love know the blessing of God with you this and every day. Amen