

**Aldersgate Sunday 22 May 2022**

**10.30 am service Lichfield Methodist Church**

**JOHN WESLEY'S HEART WARMING EXPERIENCE**

I have been asked to read an extract from John Wesley's Journal for Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738. To put it into context, it refers to a time when he was in a lot of turmoil. He had been baptised and confirmed in the Church of England and later ordained as a priest. He had formed a "Holy Club" of people nick-named "Methodists" at Oxford University who supported one another in trying to live holy lives. He had gone on a mission to Georgia in what were then known as the American Colonies. It had been a failure. He returned with his personal life also a disaster. His struggles eventually led to the events of 24<sup>th</sup> May. This is an extract from his Journal for that day.

*I think it was about five this morning, that I opened my Testament on those words [in 2 Peter 1:4] τὰ μέγιστα ἡμῖν καὶ τίμια ἐπαγγέλματα δεδώρηται, ἵνα διὰ τούτων γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως [Luckily for us Wesley then kindly provided the Authorised Version translation of the Greek!] "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature." Just as I went out, I opened it again on those words, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." [Mark 12:34]. In the afternoon I was asked to go to St. Paul's. The anthem was, "Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice. O let thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint. If thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who may abide it? For there is mercy with thee; therefore shalt thou be feared. O Israel, trust in the Lord: For with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his sins."*

*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.*

John Wesley was an odd bod. His character was lob-sided. In that way he was very like me. You can speak for yourselves! But when I was younger, I couldn't get on with this passage. For one thing, people called it his Conversion, when it did not look like that to me. After all, as I said in the introduction, he had turned to God and accepted Christ for a long time before that. Secondly, I did not like the way people seemed to make this experience normative, when it did not fit me. Thirdly, people seemed to use the passage to insist that feelings and emotions should be expressed in particular ways, and to emphasise them at the expense of thinking. That was definitely not me!

The I discovered that my problems were not with Wesley, but with what many Methodists made of him. When I actually grappled with what he said and wrote, I realised that it did fit me after all.

Wesley's experience that day was not so much a conversion as a piece of the jigsaw of his relationship with God and with himself (and therefore with others) suddenly falling into place. I suspect that we all have pieces of that jigsaw which we have tried to put in the wrong place, or which we have not even got out of the box and into the picture yet. Again, you can speak for yourselves, that has certainly been the case for me, and still is.

The piece of the jigsaw for Wesley was an assurance that he was loved. Many of us may share the desire for that. As I said earlier, Wesley had a disastrous personal life. In 1739 he wrote that “For many years I have been, yea, and still am, hankering after a happiness in loving and being loved by one or another”. That included God. What happened in Aldersgate Street was that he began to feel assured that he was loved by God despite who and what he was. It was the moment when all his strivings ceased and he began to let go and let God be God.

It was a significant moment, but it was not the end of the story. He had to keep returning to it, to letting God be God. He had to learn not to make his own experience or any particular expression of it normative for others. I have had to learn it again and again, as a human being generally and not just as a minister. It is all too easy to dismiss other people as recalcitrant because they are not saying the ‘right’ thing in the ‘right’ way. Instead, I have to listen for what God is doing in someone’s life however they choose to express it, and not just as I would like them to express it.

Wesley was so keen not to impose his experience on others that despite the significance of Aldersgate Street he hardly ever referred to it again, even implicitly. What is more even after it happened, he immediately had doubts about the reality of it, because the experience did not immediately produce frothy expressions of joy in him. Just after the extract earlier he wrote in his Journal for the same day that he had to learn that “peace and victory over sin are essential in the Captain of our salvation but that, as to the transports of joy – that usually attend the beginning of it especially in those who have mourned deeply – God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them according to the counsels of his own will”.

So Wesley discovered that his thinking on the one hand and his feelings and emotions on the other all had a part to play in his relationship with God, in being loved by God and in loving God in return. There is a wonderful prayer in the Orthodox tradition which I think, if he had known it, he would have loved. It is “Put your mind in your heart every morning and worship the Lord”. When we do that, we find ourselves letting go and letting God be God. That is the significance of Aldersgate Street for me.

Ken Howcroft

*The Revd Kenneth G Howcroft*

*Supernumerary Minister in the Tamworth and Lichfield Circuit*

*Former President of the Methodist Conference*