

THE MESSAGE AND MISSION OF METHODISM TODAY

Two hundred and fifty years have come and gone since John and Charles Wesley were converted, and the fire that once glowed with a great white heat has lost something of its brightness. Membership of the Methodist Church in this country has been declining for the past sixty years; many churches have been closed and we do not have sufficient ministers to serve those which remain open. All the celebrations of this year, and all the rejoicing of the past, cannot hide the fact that our impact on society has greatly diminished compared with the fervent force of the Wesleys and their followers which spread like a bush fire throughout our country and our world.

It is good to know that there is a growing membership of 54 million Methodists throughout the world today. In the Reading and Silchester Circuit our membership has shown an increase in each of the past four years. We have more local preachers on our plan today than for many years. We have opened new churches and have become linked with several local ecumenical projects. There is a sense of hope and growth in a number of our churches. Yet we cannot be complacent, and we would do well this year to be reminded of the traditional emphases of our Church and ask God to recall us to our message and mission today.

What is the Message which we proclaim?

We re-examine John Wesley's New Testament teaching under four headings in today's proclamation of the Gospel.

1. Salvation by Faith

Wesley was gripped by a conviction that God in Christ confronts us not with a demand to achieve our own salvation, but with a salvation already accomplished for all mankind in Christ. Repentance, he perceived, meant turning away from self to God; and faith was a willingness to receive the gift of a new life that is already in Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith come through a response to the Holy Spirit working within one's life.

In the proclamation of this Good News, the Cross occupies a central place, but Methodism has never been

eager to formulate a rigid doctrine of the Cross. The divine mystery of God's love in Jesus defies analysis. What matters is the conviction underlying the Methodist witness that on the Cross, Christ - in whom God was incarnate - entered into the depths of human suffering and bore the sin of the world in order that He might unveil the reality of divine love and draw all people into communion with God. This new life, born at the Cross, is, at every stage, a gift of God. It is something done for us and in us, but it cannot be done apart from our co-operation and consent. Conversion, whether sudden or gradual, is the gift of God.

2. Assurance

Assurance relates not to what we have achieved but to what God has done by putting us into a right relationship with Him. It is a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who bears witness in our consciousness that we are of the family of God. Whilst assurance is an awareness of divine love, it finds expression in a moral life - in the fruits of the Spirit. It is characterised by joy and thanksgiving, and it is the mark of Christian experience throughout the ages. Wesley saw that the heart of the Christian Faith is a sense of personal relationship to God and just as a child knows that he is loved by his parents, so the Christian believer may expect to be assured of the love of God and confide in it.

3. Holiness

The Gospel offers to all people the assurance of divine forgiveness. But it does something more: it awakens the passion for holiness, or perfect love and goodness - for a life that conforms in every part to the image of Jesus Christ. John Wesley taught that the goal of the Christian life on earth was perfect love. He believed that it could be reached and that the well-being of the Church depended upon its quest. There have been difficulties with this doctrine, for it asks the question, 'Can we ever be perfect here on earth?', but for Wesley it had a permanent value. It confronts us today with the need to have a great goal and a challenge, 'To present every person perfect in

Christ Jesus, and the quest to grow together in perfect love'.

4. Fellowship

The three previous emphases of Wesley's doctrine are essentially personal, but we must add something of his emphatic call for a life of Fellowship. A Christian knows nothing of solitary religion - and the quest for Salvation, Assurance and Holiness is both personal and corporate. In early Methodism the life of Fellowship was expressed in joyous worship, Holy Communion, the Open Air Celebration and the Band and Class Meeting. Indeed, it can be noted that after his conversion John Wesley's attendance at Holy Communion was more frequent than before. The Fellowship Meeting was one of the great strengths of Methodism, for there was the opportunity to share the Faith and build each other up in love: and through the times of prayer and Bible study the people were given strength to live day by day in the light and by the power of Christ, their Lord. It was through such Fellowship groups that the people were given their passion for evangelism. They had a Gospel which could be shared by all and they rejoiced to communicate to others what they had received themselves.

How is the Message linked with the Mission?

Two words relate our Message and our Mission - EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION. We have an encounter with Christ and we go out into the world as new people: He is our message and we are His messengers. We send out a challenge and a call to all who read this document and are caught up with the celebrations.

1. The Call to Commitment

The 'Rules' laid down by Wesley are still the best guide to our commitment to Jesus Christ and form the basis of our present-day membership ticket. We call upon all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour to accept the need to serve Him in the life of the Church and in the world; to be committed to Worship, Holy Communion, Fellowship and Service, Prayer and Bible Study, and Responsible Giving; to be committed to the working out of faith in daily life, the offering of personal service in the community, the Christian use of their resources, and the support of the

Church in its total world mission.

2. The Call to a Shared Ministry

The genius of John Wesley is seen in the way he used the laity. His preachers became heralds of the Gospel in a way not evident among the priests of the established church. Thousands of Methodist Societies sprang up throughout the world, led by lay men and women. In today's Church there is the rightful place of the ordained minister whom the Church has confirmed as called by Christ to full-time service, but we also call upon the whole Church to use the Local Preacher, the Lay Pastoral Assistant, the new Deaconate Order and all the shared and varied ministries which make up our large circuit.

3. The Call to Warm-Hearted Worship

The warm-hearted worship, which stemmed out of the personal experience of John Wesley, has to be reflected in our present-day services and meetings. Nowhere, perhaps, is the faith of the whole Church more eloquently and cogently set forth than in the hymns of Charles Wesley, which serve as the liturgy of Methodists in public worship and private prayer. They are the exposition of the Bible and the historic creeds which find an expression in the believer's heart. Many of Charles' hymns introduced thousands to the Scriptures and taught them the fundamental truths of the evangelical faith. Today in the new 'Hymns and Psalms', through traditional and modern hymns, we take the opportunity to sing of that which we believe and have experienced.

Mention has already been made of the place of Holy Communion in the Wesleys' life and worship, but John introduced the Agape or Love Feast which had its origin in New Testament times and in the Moravian Church. In 1755 John also called upon his people to share in the Covenant Service, much of it coming from Puritan sources, but it became and still remains one of the finest liturgical services. Alongside the liturgy and order, so necessary in worship, has been the call for freedom and extempore expression of praise and petition, so closely linked with the Spirit-led worship which the warmed heart offers to God.

4. The Call to Mission Alongside the Poor

Stemming from those Oxford days was the fulfilling of the words of Isaiah: 'Bind the broken-hearted, set the prisoner free, give sight to the blind and heal the bruised'. Those visits of the Holy Club to the prisoners in Oxford Jail are closely related to the fact that there is today a Methodist minister appointed to the chaplaincy of almost all our prisons. The setting up of the 'Poor Fund' in each of the Methodist Societies highlighted the fact that the Gospel was Good News for the bodies as well as for the souls. Wesley also set up 'Poor Houses' in many areas to care for the widows, the destitute and the orphaned. He found a doctor to open up one of the first free welfare clinics. The Almshouse Movement and the Methodist Homes for the Aged also took up Wesley's vision. Wesley was a great supporter of Lord Shaftesbury and William Wilberforce in the fight for abolition of slavery. The Trade Union Movement had its roots in Tolpuddle in Dorset where a group of farm labourers in a Methodist Society sought better working conditions. The great caring work of the Central Missions fulfilled a vital role which today is being taken up by the challenge of 'Mission alongside the Poor'. Methodists have followed the motto of their founder all the way down through these past two hundred and fifty years - 'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can'.

5. The Call to Care for the Young

Also arising from those Oxford days, the Wesley brothers saw the need and the potential of young people. John and Charles and the members of the Holy Club went around the streets of Oxford searching out the needy and hungry children, giving shelter to the orphaned, and educating the illiterate. John began one of the first Sunday Schools in America during his short stay in Georgia. Then in the first Methodist Society in Bristol he began a school for miners' children at Kingswood. He built an Orphan House at Newcastle, and another school and shelter for orphans in London. The Sunday School movement, spearheaded by Robert Raikes in 1780, found an abiding place in the life of the

Methodist Church. As a vital part of its mission, and in obedience to the Call of Christ to 'Let the little ones come to me', our Church took up the tremendous work of the National Children's Home, the Christian Endeavour, the Wesley Guild, the Boys' and Girls' Brigade, the Scout and Guide Movement and the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs.

6. The Call to the One Catholic Church

To the end of their lives John and Charles Wesley never wavered in their loyalty and love of the Church of England, but the rift grew as the Methodist Societies became strong and John ordained his preachers to go to Scotland and America. We now find ourselves being drawn closer to the Church of England and the other major denominations. There have been schemes of reunion which have been voted on by our people; in 1968 there was a rejection by the Anglicans to the Anglican/Methodist Proposals, and there was a similar failure of the 1980 Covenant Proposals. Despite these set-backs there have been many unity schemes at local level. Here in the Reading and Silchester Circuit there are focal points of Christians working and worshipping together. There is the Methodist/United Reformed Church at Christchurch, Woodley; the united work at Woosehill with the Anglicans; and for eighteen years there has been united worship at Caversham Park Village, which has recently resulted in the signing of a Covenant between the Anglican, Baptist and Methodist Churches. At Henley the Methodists meet in St Mary's Parish Church, and the latest important ecumenical step forward is the opening of Trinity Church at Lower Earley in November 1987, where ministry and building are shared with the Anglican, Methodist and United Reformed Churches.

7. The Call to Mission

John Wesley travelled some 250,000 miles, mainly on horseback, to tell people of the love of God as he found it in Jesus. He saw the world as his parish, and instructed his preachers, 'You have nothing to do but to save souls; therefore, spend and be spent in this work.' Methodism has always seen its central task as that of reaching out to all people in the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus - 'The Church is for Mission, as coal is for

burning'. This challenge has been taken up in many forms - the Mission Halls, the Camp Meetings, the work of Cliff College, the Christian Commando Campaigns, and, more recently, the initiative of 'Sharing in God's Mission'. In this Circuit we must recognise that mission is our primary task. There are the deep needs of the inner city in central Reading, the particular problems of the rural communities in our circuit, and the virgin mission-field in the vast housing developments, with well over 40,000 new homes planned within our boundaries. In this large Circuit we have the resources, and these must be matched with a burning desire to use those resources in the extension of God's Kingdom and the offering of sacrificial love which is found in Jesus Christ.

EPILOGUE

Such a rich and precious heritage is ours. In a small publication such as this we cannot do justice to all that has been accomplished by the power of Christ's spirit working in the lives of his people. To gain anything like a satisfactory picture one must read much more, both of the foundation of Methodism and local church history. During this year a

number of books are being published to satisfy this need, and a short bibliography is given at the end of this book. Our spiritual heritage and social service are matters for genuine thanksgiving and pride. One thing the story of Methodism certainly reveals is that although the great souls of the past may point the way, only the renewed life of today's Church and people can transform our society. What God did through the Wesleys and Methodism, He can do again today. All people can find the grace of God in Jesus Christ. God has done it in the past and He can do it now. Our heritage bears witness to the transforming power of God and all the preaching and activities within the churches of this Reading and Silchester Circuit seek to be channels along which that power can flow.

The marching song of Charles Wesley is the Call to all Christians today:

A charge to keep I have:
A God to glorify;
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky;

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil: -
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!