Sermon on Charles Wesley

In August 1741 Charles Wesley wrote in his *Journal*, “I discoursed on the healing at the pool of Bethesda for nearly 2 hours…The whole congregation were in tears.”

I hope to do Charles justice tonight.

My aim is to tell you something about Charles Wesley that you did not know before. With a congregation this size that will be a challenge.

i (powerpoint picture of Charles)

Firstly, I wish to look at the complex relationship Charles had with his more famous elder brother, John.

We all know that John was plucked ‘as a brand from the burning’ when Epworth rectory was set on fire, but we forget that Charles was also rescued that night from the fire. In fact, we often overlook that the 14 month-old Charles was there at all.

When Charles was a schoolboy he refused to accept a considerable inheritance from a relative in Ireland because he thought the money ‘would make him too worldly’. The money went instead to another Irish relative who later became Lord Mornington, and whose grandson was Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington.

I take two points from this: firstly, never underestimate the capacity of children for serious religious faith. Secondly, had Charles accepted that money our capital city might have been called *Wesley* – and we might all have been speaking French tonight!

It was when John was absent from Oxford working as his father’s curate in Wroote, near Epworth, that Charles founded the Holy Club, the first Methodists. When John returned to Oxford, John quickly took over the leadership. It was Charles who was recruited by General Oglethorpe to go to the new colony, Georgia, but John decided he wanted to go as well and so joined the trip.

It was Charles also, who was the first to leave Georgia for home. Oglethorpe turned against Charles as they sailed across the Atlantic and even gave away Charles’ bed to another settler – this may have prompted Charles to walk through the colony four times a day from early morning banging a huge drum to call people to worship. This did not endear him to either Oglethorpe or the settlers!

It was Charles who first met the Moravian, Peter Bohler in London whose advice to ‘preach faith until you have it’ helped keep both Charles and John in the ministry after their unhappy time in America.

It was also Charles who had his mystical conversion experience before his more illustrious brother felt his ‘heart strangely warmed.’ We keep Wesley Day on 24 May to commemorate John’s conversion experience, but on the morning of 23 May 1738, Charles had his conversion experience.

Charles was ill at the time and from his bed thought he heard a Mrs Musgrave say to him, ‘Arise and believe and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities.’ But Mrs Musgrave was not at his house and had not visited that day. The voice was actually that of his housekeeper Mrs Turner who had had a strange dream on the (19th) Friday evening when Charles had first been struck with illness. She had dreamt that she had been awoken during the night by loud banging on the door. She got up, opened the door and there was a man dressed in white. ‘Who are you?’ she had asked. “Jesus Christ’, replied the stranger and then gave her this message to relay to Charles. All day Saturday she had been too disturbed by the dream to mention it, but early on Sunday morning she had confided in her brother who had urged her to pass the message on that she had received in the dream.

Charles wrestled with the meaning of this premonition throughout Sunday and Monday, but early on Tuesday 23 May Charles woke recovered in both body and spirit and wrote his conversion hymn: *Where shall my wandering soul begin?* We all know what happened to John later the next day. Charles never did understand why Mrs Turner’s voice had sounded like Mrs Musgrave’s.

What I deduce from this is that we are all called to serve the Lord without looking for thanks and recognition. Without Charles’ leading in those early years, there would have been no Methodism. A supporting role is easily overlooked and overshadowed by the more glamorous – but at the end of the day nearly every one of us is called to play a ‘supporting role’ to someone. Few of us will go down in the history books. But nonetheless, God couldn’t manage without us.

And let us remember that Methodism itself was first raised by God to play a supporting role alongside the Church of England. I believe there is a Methodist way of doing Christianity which can be lived out not just within a Methodist church, but in a whole variety of church traditions. If we take Methodism as a method of engaging in faith, it can sow new seed in many other pastures we have not yet touched. Methodism can play a supporting role across much of the world Church.

Methodism should not be confined to or restrained by the Methodist Church.

ii (banner photo from Rome)

This brings me to Charles’ attitude to separation from the Church of England and sacraments and ministry.

There were two main battles fought and won by John and Charles over the first 5 years following their conversions in 1738. The first was against Predestination and the second, against Stillness.

Stillness was the doctrine becoming popular through both the Quakers and the Moravians that declared Church ministrations such as Holy Communion, baptism, public worship and so on were unhelpful before the individual was inwardly converted by the Holy Spirit, and afterwards were unnecessary and merely a matter of choice.

Both Charles and John were fervently in favour of the worship life, especially sacramental, of the Church. Charles kept the Octave of Easter, for example, celebrating or receiving communion every day of the week after Easter Sunday and he earnestly followed his brother’s teaching on ‘constant communion’.

From 1756 the threat of separation loomed ever larger and Charles famously urged Methodists to ‘continue in the old ship’, but after being barred by his fellow Anglicans from preaching in their pulpits and receiving from their altars, his cause to maintain Methodism within the Church of England was doomed.

Let us today be on our guard against those who make out that the life and ministrations of the Church, its worship, sacraments and ministry are superfluous. Methodism will choke itself to death if it retreats into clubs of private piety, but also pour itself to oblivion if it sees social justice alone as the Methodist thing.

Whilst Methodism starts with the inner ‘warmed heart’ and expresses itself in social justice, Methodism also needs the nourishment of praise and worship and Christian fellowship.

Methodism was ‘born in song’. It shall certainly die if ever it stops singing.

iii (powerpoint of Charles’ journal)

Charles’ life changed dramatically after his marriage to Sally Gwynne. After 16 years of itinerant preaching, facing riots and mobs like his brother, John, Charles settled down to family life with his family in Bristol, although he could still be absent for months at a time on his preaching tours.

Upon marriage, Charles had to agree to stay in bed until 6.00am rather than his usual 4.00am. He also had to agree to get undressed to go to bed. But it seems he stood firm as a vegetarian. He had preached to crowds over 10,000 strong like his brother, but began to feel his main contribution was in writing the hymns that taught the Methodists their faith.

Charles wrote over 5,000 hymns in his life, many of which we still sing around the world today, even if the Americans don’t sing them to their proper tunes.

So whilst very few of us today will ever read a single sermon of John Wesley, the Church today, and well beyond Methodism, will sing Charles’ hymns. So it could be argued the little brother that lived in his brother’s shadow is actually having a greater effect on the life of Christians today than his elder brother.

Certainly, Charles Wesley is a safe ecumenical space where Christians of many denominations can gather.

On 8th September 1748 in Dublin, Charles wrote in his *Journal*:

The Presbyterians say I am a Presbyterian, the Church of England that I am one of theirs, and Catholics that I’m a good Catholic in my heart.

I suspect if Charles were with us tonight, he would ask for no better place to be.

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