

Reflections and Prayers: What might have been?

This is the 8th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are sourced from a variety of people. You are invited to use them for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

What might have been, then and now?



This Sunday, May 24th, is known in Methodist circles worldwide as Aldersgate Sunday, and the day itself Wesley Day, when we commemorate and give thanks for the life and ministry of our founder, the Revd John Wesley, spiritually renewed on that date in 1738. I trust that readers from other traditions will not just bear with us but join with Methodists in celebration. **What might have been had God not raised up John Wesley on that fateful day, or indeed not inspired the conversion of his brother Charles just three days before?**

One answer is that many of us would not be here at all, for we are children of Methodist families and unions, but it also seems highly probable that the political, social and economic landscape of Britain (especially) would be very different today. Mischievous historians sometimes ponder what the nation or the world would look like had crucial events, not least wars (some religious), and revolutions, 'gone the other way'. Think of 1066, 1815, 1918 and 1945. What we do know is that we shall never know.

Photo of John Wesley's statue in the forecourt of Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London

Fast forward to the present: what would you have been doing on this day but for the coronavirus? What was in your diary or on your kitchen calendar? (Go on, look at it.) What is crossed out and might have been? As I begin to draft this, Joan and I would have embarked on the P&O ship *Aurora* in Southampton, heading for the Mediterranean: we would have been in the Crow's Nest lounge, gazing into the sunset westwards down the English Channel, sipping a little something without a care in the world. Maybe you would also have been on holiday or making the final preparations (bearing in mind it's school half-term for many), looking forward to a change of scenery, activity, weather and cuisine. As it is, we are at home: not exactly stuck, but much restricted. Maybe you can think of this time of relative lockdown as that longed-for sabbatical, released from some things even if forbidden from others, but a time to reflect, to take stock.

Photo by Joan Bell, Venice in May 2016, one of the places we shall miss this week. The sight of 76,000-tonne cruise ships making waves by these priceless historic buildings is one to behold!



And so, to a challenging contribution from the Revd Ken Howcroft, former President of the Methodist Conference and currently President of the Queens' Foundation Governors (the ecumenical theological college in Birmingham where all Methodist ministers train), which speaks to Christian people of all traditions.

All Things Made Newly Normal

It is a time of turmoil and great tribulation. Peoples' lives, their livelihoods and the societies they live in seem to be under attack. Someone or something propels the visionary onto the stage. They have been quietly contemplating in private, hunched over their ancient and well-thumbed books. The time has come for them to speak in public. On a screen is a picture of the world in real-time as they have known it. They step forward and press a button. The image on the screen parts and pulls back like curtains. It reveals what is really happening under the surface of things, and what will become visible in the future.

Then they speak in the name of a voice that seems profoundly real, coming from beyond them all. "Behold, I am making all things new." It is a comfort: there will be a future. It is a challenge: things will be different.

But what did Christ's followers, people beyond their number and their governments and agencies whose power was being challenged make of it when they originally heard Revelation 21:5? How do we and the world around us react today? When we hear talk of moving on to a 'new normal' do we think of things being reshaped on the potter's wheel, made new and different? Or do we really just want everything to go back to the way things were before?

I know that I do not have much right to say this because I was a post-war baby born in 1951, but what I have missed in the VE Day commemorations and celebrations is much emphasis on the desire at that time to make a new world, and so make things different for the common good. We can, and probably should, argue about how that was, or could have been or should have been achieved. We can, and probably should, argue about what needs to happen in detail now. Methodists know that it is through Christian conferring that we can best discern what God is doing and requiring of us in the nitty-gritty of things. That includes what the late Lord Donald Soper called the "fellowship of controversy", which is always a fellowship first and a controversy second.

We cannot avoid these painful debates and hard decisions unless we abandon what God is doing in the 'real' world. At the root of everything, we must remember that God is making all things new and calling us to cooperate as the body of Christ in this time and place.

So, I think that we shall have to discuss in detail what the 'new normal' will be for us as individual disciples, and collectively as the body of Christ in each time and place. I am a traditionalist, so I hope that lots of our old ways (including some that we recently seem to have forgotten!) will return. But tradition is not the preservation of old, dead things as if they were Egyptian mummies. It is something living. Sometimes it will be employed by God, and sometimes laid aside by God. What is important from the past needs to be re-expressed in each new context as God makes all things new.

I am also a modernist and therefore I hope that we shall also retain lots of the new, creative ways of being Christ's body using new technologies and skills that we have been learning and developing during lockdown. They too will need sifting to discern what God wishes to employ for a time or lay aside for a time. They too will need recasting and re-expressing as times and contexts change. Just because something is new does not mean that it is automatically valuable and useful over a long time. But just because something is new does not mean that it is automatically valueless, either. We have to remember that it is a parody of the hymn that goes "Like a mighty tortoise moves the Church of God. Children, we are treading where we've always trod"!

John Wesley apparently used to pray "Lord, let me not live to be useless". But as we try to work out what our 'new normal' should be, how do we discern what is 'useful'. The temptation is to concentrate on measurable criteria, performance indicators, success markers. Do not misunderstand me. I believe that the number of people being served by the church, engaging in church activities, becoming disciples and committed members of Christ's body is very important. Similarly, I am for the maintenance of our buildings, business-like stewardship of our finances, and proper governance and administration of our life and institutions. The parable of the talents still applies!

These things are secondary, though. They are not ends in themselves but means to God's end. Before we start to think about what we do as a church, we need to become aware of what it means to be Christ's body. What I would like to see us being driven by is the question "Am I becoming more Christ-like? Are we as a church community becoming more Christ-like?". That involves us increasingly becoming embodiments of the Easter mysteries; in other words, becoming the body of Christ, one with him in both his crucifixion and resurrection. Walking the way of the cross and walking the walk of new life are two sides of the same coin. We are judged by

how much we are a community of openly broken people who are open to be raised to life. In that sense, we must place ourselves into God's hands as the body of Christ through which, in God's own time and way, God will make all things new.

Reflection

John Wesley's life and accomplishments are legendary. He kept a daily Journal, later published in eight volumes of 500 or so pages each, detailing his epic travels on horseback the length and breadth of Great Britain and Ireland (it is estimated that he covered 250,000 miles, thus giving new meaning to the 'Sermon on the Mount'), the places he visited, the people he met and offered hospitality, the reception he received (which was often hostile) to his preaching, both indoors and in the open air. In August 1787, at the age of 84, he

embarked on what became a perilous voyage to the Channel Islands of Guernsey and Jersey, noting on the outward trip in his Journal 'we then judged it best to put in at the Isle of Alderney; but we were very near being shipwrecked in the bay; so we went to prayer, and the wind sprung up instantly. About sunset we landed; and though we had five beds in the same room, slept in peace.' Such is the meticulous and intense detail of Wesley's narrative.



Photos of the tree in Winchelsea, East Sussex, where Wesley preached his last open-air sermon in October 1790.

John Wesley – preacher, evangelist, sermon writer, campaigner against slavery, champion of the poor and underprivileged, educationalist, quiet revolutionary – died in 1791, but what did he make of the 'new normal' he had begun? We shall never know that either, but, what is beyond doubt, his new Methodist movement (so named because of the methodical approach of his associates to worship and prayer – a legacy sustained to this day!) had the most profound impact on patterns of Christian Church, community and society in Britain and, later, across the globe. Thanks be to God.

Today's challenge as we return to public worship

The Government's unequivocal science-based advice is that the coronavirus is much less likely to be transmitted in the open air than indoors. Therefore, as summer beckons, if our churches have gardens or open spaces and the weather is fine, let us worship in the open air (bring your own chairs, observe social distancing, sing unaccompanied) and praise God in faithful Wesleyan style. For Methodists, we can truly claim our heritage in the 'new normal'.

Best of all, God is with us

These are the last words attributed to John Wesley as he died on March 2nd 1791

Reflections and comments, other than Ken Howcroft's, by John Bell.

Note and invitation to readers

I have gathered these reflections and prayers and they include some of my own material. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Many thanks, John