

Waikato Waiariki Synod

Wesley Day

25th May 2014

Wesley Church Tauranga 10am

Methodist Church Te Awamutu 5pm

THEME: Being a Christian the Methodist Way

PREACHER: Vice President Jan Tasker

Sermon

Theme: Being a Christian the Methodist way

Introduction:

In the Methodist Church calendar, the Sunday nearest the 24th May is designated as Wesley Sunday. The significance of the date relates to John Wesley's conversion. In a letter to his brother Samuel dated 30th October 1738; Wesley contends that he was not a Christian 'till May 24th the last.'

This may seem a surprising admission because John had been born into a Christian family. His father, Samuel was an Anglican parson, and his mother Susanna was a devout Christian. What's more John was himself an Anglican priest. He went as a missionary to the Colony of Georgia in America hoping to convert the native Americans, but he returned home two and half years later.

An entry in his diary written during his return voyage home, revealed the depth of disappointment regarding his missionary efforts and his growing discontent with the kind of Christian faith and life he had been living. He wrote in his diary;

"I went to America to convert the Indians but, oh, who shall convert me? Who, what, is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well, nay and believe myself, while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face and my spirit is troubled. Whoever sees me, sees that I want to be a Christian...."

In the evening of the 24th May 1738, Wesley still brooding that his faith lacked courage and conviction, went, *"very unwillingly to a house church in Aldersgate Street where someone was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that God had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."*

This experience changed Wesley's life and faith. It represented a shift from a religion of fear to a religion of love, from a religion of duty to a religion of

freedom. This discovery of the unconditional love of God, after Aldersgate, became the bedrock of Wesley's life and ministry and the heart and life of Methodism.

What is the Methodist way of being Christian?

- Believing in the generosity of God's love.
- Using one's intellect to explore faith issues.
- Working for social justice.
- Tolerating and respecting other people's faith journeys.
- Being open to fresh ways of 'being church.'

What is the Methodist way of being Christian?

1. Believing in the generosity of God's love.

Wesley was called on many times to explain the phenomenal rise of Methodism. He wrote no fewer than ten pamphlets giving his explanation for why so many people, particularly the working classes were committing themselves to Christian faith and practice. Wesley argued that the unusual character of Methodism was not their doctrines or their programmes, but their unusual capacity to love one another. They were no better than others. Certainly not wealthier or more influential than others. Their doctrines were not more orthodox, their worship was not more traditional. They were unusual only because of what they were becoming, because of the free, unconditional love and grace of God in their lives.

Running through all that Wesley said and did there is a strong and pervasive spirit of generosity.

The giving of ourselves in response to the gracious giving of our generous God, is at the heart of Methodist spirituality.

Wesley spelled out what a life lived in response to the generosity of God should look like. Methodist spirituality includes both works of piety (worship and prayer) and works of mercy (acts of compassion and service to others).

What is the Methodist way of being Christian?

2. Using one's intellect to explore faith issues.

As the Methodist movement grew Bishops and clergy in the Anglican Church saw it as a threat to the order of the established Church. Wesley and his small band of lay preachers were quickly branded *enthusiasts*. The Bishop of Exeter published a scathing criticism of Methodist excesses described as ecstasies, raptures, apparitions and visions. But from a faith perspective the most damning criticism was that Wesley and his followers were unreasonable.

In response Wesley published four "*Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion.*" Wesley used his considerable intellectual gifts to argue that the only religion worthy of God was love, the love of God and of all humankind. This love he called the medicine of life, the never failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world. He asked, why do the critics of Methodism object to such a religion and call it unreasonable? If God is love and the Parent of all good, why should anyone call this unreasonable?

For Wesley the bottom line was summed up in his concern that Methodists think for themselves and let others think for themselves.

What is the Methodist way of being Christian?

3. Working for social justice.

Living in England in the middle of the 18th century, where at times unemployment was as high as 40%, Wesley was acutely aware of the sufferings of others. He wrote, "One great reason why the rich, in general have so little sympathy for the poor, is because they so seldom visit them." That was not true of Wesley himself. He *visited many of the sick*. Even while a Fellow at Lincoln College, Oxford Wesley was developing a social conscience. One of his chambermaids came to him after he had paid for some paintings to be hung in his room. It was a cold winter day, and she had nothing to protect her except a thin linen gown. Wesley was going to give her some money from his pocket when he found that he had too little left after paying for the paintings. He was struck by the thought. "*Will your master say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant? You have decorated your walls with the money which might have sheltered this poor creature from the cold.'*"

John Wesley's life provides many illustrations of a theology which is worked out in practice in a spirit of generosity. Wesley organized Methodist congregations to work alongside the poor. Each congregation appointed a steward to see that no money was spent on fancy things. They were to keep account of the money given to help the poor, and if any asked for relief, they were not to give 'neither an ill word, or an ill look. "If they couldn't help,' said Wesley, they shouldn't hurt." In addition congregations were invited to visit the poor and sick and give them support, to relieve their suffering, to advocate for them.

Nevertheless, Wesley realized that the imperative of compassion required more than this. Health clinics were established to provide remedies for the sick. Houses were purchased to look after widows, orphans and the like. Schools were founded to provide free education and loan societies were created to help people set up their own businesses, pay off debts and become financially self-supporting.

The current project of the Methodist Church to work for the eradication of child poverty is an outworking of Wesley's 'imperative of compassion.'

What is the Methodist way of being Christian?

4. Tolerating and respecting other people's faith journey.

Narrow mindedness, bigotry and intolerance have never been the prerogative of one religion, but seems to be found in every religion. There have been far too many Christians throughout history who have suffered because of the ill-informed antagonism and self-righteousness of other believers. Wesley's age has sometimes been called the age of tolerance, but in reality there was more bigotry than tolerance.

Wesley came to accept the riots against Methodists, the antagonism of the clergy but he constantly sought to encourage the people called Methodists not to respond in kind.

Over the period from 1749 to 1752 Wesley appealed to Methodists and other Christians to guard against intolerance and bigotry and to practice a mature and gracious spirit towards others, especially those who attacked them.

It is no co-incidence that Methodists have been to the fore in New Zealand

in fostering ecumenical relations with other denominations. It's in our Methodist genes!

Wesley's teaching on respecting the beliefs of others is timely as here in New Zealand, as in other parts of the world, Christians are beginning to engage in dialogue with people of other living Faiths.

What does it mean to be Christian the Methodist way?

5. Being open to new ways of being Church.

Wesley was a very orthodox Anglican. Pioneering new ways of being church didn't come easy to him, but circumstances forced his hand. Firstly, as the 'Methodist way of being Christian' grew, increasingly Wesley was banned from preaching in Anglican Churches. Here are three excerpts from his Journal in May 1738.

7 May: "I preached at St Lawrence's in the morning, and afterwards at St Katherine Cree's church. I was informed that I was not to preach any more in either of these churches."

9 May. I preached at Great St Helen's to a very numerous congregation...I did not wonder the least when I was afterwards told, 'Sir, you must preach here no more.'

19 May. I preached at St John's Wapping, at three, and at St Benet's, Paul's wharf in the evening. At these churches likewise I was to preach no more."

How was Wesley to communicate with the masses who were eager to hear him expound the Gospel of God's unconditional love and compassion for all? The answer came in the form of a letter from his close friend Rev. George Whitefield. Whitefield had begun preaching outdoors. He was an outstanding preacher and was soon attracting large crowds.

In an entry in his diary dated 27 March 1739, Wesley wrote;

"In the evening, I reached Bristol and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very

lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."

We are told that what finally moved Wesley to do the unthinkable and preach in the open-air was the urging of his mother, Susannah. She told him to put aside his reservations and fears and preach where the masses could hear his message of Good News.

In his journal for the 2nd April 1739 Wesley entered the following; *"At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little rise in the ground adjoining the city of Bristol to about three thousand people."*

For the month of April 1739 alone Wesley preached to around 27,000 people.

The genius of Wesley was his organisational ability. He didn't just preach and convert people. When people responded to his preaching he would organize them into 'class meetings,' where up to twelve people would meet together each week, for prayer and the reading of the Bible. They would each contribute a penny and from the accumulated funds gifts would be made to assist the poor.

Professor Peter Lineham from the Albany campus of Massey University has interpreted the significance of the latest religious census returns for Methodism. .

The lesson that emerged from the census was clear. Unless Methodism finds new ways of being church, especially among the Pakeha sections of New Zealand society, it will not survive.

There are two ways we can respond to this chilling analysis. We can go into denial, and refuse to believe what the census statistics are telling us, or, in keeping with the example of John Wesley we can let the information energise us into finding new ways of being church.

And that is the Methodist way of being Christian! Thanks be to God.

Acknowledgements: Adapted from a sermon prepared by Rev Barry Jones.