

Hymns:     **148**    **“Come, let us with our Lord arise”**  
              **154**    **“Father, I place into your hands”**  
              **347**    **“Crown him with many crowns”**

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Readings:  **Acts 10:34-48**  
              **John 21:15-19**

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### ***“THE PRIORITY OF THE PASTORAL”***

We have John Strawbridge with us this morning – a direct descendant of Robert Strawbridge who was a key figure in the beginnings of Methodism in the USA. That gives me an opportunity to do a little history. John Wesley seems to have turned through 180 degrees in the way he thought about America in the period marked by its rebellion against the English crown. Just before the Revolution he wrote a pamphlet urging calm. He pleaded with those thinking of rising up against their colonial masters to find a more peaceful way of making their case. He dismissed their case for independence – “no taxation without representation”. After all, most people in England could have chanted that particular slogan. And he wondered about what kind of representation was available to slaves. For all that, he did not want the Revolution.

Once the war has been fought, however; and once Americans gained their independence, he was quick to accept the new situation and set about organising for the development of Methodism in the new post-colonial Republic.

How do we account for this radical change of stance? Was it senility? Or opportunism? Simple pragmatism? Or control-freakery?

Whatever the answer to those questions, the direct outcome of all this was that Wesley felt forced to ordain Thomas Coke who was in turn to ordain Francis Asbury to the order of a Bishop so that, the two of them together, could oversee the development of Methodism in America. He took this step reluctantly. It was all about continuity, succession, order – all very important in what were still chaotic times.

Nothing got Wesley into deeper trouble than these ordinations. No step towards an independent and separate Methodist Church in England was more radical or decisive than this one. Wesley knew it would be so. So why did he do it?

At that time, America was part of the diocese of London! So the Bishop of London, a leading cleric in the established Church of England (whose Supreme Governor was none other than the much-reviled King George III), lost his entire American territories when the rebels won their war. All Anglican priests fled for the home country. Wesley was concerned that America had lost its pastors and that disorder loomed. There were people claiming to be Methodists who administered the sacraments without being commissioned to do so. So Wesley appealed to the Lord

Bishop of London to send replacement priests. The Bishop, of course, refused. Several times. And so Wesley decided to ordain people himself for this important work.

Once he do so, of course, the cat was out of the bag. He was declaimed as a heretic, a schismatic, a disturber of the peace. He'd broken the rules, stepped outside his brief, sinned against the Holy Catholic Apostolic Church. He must be punished.

He maintained (and history seems to be on his side) that there was one argument that outweighed all others. Doctrine, Order, the Constitution, the Tradition – these were all important. But not as important as the Pastoral. There were people deprived of the sacrament; they were sheep without a shepherd; exceptional times demanded exceptional measures.

So he acted.

As indeed Jesus would have acted; as indeed he did act. The pastoral must be addressed first:– Jesus did this again and again. You worry about religious ordinances, dogma, the rules, later. The Scribes and the Pharisees would certainly have helped us to understand that.

Just consider this morning's passage from the gospel. After his resurrection, the first piece of directional guidance given by Jesus to his startled disciples was: "don't be afraid". A negative command to give them reassurance. It was followed by this conversation with Peter in which a far from negative instruction is clear: "feed my sheep, tend my lambs." We know that later on Jesus issued his Great Commission – "go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit..." We've tended to interpret this Commission in imperialistic ways. We've tended to suppose that it means a crude kind of evangelising, winning people for Christ, establishing a foothold in all the territories around the Mediterranean Sea. That certainly was the way things worked out. But the message to be taken out in this way would never have been intended as a piece of ecclesiastical imperialism. It was the good news that God cares, that Christ cared, that the followers of Christ are called to care, to tend the lambs, to feed the sheep.

Those post-resurrection fireside chats prioritised the pastoral. And they give us lots to think of.

Three times Jesus asked if Peter loved him. Three times, with increasing vehemence, Peter assured him of his love. Three times Jesus pointed at the only way to prove his love – feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

The injunction "Follow me" comes only when that contract is sealed, the deal is done.

Interestingly, the successor of Peter, Pope Francis, has in the last few days given his signature to a document entitled "The Joy of Love". Over the last two or three years (in two Synods and a questionnaire put out to all Roman Catholic people) he's

been trying to give greater priority to the pastoral in the Roman Catholic Church on questions such as marriage and divorce, Communion for divorcees, respect for those in same sex relationships. He's been trying to balance the traditional and progressive forces in the Church but anyone reading this document will find it easy to conclude where his sympathies lie. The Pope has tried to finesse the polarities but he's clearly pleading for greater pastoral emphasis.

The laws of the Church should always emerge from good practice. They should certainly give us a shape for our daily living, they must be a prop to hold us up, but they must never be a blanket to smother us, a sledgehammer with which to hit us or a buffer to prevent all forward movement.

- Once upon a time, a child born out of wedlock would have been a bastard, ostracised, his wings clipped. Now he can be Archbishop of Canterbury (or Superintendent of Wesley's Chapel).
- Once upon a time divorce was the end of the world for those undergoing it. It was thus for my mother. Mercifully, it's become less so as the cases of two of our children can prove.
- Once upon a time, gay people were obliged to live in the shadows or pretend to be what they weren't. Now, thank God, they can play their full part in their communities and society at large.
- Once upon a time, people of colour were discriminated against or, worse, treated as non-people (though the institution of slavery). Now, mercifully, we are well on the way to becoming a rainbow people.

In order to achieve these advances,

- Codes of practice had to be broken in pieces.
- The law of the land had to be reformed or replaced.
- Social attitudes had to be challenged and changed.
- Custom and tradition had to be questioned and reinterpreted.

The sheep must be fed. The lambs must be looked after. The pastoral must be prioritised.

People are people are people. And it will always be so. We must always believe that there is something of God in everyone. People are often, so often, like sheep who have gone astray. What do you do with sheep who've lost their way? Do you shout at them? Humiliate them? Haul them back into the correct path? Read the riot act?

No.

We must never forget our duty to tend the sheep, feed the lambs, find the lost, lead them back to still waters and green pastures. That's our job. That's our calling.

And it's never a simple, passive assertion. It's a campaigning issue. We have to go out there and do it. Talking about it cannot be enough.

Let me end with a version of one of John Wesley's Sermons – something I wrote for a book some years ago. The sermon is called "A Caution Against bigotry". And this is what I wrote:

- What if we were to see a Roman Catholic, a member of the Orthodox Church, or a Calvinist, doing something that was clearly good? We wouldn't forbid him without being bigots.

Or what if we should see a Unitarian, a Jew, a Muslim or one of my daughter's Buddhist friends doing the same? If we tried, directly or indirectly, to stop such a person, we would be nothing more than bigots.

So, Wesley concludes, we must allow those things to happen if we want to avoid becoming bigots.

- But that's not enough. By no means enough. There's another important step to take.

Wherever good is clearly being done, whoever is doing it, we must acknowledge God's presence, rejoice in his work and praise his name with thanksgiving.

We must encourage the other person, Catholic, Orthodox, Calvinist, Unitarian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist whom God is pleased to employ. We must speak well of them wherever we are; defend their character and their mission; show them kindness in word and deed; enlarge their sphere of action.

- And then, to complete this analysis, John Wesley offers a cautionary word about our instinctive responses to things that disturb us.

We're living in times of great difficulty. Radicalized young Muslims seem ready to become terrorists or suicide-bombers. Their activities create panic and instill a sense of insecurity. They also breed suspicion which sometimes borders on hatred. The population at large, fanned-up by sections of the press, find themselves becoming increasingly negative not only to the perpetrators of evil deeds but to Islam in general. When this happens, there's a real danger that racist and xenophobic anxieties will spill over into society at large. Ordinary citizens identify Muslims as the enemy and the flames of hatred rise even higher.

When there's a clearly recognizable voice that insists on returning evil for evil, giving back medicine of the same kind, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, the voice that simply wants revenge has to be recognised and challenged in all of us.

Wesley ends his sermon with the simple salutary word, we must never let someone else's bigotry turn us into bigots. We must beware at all times of retorting to bigotry with bigotry.

Do you love Jesus?

Do you really love Jesus?

Seriously though – do you in your heart of hearts love Jesus?

If the answer is YES - you'll know exactly what you've got to do. I'm certainly not going to end by repeating the words now. My prayer is that they are firmly imprinted on your hearts.

Amen.