

22<sup>nd</sup> May 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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**HYMNS:** 21 "Born in song"  
390 "My God! I know, I feel thee mine"  
345 "And can it be that I should gain?"

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**READINGS:** Romans 5:1-5  
John 16:12-15

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### ***"THE CHANGE WHICH GOD CAN WORK"***

Today is Trinity Sunday in the calendar of the Church universal – the day when the Church considers the threefold work of God – God as Creator, God as Son, Jesus Christ and God in his ongoing work as the Spirit.

Today is also Aldersgate Sunday for Methodists. This is the Sunday which precedes the 24<sup>th</sup> May – the day of John Wesley's 'heart-warming' experience in Aldersgate, about 10 minutes to the east of us here. We also recall that Charles Wesley had a similar experience three days before John, in a house in Little Britain very close to Aldersgate, too.

Whatever happened on the 21<sup>st</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 and however we or others might describe the experience, it caused a change in the life of the two brothers. Immediately Charles began to write hymns. He quoted Psalm 40 saying, "God put a new song in my heart" – not just one, for that was a great understatement for he wrote over 6000 in his life.

For John the change was a new liberation to preach not just where he was licensed by the Established Church to do it but anywhere and everywhere where people were willing to listen to him.

This coming Tuesday we shall retrace John Wesley's steps on that day in 1738 – starting, as he did, at St. Paul's Cathedral for Evensong and then passing close to the site of the meeting house in Aldersgate Street and then on to the grave of Susanna, his influential mother across the road in Bunhill Fields before returning to the Chapel. We shall do this not just to re-enact the past but to inspire and enthuse the present generation of Methodists with the same zeal as inspired their ancestor, Mr Wesley.

What was it that triggered the change in John Wesley? Well we cannot answer that question in a definitive way. Both John and Charles had long been struggling with the nature of their faith. They had been brought up in a deeply Christian household. Their father was an Anglican priest and their mother was well grounded theologically. She took care to instruct all her children in the Christian faith, taking time to talk to each of them individually each week.

John went to school at Charterhouse; just 15 minutes from here and Charles went to Westminster School. They proceeded to Christ Church College, Oxford, studied theology, set up a group later known as the Holy club for regular prayer, Bible reading and doing charitable work for the needy. They were mocked for their

diligence in religious practice .... they were called Methodists which was certainly not a positive term!

Yet they were still ill at ease. They felt that they did not really have a deep faith or a close relationship with God. John and Charles accepted an invitation to go as missionaries to Georgia with James Oglethorpe's group of settlers. They accepted because they believed that being missionaries to the indigenous Indians as well as to the settlers would confirm and strengthen their faith.

Charles returned very soon – ill and dispirited. John followed – fit in body but still very dispirited and unclear about his faith and his future. The major high point of their time in America for John and Charles had been their meeting with the Moravians, Christians from Germany in whom the brothers Wesley saw a different quality of faith from their own.

So 1738 saw John and Charles back in London, searching for that quality of faith that they had seen so wonderfully at work in the Moravians. John and Charles read the Scriptures, prayed with their friends, attended church worship and the meetings of small Christian groups. Their journals for this period show their spiritual turmoil. They continued to doubt the sort of faith they had – they lacked the assurance that they were loved by God. John spoke of himself as having the faith of a servant rather than the faith of a son.

So John and Charles were certainly seeking for this new quality of faith and for a personal relationship with God in Christ but it is instructive for us to understand what in particular triggered the change in John.

We know from the familiar extract from his journal that John Wesley went very unwillingly in the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 to a religious meeting in Aldersgate where someone was reading from Luther's preface to the letter to the Romans. Our reading for this morning from Romans 5 would undoubtedly have formed a central part of their consideration that evening.

We usually pass over this part of the account of May 24<sup>th</sup> 1738 quickly but I would like us to dwell on it. Firstly of all the letters of Paul the letter to the Christians in Rome has long held pride of place. It is the longest and most detailed unfolding of Paul's thought on the Gospel of God that has power to save all who believe. Paul was not writing an abstract theological treatise – he was writing about his own experience, about the earth-shattering change that God had brought about in his life. On the Damascus Road Paul's dramatic encounter with God changed from being a vindictive persecutor of Jesus' followers into a tireless apostle for Christ. It was in this letter to the young Christian community in Rome that Paul poured out his own beliefs, his own understanding of God's righteousness as he had experienced it himself.

The power of Paul's letter to the Romans brought about life-changing experiences for individuals and provided impetus for religious revival movements over the centuries ever since.

In his early years the great Father of the Church, Augustine, was deeply distraught because his attempts to live a good and moral life had been a failure. On one occasion while walking in the garden he heard a voice say, 'take and read'. He rushed back to where a friend was sitting and where he had left a copy of Paul's letters. He picked it up and read a passage from Romans, a passage which gave him the assurance that he was indeed a child of God and that changed his life.

It was no coincidence that Luther – the pivotal person in the Protestant Reformation – wrote a preface to Paul's letter to the Romans for it had been a major influence on his life and thought, too. As a Professor at the Seminary in Wittenberg, Luther studied Romans with his students. The Church of his day had emphasised good works as being the most significant factor in the life of a Christian. Here in Romans Luther began to grasp what he saw as the true meaning of the Gospel – namely that faith is at the heart of our relationship with God and that faith is a gift from God, not something that human beings earn by their own efforts.

Luther wrote in his preface to Romans that it was 'the most important piece of the New Testament' and 'almost bright enough to illumine the entire Scripture.' In his lengthy introduction Luther says, quite categorically, 'faith is a work of God in us which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God' and again, 'faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain that someone would die a thousand times for it.'

Here was Luther writing not an academic thesis for his students but out of his own experience of embracing the faith that God had offered him.

It was words such as these that John Wesley heard on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 and a heart that was seeking for faith received the assurance long desired.

John Wesley wrote in his Journal: "About a quarter before nine, while someone was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

This was the beginning of a changed life for Wesley. For the first time in his life he realised that faith was a gift to be accepted and a relationship with God to be embraced. His personal experience that evening moved him from the faith of a servant to the faith of a son, from a religion of the head to a faith of the heart and the head.

Unlike many others who had a 'conversion experience' in those years neither John nor Charles had dramatic and extravagant experiences of rebirth. John's was not a hot or overheated heart but one merely 'strangely warmed.' There was still a long spiritual journey ahead of him which would have reverses as well as advances, dry periods of doubt and self-questioning as well as times of joy and exultation

But life had changed for John and Charles. They now had a new outlook on life. John was a man of immense spiritual and mental energies but up until now they had been directed upon himself. Now these energies were released and immediately

directed outward towards his fellow men and women, as he sought to bring them the same liberation he had received.

Wesley changed in ways he could never have imagined – he preached out in the open air, he used the preaching skills of lay people even women. His new movement to renew the church could not be contained, the old wineskins of the Anglican Church could not contain the new wine.

Radical change came about in the life of Paul through his encounter with the living God, radical change came about in the life of Augustine, in the life of Luther and in the life of the Wesley brothers as they accepted faith as a gift from God.

Have we fully realised the change that God can work in us? Have we opened ourselves to accept the faith God offers? Pray God that we have. Amen