

A HEART STRANGELY WARMED

Martin Camroux

How long should a sermon take? I am reminded of the preacher who used to have an hour glass in his pulpit which he used to time his sermon. Sometimes when the hour glass came to an end he would turn it over and say, "This is a very interesting topic. Let's have another glass!" Today it's another glass on the great movement which flow into the life of this Church.

In the 18th Century the Church was facing a new challenge. England was changing and the Churches were increasingly out of touch. This was the time of Industrial Revolution. New great industrial cities were springing up, mills, pits, factories, chimneys belching smoke. The established Church with its alliance of squire and parson had little place in this new world. Often in the new industrial city there were hardly any churches at all, and if there were those living among these dark satanic mills could find little with the old class-ridden church. As for the reformed - they had gone through the fire. They had faced persecution and then social apartheid. They had survived. But they had shrunk in numbers and lost vitality. For the first time the Churches lost contact with a large section of the population.

In this situation comes evangelical revival and at the centre of it John Wesley. He is a minister of the Church with a dry, hard, priggish kind of faith. He goes to America as a missionary. There he refused to allow Nonconformists to receive communion and would not even read the burial service over their graves. If you want to get the feeling of this rather narrow individual look how he treats his girlfriend. When they alone he reads church history to her. She jilts him. He is amazed. Scandalised he excommunicates her from the Church.

But behind this grim exterior something is going on. He begins to have doubts about his faith. All his fanaticism had not brought him an inner peace. His religion seemed a burden not a delight. Then on 24 May 1738 there came a change. As he always did he rose at 5 to read his Greek testament. He felt greatly troubled. Later he went to a service at St. Paul's. What happens next is best told in his own words.

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldergate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for 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".

What does he mean by strangely warmed. When we hear the strangely warmed because he was not an emotional man. It was strange for him to feel strong emotion. As far as we know he never such an experience again in his life. But in this occasion a warm of God's forgiveness ran through him. You notice it was Luther's preface which was being read. For him the heart of

religion moves from external practices dutifully done to a personal inner experience of the love of God.

What follows is amazing. From now on the rest of Wesley's life will be given to sharing his discovery with the world. He comes to recognise who are living in a different world from the Church. He determines to reach them. At the instigation of George Whitfield he begins to preach not simply in churches but to great crowds outside. From his background it was utterly unnatural. He disliked it from the start and aspects of it distressed him all his life but he determined that it was what he to do.

Listen to this about his preaching in Bristol. "I could scarcely reconcile myself to this strange way of preaching in the fields, having been all my life 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. At 4 in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile, proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation".

So Wesley's great ministry begins. Until he was 70 he travelled on horseback all over the country. It's estimated that he travelled 225,000 miles and preached 40,000 sermons. Everywhere he preached little groups of Methodists grew up, And along with the preaching came the singing. How could you reach people who were often illiterate? Wesley give them something to sing. His brother Charles wrote, some of which we still sing.

Well today Methodism is about the willingness to do something different, in a real sense to let the needs of the world set the agenda. Wesley had no intention of founding a Church called Methodism. He had no intention of going field preaching. But in the end both were what had to be done if the needs of the world were to be met. The genius of Wesley was that he listened to the Spirit was doing in the lives of ordinary people and made a theology out of it. The genius of Wesley was that he saw where people were and went out to meet them. Sometimes people talk of the Methodist way of doing things – what I see with Wesley is that different times, different challenges require different solutions.

Secondly evangelical religion is personal religion. With Luther last week we saw the heart of it was the individual experience of saving grace. It is just the same with Wesley. The heart of faith is each individual finding for ourselves. Look at the Wesley hymns. Look at the number of times you see the words me and my in them.

"Tis Mercy All, immense and free,
For, O my God, it found out me".

Or,

"O Thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart."

With Watts you look at the wonders of the world. With Wesley we come to inner place where the love of God breaks into a life. Now there are dangers in this. In the wrong hands it can be introverted in a narrow kind of way. It can become like a fetid hothouse in which you spend all your time looking into your own soul.

But at the end of a day how can faith move a life unless it really got inside you. A lot of religion is simply go through the motions. People sing about experiences they-re never had, they pretend to believe what they really don't, they say creeds without knowing what they means. The question is how is any of that going to change a life?

As someone said: -

"They go to Church on Sunday,
They'll be alright on Monday,
It's just a little habit they've acquired".

A faith like that that is always be liable to go to pieces on the hard facts of life. In Aldersgate Street John discovered a quite different kind of faith. One which springs out of a love you yourself have met with. Not just a pious orthodoxy, but something alive and personal. No one can believe it for you. No one can live it for you. You must make your own way down the path. For Wesley religion is personal. That's what I mean when I say I am an evangelical and why in this Church we claim the inheritance of evangelical faith.

Thirdly for Wesley faith having been experienced must be Look again at the Wesley and notice how often the word perfect occurs in them, often in terms of perfect love. If this experience of God is real it must lead to a changed quality in our lives. Eugene Laubach tells of someone who went to visit an aunt in a country area in the American South. On the Sunday he went with her to Church. The worship was extremely emotional. There was a great deal shouting and jumping. The aunt saw he looked uneasy. "Honey" she said "It aint how they jump that counts. It what they do when they come down".

That's the test of all Christian faith. It's how you live it. The Christian gospel is faith active in love. If it's real get about it. Live it out. Wesley put this wonderfully. He said

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
In all the places you can
At all times you can
To all the people you can
As long as you can.

That's how he lived. God grant it may be true of us also.

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