

A service of worship for use at home
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Sunday May 22nd 2022 – Aldersgate Sunday

Nottingham North East
Methodist Circuit
WWW.NNEMETHODIST.ORG.UK



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Today is Aldersgate Sunday. The day when Methodists all over the world remember the conversion of John Wesley and his brother Charles, the founders of the Methodist Church.

So today we are going to do things a little differently and tell the remarkable story of John Wesley.

Aldersgate Sunday is a great opportunity to celebrate the work of God in our lives, and to reflect on how we should respond to everything that God has given us.

Call to Worship:

Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power
and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen! Hallelujah!

(Revelation 7:12)

Our first hymn was Charles Wesley's hymn written especially for Ascension Day.'

Hymn: Singing the Faith 300

https://youtu.be/7b_ODz_jgTs

Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!
ravished from our wistful eyes! Alleluia!
Christ, awhile to mortals given, Alleluia!
reascends his native heaven: Alleluia!

See! He lifts his hands above; Alleluia!
see! He shows the prints of love; Alleluia!
hark! His gracious lips bestow Alleluia!
blessings on his Church below: Alleluia!

There the glorious triumph waits: Alleluia!
lift your heads, eternal gates; Alleluia!
wide unfold the radiant scene; Alleluia!
take the King of Glory in! Alleluia!

Master, parted from our sight, Alleluia!
high above the azure height, Alleluia!
grant our hearts to you may rise, Alleluia!
following you beyond the skies: Alleluia!

Him though highest heaven receives, Alleluia!
still he loves the earth he leaves; Alleluia!
though returning to his throne, Alleluia!
still he calls the world his own: Alleluia!

Cast ourselves before your throne, Alleluia!
here our heaven of heavens to own, Alleluia!
there we shall with you remain, Alleluia!
Partners of your endless reign: Alleluia!

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Opening Prayer (adapted from a prayer by John Wesley)

O LORD God Almighty, Father of angels and men, we praise and bless your holy name for all your goodness and loving kindness to humanity.

We bless you for our creation, preservation, and for your unceasing generosity to us throughout our lives; But above all, we bless you for your great love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ.

We bless you for bringing us safe to the beginning of a new day.

Grant that this day we fall into no sin, Neither run into any kind of danger.

Keep us, we pray, from all things hurtful to body or soul, and grant us your pardon and peace, so that, being cleansed from all our sins, we might serve you with quiet hearts and minds, and continue in the same until our life's end,

through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. Amen.

Prayer

O God, seeing as there is in Christ Jesus an infinite fullness of all that we can want or desire, may we all receive from him, grace upon grace; grace to pardon our sins, and subdue our iniquities; to justify our persons and to sanctify our souls; and to complete that holy change, that renewal of our hearts, which will enable us to be transformed into the blessed image in which you created us. O make us all acceptable to be partakers of the inheritance of your saints in light. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Psalm 130

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

² Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵ I wait for the LORD; my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Aldersgate Sunday: The Story of John Wesley

Story One: A Brand Plucked from the burning

The story begins in 1703, the 28th of June to be precise, when John Wesley was born, or young 'Jacky' as he was known by the family. John's father Samuel was Rector of a place called Epworth, then a remote spot in Lincolnshire. John was one of 19 children in the family and life was not that easy for the family. It was said that Susannah, John's mother, was very beautiful, but some said she was also very harsh. Bringing up 19 children at that time must have been very hard and she needed to be a disciplined person. The family didn't have much money and in fact two years after John was born his father, Samuel was thrown into debtors' prison in Lincoln Castle. Samuel was a very loyal father, but struggled all his life to keep out of debt. So much of the children's early learning and development of faith and character came from their remarkable mother. His mother was also his teacher and taught the family and other children in their home in Epworth.

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in 1710 she wrote to one of her pupils, Sukey:

'The main thing now to be done is, to lay a good foundation, that you may act upon principles, and be always able to satisfy yourself, and give a good reason to others for the faith that is in you- for anyone who makes a profession of religion, only because it is the custom of the country in which they live or because their parents do so... will never be able to stand in the day of temptation.'

John was six years old when a disaster nearly ended his life. All were asleep in the house when suddenly there were heard cries of 'Fire! Fire!'. Old Samuel stirred himself from his slumber and realised that the thatched roof was on fire. The children were called, and the nurse grabbed Charles and all the other children got out of every door and window to safety. But young Jacky slept on, unaware of the fire that was by now raging. Once the family had assembled outside they realised the horrible truth, Jacky, who was by now at the upstairs window calling out for help, but at the same time, I suspect, making his peace with his maker as he was sure he would not survive. There was no time to fetch a ladder, but one of the villagers saw the problem, bravely ran to the side of the house, another stood on his shoulders and managed to grab John and bring him safely down. The next moment the roof fell in and the house burnt to the ground. In later life, John Wesley reflected on this event and described himself as a 'a brand plucked from the burning'.

So the Wesleys were homeless, but a kind parishioner took them in. It was suspected that the house was deliberately set on fire by some parishioners who did not like Samuel's preaching! Nowadays people either fall asleep or even now fast forward the sermon!!!

Susannah continued to be John's teacher until he was ten years old, when he managed to gain a place at Charterhouse School in London. For John this was a brand-new journey of learning that eventually led him in 1726 to Oxford University and the founding of "The Holy Club". But more of that later.

Hymn: Singing the Faith 364

<https://youtu.be/X-dEfVz6Vms>

O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace!

He speaks; and, listening to his voice,
new life the dead receive;
the mournful, broken hearts rejoice;
the humble poor believe.

My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad
the honours of your name.

See all your sins on Jesus laid:
the Lamb of God was slain;
his soul was once an offering made
that all may heaven gain.

Jesus — the name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health, and peace.

In Christ, our Head, you then shall know,
shall feel, your sins forgiven,
anticipate your heaven below,
and own that love is heaven.

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean,
his blood availed for me.

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Susanna Wesley's Apron Prayer

Help me, Lord, to remember that religion.....is not to be confined to the church, or closet, nor exercised only in prayer and meditation, but that everywhere I am in thy presence.

So may my every word and action have a moral content. May all the happenings of my life prove useful to me. May all things instruct me and afford me an opportunity of exercising some virtue and daily learning and growing toward thy likeness. Amen.

Story Two: A Heart Strangely Warmed

John kept a diary while he was at Oxford and its worn-out pages tell the story of a young man who struggled to pay his way through university. He had very little to live on but needed some expenses such as money, for books, tea and sugar, as well as a horse so he sees his friends the Kirkhams in the Cotswolds! At Oxford he avoided all the drinking and rough behaviour and gathered around himself a group of like-minded people that were nicknamed 'The Holy Club'. He set his sole purpose to get closer to God. He was a very methodical person and not even sleep escaped this treatment. 'I found I wakened every night at around 12 or 1 and would lay awake for some time'. He put this down to his belief that he stayed too long in bed. He bought himself an alarm clock and set it to go off at 7am, then 6am, but he kept waking in the night, so he then set it for 4am and that did the trick! Until his dying day John got up at 4am.

John finished at Oxford. His father wanted him to go back to Epworth and take over as Rector there, but by this time John had other plans. He had met General James Edward Oglethorpe who had the plan to take 10000 debtors from prison and transport them to North America to begin a new life and he wanted John to go with them as their Pastor. Charles, his brother was to join him too. Just before they were to sail their father Samuel died. Susannah insisted that they went rather than stay behind.

All this time John was struggling to find his own faith. The 'brothers Wesley' continued their

strict religious practice on board ship. On board ship there was a religious group, a German group of Moravians. John was so impressed by their Christian witness. They were humble, forgiving. They even willingly took on the lowest of jobs that the English travellers refused to do. Their loving saviour had done more for them' they said. As they were sailing a great storm brewed up. The mainsail was split in two and huge waves came overboard. There was a very real chance that 'the brand plucked from the burning' would be drowned at sea! They survived, but the calm influence of the Moravians lived with John and Charles to the end of their days.

There are many stories to tell about the adventures John and Charles had in America, but not time to do them justice.

Instead, we move forward a few years. They had returned from America on 1st February 1738. John was now living with inner turmoil. He has seen and lived among the Moravians, but he felt he simply did not have their relationship with God. He remembered the words of the Moravian Peter Bohler who told him to 'preach faith until you have it and then, because you have it ... you will preach faith'. He began a small religious community and began preaching in the churches, telling them about 'the love of God for all'. This did not go well! Eventually the doors of churches were shut to him. 'Sir, you must preach here no more.'

Then on May 24th, 1738 he opened his bible at about five in the morning and came across these words, "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should partakers of the divine nature." He read similar words in other places.

That evening he reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate. Someone read from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans. About 8:45 p.m. "while he 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 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."

John had found the faith that he so desperately wanted.

Hymn: Singing the Faith 345

And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
to sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
let angel minds enquire no more.

<https://youtu.be/sQelGbKqiw8>

He left his Father's throne above
so free, so infinite his grace —
emptied himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
for, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray —
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne,
and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Reading: Philippians 2

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Story Three: The World is my Parish

On Monday, 2nd April 1739, John preached his first sermon in the open air. It was reported that he stood on a mound in the brickfields outside Bristol to a crowd of about 3000. This was the beginning of his open-air ministry. From then onwards he preached all over the country. Being shut out of the churches did not stop him, wherever he went he would draw crowds of people wanting to hear his message of God's love for them all. It is said that he travelled over 10,000 miles by horseback preaching his message. Sometimes it was received well and sometimes not! On one occasion, a mill owner emptied the water from his mill into the millpond hoping that would stop the gathered crowd hearing John Preach. John kept a diary throughout his life and is interesting to see how he told the story of his journeys, all over this country and abroad. He even made a few visits to the Nottingham area, although not while any of us were around!

Wesley also saw himself as a medical man, with considerably less success at this than at his preaching! He believed that drinking cold water and taking cold baths could cure most illnesses, but his suggestion of drinking chamomile tea for an upset stomach has survived. For asthma he prescribed dried toad, made into tablets; for a cold he suggested orange peel up your nostrils; for toothache... a clove of garlic in the ear and to cure an Ague, which is remarkably similar to the current covid 19, he suggested pills made out of cobwebs. Perhaps we could offer that as a suggestion?!? Perhaps not! Despite his failed career as a medic, John Wesley's influence lives on. His exclamation that 'the whole world is my Parish' is a reminder of his passion and desire that the good news of Jesus was for everyone. Wesley preached where anyone would hear him. He was a passionate advocate for the abolition of slavery and saw that: "All need to be saved. All may be saved. All may know themselves saved. All may be saved to the uttermost."

In 1791 John preached the last of 42,000 sermons preached over 54 years. On his deathbed he was heard to sing some lines from one of his favourite hymns 'The best of all is; God is with us'

John carried his Field Bible on all his journeys, and this is now a very treasured item which is handed to the New President of Conference every year – they then have to give it back for safekeeping!

It struck me that much of what our Circuit Ministers and Lay Employees and all those contributing to our Methodist way of life are doing is definitely following in John Wesley's footsteps. Many of our Lay Employees are Outreach Workers with some Pastoral Work. They are now communicating God's love through zoom, online, delivery of items for messy church, holiday clubs, craft work, café, choirs in libraries, online ventures, etc. Pastoral work is carrying on with telephone, letters and poems.

John Wesley broke with tradition and preached in the open air – our Ministers, Local Preachers and Lay Employees are now using modern technology to keep in touch and spread the love of God. They are not preaching in the open air but using today's method of spreading the love of God. How can we spread the message of Christ to our communities? Now the lockdown is lifted, are we wanting to return to what we had before, and just revert to our previous way of life? Many of us have been enjoying listening to Sunday services in our own homes – do we want to go out in the rain and cold to go to a Church? Or will we rejoice in a new way of "being Church"? We need to face different challenges to John and Charles Wesley, but we all share the same mission.

The Covenant Prayer

This prayer has been the prayer of Methodists since John Wesley himself.

If you are able, take time to reflect on this beautiful version in song:

https://youtu.be/F3_TjhpK5OY

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

An adaptation of a prayer by John Wesley:

Almighty God, in a time of great need you raised up your servants John and Charles Wesley, and by your spirit inspired them to kindle a flame of sacred love which leaped and ran, an inextinguishable blaze. We pray today for all those who need to feel the warmth these flames of your love. For those in sickness or sorrow today, we pray for the comfort of your Holy Spirit. We pray for those who are dying this day, that they too may know the truth of Wesley's final words, Best of all God is with us. Grant that all those whose hearts have been warmed at these altar fires of the love of God, being continually refreshed by your grace, may be so devoted to the increase of scriptural holiness throughout the land that in this our time of great need, your will may fully and effectively be done on earth as it is in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Use whichever version is your preferred wording

Hymn: StF 610 Best of all is God is with us

Best of all is God is with us,
God will hold and never fail.
Keep that truth when storms are raging,
God remains though faith is frail.

Best of all is God is with us,
life goes on and needs are met,
God is strongest in our weakness.
Love renews, will not forget.

Best of all is God is with us,
hearts are challenged, strangely warmed,
faith is deepened, courage strengthened,
grace received and hope reformed.

Blessing

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 the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.

John Wesley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKJ5siTbOWQ>

Best of all is God is with us,
in our joy and through our pain,
till that final acclamation :
'life is Christ, and death is gain.'

Best of all is God is with us
as we scale eternal heights,
love grows stronger, undiminished ;
earth grows dim by heaven's lights.

Andrew Pratt (b. 1948)

Based on John Wesley's final words.