Eighth Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies:
The Significance of Methodist Teaching and Practice
for Confessing the Apostolic Faith
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CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The Right Reverend Rowan Williams
Bishop of Monmouth

I want, first of all, to share some reflections about the Institute's process and structure itself; I want then to share some thoughts about politics, and then some thoughts about theology. They all pivot around the same set of themes, as you will see. I am also going to ask you to do a little bit of reflecting and talking among yourselves at one or two points because, I think, there is not a great deal of use in my simply standing here haranguing you.

THE INSTITUTE'S PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

Several people have said that they are aware of the ambiguity of meeting in a place like Oxford. Here we are—discussing poverty and need—in a setting that appears to be one of comfort, relaxation, and privilege. And that leads me to my first reflection. Oxford *is* a place of comfort and privilege; it's also another kind of place; and the city of "comfort and privilege" which you have seen is not precisely the city in which I lived for six years. What I should like to ask you is what you have learned this week about Oxford; that is, Oxford as a place to live, a place where actual, rather complex, human beings live. You will also, I trust, have noticed that you can't walk 100 yards in Oxford without meeting somebody who is homeless. An increasingly, those who are homeless on the streets of Oxford are people under 30, some of them with children. The first thing I would like to put to you is what your reaction to that has been. How have you noted, assimilated, the actual concrete poverty that has been before your eyes in the last ten days? (Pause for Reflection).

THE BUSINESS OF LEARNING

What I am getting at, I suppose, is this. Let's say that we did meet somewhere other than Oxford. Could we guarantee that we would listen to the concreteness of *that* place any more than we listen to the concreteness of Oxford? Now, that's an open question; and I don't take it as an argument, one side or the other, for where the Institute should be. I simply offer it to raise a question about structure and process. Behind that, for me, lies a deeper and much more difficult area, where I want to challenge some of what's been done and said here, in the name of being *specific*. As I've heard our discussions, I frequently felt hungry for specificity: and I felt enlightened and nourished when we have actually had the courage, the

imagination, to tell specific stories, and to reflect corporately upon them. Because the danger of talking about "The Poor" (capital "T" and capital "P" as it were) is *abstraction*; and since we are, all of us, engaged in a trade which is, perhaps, more prone than most to being abstract, it is not surprising that we have had some difficulty.

Behind the question of being specific, I think, lies another very large issue about the nature of the Institute, the question of what it's *for*. Somebody the other day made the distinction between an *institute*, as an academic setting in which theses were discussed, points made, understanding (perhaps with luck) advanced by half an inch or so, and, on the other hand, a *conference* where programmes are set out, projects are elaborated, votes are taken, and decisions made. I would want to add a third possible variant to that, which is the *rally*. In a rally, your commitment and your vision are reinforced, your emotions are stirred, your perceptions are, perhaps, intensified. You may not actually learn anything very new. Now I think that the difficulty is that this Institute has included elements of all of those. Some of it has been in the style of the academic conference—good and not so good—but, generally, in the mode of advancing theses and discussing points. Clearly there has also been a kind of groundswell for many people who think that this ought to be a more executive sort of body—it ought to take votes and decisions. And then, at times, we have had elements of the rally. We have—and I don't mean this disparagingly, I am just trying to define a type—we have had our emotions stirred and, perhaps, deepened.

But the question is "What kind of a learning experience has this ten days been?", because in each of those styles of performance the way you learn and what you learn will be different. So, although I won't ask you to discuss this now, that might be something you'd like to take away and ruminate over. What sort of learning did you expect when you came here? What sort of learning have you actually been through while you have been here?

My guess is that this question has been made rather more complicated by a further underlying agenda which is a set of questions about the nature of the Wesleyan identity. And it has been borne in upon me that this is one of the very few occasions where you have space, leisure and opportunity to discuss that question as a kind of church, not in isolation—not in abstraction. So alongside the overt agenda "Good News for the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition" has been the question "what Wesleyan tradition?" – and our conversations have ebbed and flowed, I think, around that issue too. If I were putting it, perhaps, rather bluntly I would say that sometimes it sounds as though being Wesleyan is a good reason for opting for the poor and sometimes it sounded as though the obviousness of the options for the poor is a good reason for remaining Wesleyan (because you can excavate in Wesley quite a lot of things that sound promising).

Now, all of this seems to me inevitable at a meeting of this kind, not dishonest—quite the contrary. I have been very glad that the issue of the identity of the Wesleyan tradition has been around. But it has, I think, contributed to what a number of us (am I right?) have felt: that there has been a certain vagueness of focus in much of what we have said. A vagueness of focus both in theology and in sociology and economics; I think there is a proper responsibility of precision, for those who like to think of themselves as intellectuals, which needs some work here. It was said in the Institute that we could have done with a few economists here. I endorse that. I think it is extremely difficult to talk, in generalizing terms, about the poor

without some very hard-nosed analysis of how deprivation works here, here, here, and here. I don't think we have had enough of that—and I have to say that rather forcefully.

A further thought about process. This Institute has, itself, been a community, a kind of church, as I have hinted. That is to say: here we are, Christians, doing something—even if it is only talking and reflecting together and worshipping together. Our theology ought, at least, sometimes to reflect on that. In other words, there is some theology to be done about this particular community. And if we are asking about "options for the poor," we need to look very hard at who the disenfranchised are in this group; at what it is that concretely binds us together in this church here, this *ecclesiola*; at who makes the decisions, how the nature of the language we share is determined. Those are partly sociological, partly theological questions and it might be worth our asking what is the Good News we have had for one another in this "little church". That focuses, then, the question of where and how you and I have encountered Jesus Christ in the last ten days. I talked about institutes, conferences and rallies a little while ago—and the different modes of learning; I want, now, again, to put to you a specific question which is: What new things do you believe you have seen or discovered about God in Christ in the last ten days? Take a moment of silence to reflect on that and, then again, talk to your neighbour for a couple of minutes. (Pause for reflection)

I am, as you see, trying to see if we can articulate how we have learned and I said that learning was going to be a central theme in what I am talking about; and so I want to next step back from the Institute and its processes and look at why learning might be important in the context of politics overall—so I move now to my second main area of reflection, which is political life.

Listening to the lecture to the Institute from Victorio Araya I was particularly struck by the way in which my own relative poverty came home to me. I mean by that the powerlessness of the well-meaning *bien pensant* liberal intellectuals of the Northern Hemisphere: our political impotence. We live in a world now in which the market, as many people have said, largely works in a way that is not accountable to any particular democratic process. We have areas, we have—you might say—colonies of democracy here and there. We don't, on the whole, have very much political accountability in the world of international money dealing which is why the problem, the agonizing and outrageous problem of third world debt, is so difficulty to address politically, because decisions are made here and there in secret and inaccessible places and, sometimes, by very diffuse means. And the possibilities of democratic structural change in the kind of world we are in are not enormous, to put it mildly. And for somebody like myself, a well-meaning liberal intellectual in the Northern World, part of what poverty means, subjectively for me, is that depotentiation, that erosion of moral accountability; subjectively for me, is that depotentiation, that erosion of moral accountability; accountability, as you might say, replaced by accountancy, in the doings of our world.

The Christian churches are among the relatively few bodies that transcend national boundaries without being primarily commercially oriented (I do say "primarily"). They are one of the few global networks of reflection, information and, within a very modest sphere, empowerment; and I want to say that it's really quite important for the Christian churches to discover themselves as what I should call *trustees of political responsibility.* In a world in which the accountable, the responsible, is not very deeply ingrained in the public life of most of our nations, the church can, at least, keep alive a memory and a practice of human

beings negotiating, collaborating, decision-making, finding the possibility to make small differences by that process of collaboration and life together.

Small differences—but another thing that I have heard, positively, in this Institute, from several quarters, is the importance of affirming the significance of the small scale, not as a sort of alibi for engaging in the larger questions, not as a sort of romanticism of the local, but a serious sober valuation of limited goals of liberation and the gifts and growth of happiness that can happen in Christian life. So, if I were to ask how are churches like mine (and people like me) to engage with the global question of poverty, with the massive structural injustice in the world, I don't think the answer is in evolving a Christian super-economic plan. We haven't got the resources, we haven't got the power. Nor does it lie simply in cultivating intense feelings of solidarity. To go to the dying, starving of the world and, in effect, to say to them "you have no idea how strongly I feel about this," is not particularly Good News! My solidarity, my involvement, my reaction, may lie, as much as anything, in my own resolve, *our* own resolve in the North, to recover *politics*—that is to recover a sense of shared responsibility in our human life, to help persons to become capable of taking decisions, becoming subjects—we have heard that several times. This does not always, or necessarily, happen through the political parties of the First World. You may have noticed that the powerlessness of people like you and me extends, quite considerably, to those who believe themselves to be in power in our world—and one of the painful sights of the last few years has been the posturing of various world leaders claiming power when they are, in fact, so frequently puppets. A church also has a demythologizing role to perform in such a context.

As I have hinted, I am not suggesting that we abandon the public realm for the cultivation of small groups. I am suggesting, though, that the church's practical priority is to be what I've called a trustee of responsibility—which means at least two tasks in a context like mine. That is to make sure that the church does act so as to give people the capacity to make decisions and to remember, too, that this puts questions against our church structures as well as the structures of that mysterious entity called "the world" out there. It means, also, making sure that certain issues are kept before what's left of the public eye; which may mean helping people to write letters to newspapers—maybe something as basic as that. (And for what it's worth, I think that informed and responsible access to the media on the part of the Christian churches is abidingly important and needs a great deal more hard work and planning, than most of us in this country at least have been prepared to put into it.) And we need to attend to the church as a learning community—the church as an educating community. This is where, at long last, I touch base, briefly, with *Wesleyanism*.

I believe that one of the greatest contributions of the Wesleyan tradition to the Christian spectrum has been that sense of Christianity as a learning and growing life and the possibility of so organizing the church's corporate existence that this comes to the fore. It is possible, says Wesleyanism, for the church to see itself and arrange itself as a learning community. Not very long ago, John Hull wrote a rather powerful book called *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning* (SCM London, 1985). A very good question; and one that, I suppose, most of us could ask in our context in different ways. It's at first sight a very Anglican question, in that it seems to presuppose the informed instructor and the passive laity, only trying to reverse the situation. But, in fact, the book decisively overturns any such model. I'd like to think—and

perhaps this is just one of my idle fantasies—that the Wesleyan tradition would find this overturning a slightly less difficult or challenging prospect. Is that so, I wonder? But there is, as I say, built into the Wesleyan identity the priority of learning. I don't mean education in the academic sense; I mean what the fathers of the church sometimes called "the enlargement of the heart"—the "enlargement of the heart" as a process that all Christians must live through; an education of (to use Wesleyan language again) temper and affection; an education of vision.

Education is still an area in which the churches have some resourcefulness and resource. Education always assumes the possibility of change and, in nearly all circumstances, real education is a profoundly religious act. But I think that the church's commitment to educating, in the widest sense, is one that we, certainly in this country and this context, need to keep before us, at a time when, once again, public accountability is being eroded on this matter. The churches have some resources for forcing into the public arena the questions that so many governments now refuse to engage with. How do we induct people into an adult, human community—a community of shared responsibility? So the churches of the North, the rich world, have various things that they can do to show something more than a merely emotive solidarity with the global deprived. They can keep alive, in their own contexts, certain sorts of questions, certain sorts of anxieties to which our "public" life conspires so often to deafen us: the question of accountability and, therefore, the question of repentance—not a word you often hear in public life; the question of what I called "induction" – how do we learn to belong in a community of adults—decision-making, self-aware, hopeful adults? And for all our churches, yours and mine and others, the question must constantly be put back to us: In what ways does the structure and practice of your own ecclesial community prevent people from becoming adults, prevent Christian adults from learning—that is, from the "enlargement of the heart"?

To us that expression gives me my bridge into the third and last section of what I want to say. But before doing that, can I invite you to reflect, briefly, on your own home church base, and think for a moment about how it does and doesn't enable people to become adults in the sense I have tried to outline. (Pause for reflection)

"PARTAKERS OF THE DIVINE NATURE"

Heavenly Adam, life divine,
Change my nature into thine.

I move on to theology: the hymn will be familiar at least to some British Methodists, but maybe to others as well: *"Since the Son has made me free."* It contains in a few stanzas the entire gamut of classical Christian theology in a way that, even for Wesley, is exceptional and wonderful. It tells us why all this business about learning is so important, by sketching out the shape of the Christian project in terms of *coming to stand where Jesus stands* and to be alive with Jesus' life, and to be free with Jesus' freedom. That is why, for the last part of what I want to say, I am taking the two lines quoted as my epigraph.

There are some links that the Wesleyan tradition has with the Eastern Christian world; and it's something that both John and Charles Wesley exemplify in a number of diverse ways. The language so often associated with Eastern Christian spirituality, the language of "deification"—becoming transfigured to the divine life itself—while bold and shocking, is a language, in many ways, very deeply embedded in the roots of Wesleyanism. One can misunderstand deification all too easily. One can see it as a king of mystical union in a flat and undialectical way. One can see it as the acquisition of divine power. But, as I read it, the essence of this notion in the classical Christian tradition in general, and in Wesleyanism in particular, is precisely that notion of "coming to stand where Christ stands."

I want to explore some of the implications of that, by way of focusing what the Good News we are talking about fundamentally is.

First, a brief polemical aside. *The Good News is not about us.* I put that to you as a very serious proposition to reflect on—the Good News is not about us; that is, the "us" here of the wealthy world trying to reconcile itself to the fact of misery and privation. As I said earlier, it is not particularly "good news" for the poor if we go and say we feel terrible about it. The Good News is not my solidarity; the Good News is not my guilt; the Good News is about God; and the Good News is there before my repentance, my uneasiness, my struggle. The Good News is there first. It's about God. It doesn't even say "My God is on your side", but rather "The God who is both yours and mine, and who is neither yours nor mine, is doing a great work which is not dependent on my feeling as guilty and wealthy, which is not dependent on any particular programme—though it will involve any number of particular programmes. The Good News, then, is so often what can be described as a kind of inarticulate pointing – "Look! Look! God!"; "Look! Hope!"; "Look! Christ!"; "Look! Community! Reconciliation!"; "Look! Empowerment!".

With that in mind let me offer you a few thoughts from recent experience as a Christian pastor—the context in which I found myself saying "I think I know what deification might mean."

> About three weeks ago I was confirming, in a parish in the dockland area of Newport, where there is a fair level of (by British standards) privation and an enormous variety of social problems. And the image that stays with me is of a young woman—let's call her "Chrissy"—who is, I think, about 36, and a grandmother. She became a single mother as a teenager, her daughter then became a single mother at much the same age; her daughter then abandoned her child and Chrissy was left with bringing up the child alone. Watching Chrissy sing:
>
> *Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands*
> *That holy things have taken...*
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> was, to me, a moment when I thought I understood, perhaps, a little about deification. The "service" for which Chrissy's hands are being strengthened is a service which, perhaps, none of us is ever likely to write theological treatises about, and yet just such strengthening for service, living with the life of the heavenly Adam, is something with which to begin and

end as pastors and as Christian reflectors. To this we come back constantly; this is what the flesh of it is. It may be only such a moment of seeing Chrissy singing the words of that hymn, taking to herself the great images of Christian tradition, for her dignity—no more than that. But in our worship is a place for her, to see herself and know herself strengthened for service, in and with the life of Christ.

Even more powerfully: exactly eight weeks ago today, I was celebrating the Eucharist at another church in an impoverished part of our city, a church in the middle of an estate of about 20,000 people—one full-time cleric serving the area. The year before, a young lad called Gary had died of AIDS at the age of 8. In memory of Gary's death, the parish priest and one or two others had organized a sponsored walk to raise money for provision for an AIDS hospice in the town. They raised 20,000 pounds by this sponsored walk. Most of that went to the AIDS hospice project, and the residue went to set up a new altar in the church, an altar which was to be dedicated that night, eight weeks ago, in memory of Gary. And on the surface of the altar were engraved the words "In memory of Gary..., 8 years old". The parish priest, in his sermon, said "What we are saying tonight is that when we celebrate the Eucharist, the memorial of Christ's suffering and death at this table, Gary's pain and his parents' pain is held in that everlasting moment of Christ—and that becomes part of the Gospel we preach here in this place". To meet afterwards and talk with Gary's parents was to understand that this was not abstract talk—the Good News was there in their lives and their experience, in just that way...

Heavenly Adam, life divine
Change my nature into thine

More prosaically, perhaps, I think too of a number of projects here and there in the diocese which the Children's Society—what used to be the Church of England Children's Society—has been engaged in, in partnership with our local churches: community development work, in which the diocesan team listens to what the local parish have to say about its needs, moves in, imparts the skills needed to organize a committee and to identify priorities, and moves out again rapidly. Those people in the decaying industrial villages of the valleys have discovered something about being organizers, about taking responsibility, about spending money that they have never had, about making the small difference that is so rare and so precious and so vital, and I say again, "Deification."

I think, lastly, of the story which could be paralleled by many of us from the First World. The President of the British Academy, Dr. Tony Kenny, described his first visit to Crossroads in South Africa, and said that he had gone there in fear and trembling, ready to be hated. And when he stepped out of the car he found he was immediately surrounded by children embracing him, by men and women grasping his hand, by smiles, by affirmation,

and, he said, he felt he had experienced Good News for him in a way that he had never felt before. Why should we expect to be forgiven and welcomed like that? "And can it be that I should gain an interest..." well—in the Good News that the poor have for me? Deification: children hugging the President of the British Academy's knees, once again, a window into deification—the life divine.

All this is perhaps to say that somewhere near the centre of the Gospel is the notion of *the gift that makes us givers.* The gift of Good News is not one that is simply deposited on us and we say "thank you very much, that's lovely". It's a gift which lives only in its being given, a gift that lives in our life, a gift which makes us capable of being givers—and, therefore, also being receivers. Because if you've got a community of givers, you've got a community of receivers, and the grace and the glory of God's gift to us is to make us that, to bind us in that way—givers and receivers. Which is why, finally, it is in the Eucharist that we most focally and centrally understand what it is that we're talking about in terms of the Good News. In the Eucharist we stand with Christ. The gift of the Good News brings us into the life of Christ, oriented towards the source of His being that He calls "Abba"; oriented towards the world which, by His death and resurrection, He restores:

Abba, Father, hear Thy child
Late in Jesus reconciled.

We stand with Christ, receiving into ourselves the fullness of the gift from the one he calls "Abba, Father"; we stand there too, receiving, and bringing with us, the need and the complexity, the mess and pain of our world. We stand there giving praise and thanks to God, and, standing in the middle of God's own giving work to the world, we know there that we have something to give and the freedom to give it. We know that because we receive the endless gifts of Christ's grace.

In the Eucharist, in that standing in Christ's movement towards the source of all things, which is also a movement out to the end of creation, in standing there, in offering with joy and delight the gratuitous language of praise, there we learn what our Good News is. *There,* also, we are judged; *there,* we discover the ways in which we are incapable of giving and of receiving. We discover our enclosedness, our selfishness. We discover, too, the ways in which we cannot hear, cannot receive the gift God longs to give us and cannot receive into our flesh and blood the need of our brothers and sisters. As St. Paul reminds us so forcibly, the Eucharist calls us to the tribunal as well as calling us to the feast: and, I suppose I can only describe the essence of the Eucharistic offering in which we participate as a kind of uneasy ecstasy—a joy so great that it unsettles, that it judges and transforms, a judgement so absolute that we cannot but rejoice that it's also a gift.

To see our Good News in that light is to be taught that every issue of justice and of liberation, when it becomes an issue whose problematic defines our horizon, is in danger of nudging us away from a

Good News which is larger than any one issue. Now, I am not saying that "Good News to the Poor" is *one* issue—it isn't. Precisely what I have said earlier about the variety, the appalling diversity of poverty, should remind us that it is not one issue. But the more we see that agony and that need in terms of a set of problems inviting solutions, the less, maybe, we shall have confidently to say about the Good News. We are outraged and we are judged by poverty because of the greatness of God's promise. Let's not lose sight of that. The judgement, the imperative, is because the endless generosity of God is such that a situation where we cannot be givers and receivers with one another, is a blasphemy. It's appalling because God tells us, in flesh and blood, in death and resurrection, that one world of mutual exclusion of power and dominance is not all that humanity has to say. There is another world, around God's table, and we stand under judgement if we pretend we haven't known this.

CONCLUSION

So my conclusion, such as it is, is that we need always to be retaught, we need always to relearn, why it is that this whole set of questions is, for us, challenge and agony: it is because of the generosity of God. Our goal is not the solving of problems, which would, once again, bring the Good News back to good news about me or us. The goal is not the solving of problems but what we call the Kingdom—that fellowship around the table where we can all have the dignity of givers and the dignity of receivers, the dignity of the generous and the dignity of the beggar, *simultaneously*; where we can rejoice in one another in a way which in our unjust world we can't, because resentment and guilt, fear and blindness, hold back the fullness of our joy in each other.

I can't really *NOT* end with Charles Wesley—and so I shall. I shall simply remind you of the last verse of the greatest hymn in the English language; a hymn which expresses both the profundity of evangelical conversion in its proper sense and depth and glory, the Catholic richness of the life into which that conversion introduces us. I refer, of course, to "And can it be?". Let me remind you of that last verse.

No condemnation now I dread
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine
Alive in Him, my living head
And clothed with righteousness divine
Bold, I approach the Eternal throne
And claim the crown, through Christ, mine own.