

Significantly ordinary – a reappraisal of Wesleyan social ethics in the 21st century.

Does it not seem (and yet this cannot be) that Christianity, true scriptural Christianity, has a tendency, in the process of time, to undermine and destroy itself? For wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches! and riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity. (Wesley, 1789)

Was Mr Wesley right? Is Christianity, especially as he attempted to proclaim it throughout his ministry, doomed to ultimate failure? I suppose it depends what you think the purpose of Christianity is in the first place. Theodore Jennings argues, persuasively to my mind, that Wesley's mission was not the reformation of the Church, nor the renewal of doctrine, but the transformation of the Christian life. Some, maybe even many, have interpreted this in a highly individualistic way, arguing for a personal piety that seeks to remove the believer from worldly concerns. But Jennings challenges this view by attempting to articulate an 'evangelical economics' arising from the various strands present in Wesley's writings. He argues that, though it may seem that Wesley was overly concerned with the minutiae of people's individual pilgrimages (and established pastoral structures that could be seen as a spiritual way of minding other people's business), his real concern was to highlight the spiritual significance of the ordinary. Of course we know that John Wesley was a political conservative, opposed even to democracy. But this belies his economic radicalism. His railing against the settlement brought about in the time of the Emperor Constantine, when the Church was inundated with 'a flood of riches, honours, and powers', (Jennings, 1990, 43) to its ultimate detriment, shows a Wesley deeply discontent with his contemporary economic order. And his 1789 sermon on the 'Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity' (cited in Jennings, 1990, 166), is an indictment of his fellow Methodists who had obviously progressed along the path he laid out - to ultimate ruin.

I begin here as a reminder that the commitment to social justice (and social action to bring it about) is not something injected into British Methodism by the likes of Hugh Price Hughes in the late 19th century, but is something that John Wesley himself would have recognised. Social action is at the very heart of the mission and purpose of Methodism, built on Wesley's profound belief in the power of grace to transform. His fight against the Deists is predicated on the possibility of identifying visible and tangible results of Divine action in the world. They hold to a God far away from the mundane details of human affairs; Wesley preaches the God revealed in a life transformed.

That John Wesley was concerned with a divorce between *liturgia* and *diakonia* in the early Methodist movement is both a comfort and challenge: we might be offered a prescription to the ill if we mine the tradition carefully, but it remains a besetting sin. This divorce, or at the very least a separation, is a reality for 21st century British Methodism. It has become a truism to say that Methodism has retreated very significantly from public life in recent times. The numbers of high profile Methodists in positions of power and influence is given as evidence of how the denomination has dropped well below the radar. And the problem is not simply that there are no longer suitable people to open summer fêtes or refurbished toilets. More serious is the diminishing of tangible connections between the local congregation and the wider political sphere, broadly understood. The words of a former Secretary of Conference to a journalist that 'we were

something, once' ring all too true. Talk of Methodist social engagement does seem to have more than a hint of nostalgia about it.

So are we to take Wesley's analysis seriously? Is it enough to say that the problem stems from Methodists 'getting posh'? Weber and others have long highlighted the power Protestantism has had in improving social mobility, a phenomenon Wesley saw with his own eyes. And it was the tendency of wealth to create a narrative of the undeserving poor that most troubled William Booth and led him to separate from his Methodist contemporaries:

'brought it upon themselves you say? Perhaps so, but that does not excuse our assisting them. You do not demand a certificate of virtue before you drag a drowning creature out of the water, not the assurance that a man has paid his rent before you deliver him from the burning building.' (Booth, 1905)

For Wesley, the advice on the use of money he had offered had only been partially taken up by some in the Methodist movement. Whilst much had been gained and saved, there was a failure to 'give all you can'. There is more than ample evidence of this phenomenon to be found in the bank accounts of 21st century Methodism.

However, the tendency of the middle-classes to retain healthy bank balances to cover contingencies is only part of the picture. Mobility and migration are also key to understanding where British Methodism finds itself today. Until recently, I lived and ministered in the East End of London, a place synonymous with movement. Situated just outside the city Walls, places like Spitalfields, Whitechapel and Bunhill Fields allowed non-Anglicans of most kinds to settle and ply their trade with those within. The current Brick Lane mosque is the symbol of the waves of migrants the area has embraced. This building began life as the French Church for Huguenot refugees and, as such, retains a special place in Methodist history. It was in this church that Wesley himself often preached and, in 1755, it was the site of the very first Methodist Covenant Service. After Wesley's death, it became a Methodist Church, but the local Methodist residents moved on, like their French predecessors, to be replaced by a strong Jewish community. Thus the building became a synagogue before its present designation as the local mosque for the Bangladeshi Muslim community that arrived after the second World War.

Inner city areas are used to receiving the poor and used to watching them leave as they find their feet and move to leafier climes. In some cases, rather than taking their shrines with them, they leave them behind and return on holy days to pray in the places where their ancestors worship. In doing so, of course, a divide begins to emerge - between where worship and discipleship take place. The growth of air travel and the advent of telecommunications means that this phenomenon is no longer restricted to one city or country. Increasingly, the experience of migration is not leaving one place to settling in another. Rather it is about living a hyphenated existence (and identity) in more than one place. One way this has been expressed is in the transfer of membership. For one inner city Methodist Circuit this has meant new members retaining their membership of their home Conferences whilst also choosing to become British Methodists.

The effect of both practices has been to create a physical distance between the worshipping community and those around. For those who commute to pray, there is a question about who now constitutes their neighbours. For both commuters and migrants, where is the locus of their discipleship to be?

Whilst economic and logistical factors have played their part, they are together not a sufficient answer to the reason why a modern separation exists. The political landscape in Europe has altered beyond recognition since the time of Wesley and the place of the Church is now a serious question. The arguments about secularization and the privatization of the Church are well-rehearsed and equally well-contested. I think there is some merit in John Morrow's phrase, the 'captive of the churches' (Morrow, 1995, 44) resonating as it does with the work of the German reformer, Martin Luther. It is useful because it retains a helpful focus on the attitudes and practices of Christians as actors in society rather than as passive recipients (and even victims) of the hostility of others. By highlighting the role of Christian faith communities in recent conflict zones – South Africa, Ireland, the Soviet bloc - he demonstrates that public religion is not necessarily a force for good. But nor is the retreat into pietism or an individualistic notion of salvation. To vacate the public square because it is the place of violence and complexity is to have as much of an influence as engagement. The danger of cooption by the prevailing forces certainly always exists – being drawn into taking sides – but silence is no antidote. The churches in Ireland are still coming to terms with a long and tangled history of sectarianism and are struggling to understand their own place within it. The preaching of a prosperity gospel certainly attracts crowds in British inner-cities but there are few critical voices to challenge its corrosive effect on community cohesion or collective social action to achieve economic change.

This is not to say that the Church has withdrawn from significant social action in the inner city. Far from it! In one inner London Circuit alone sits a Mission to the Homeless and a major hostel to former seafarers and service personnel, alongside other smaller projects. It is also the place where the National Children's Home began its work in the 19th century. But the presence of such significant social projects in a circuit with a relatively small worshipping community raises major questions. Increasingly it appears that those who engage in social action - even that which is done in the name of the Church - do not worship and those who worship do not engage in social action. For many "practicing" Methodists, social action amounts to becoming non-executive directors on a board overseeing work done on their behalf..

In this regard, British Methodism is not unique. The inspiration of the Forward Movement in 19th century Britain has been taken across the world and seen social work in the name of Methodism flourish. The work of the Central Parish Missions of the Uniting Church in Australia is testament to that. Melbourne was unique in establishing a Mission after the church had already been built as the 'Methodist Cathedral' for the city. It was in this Mission that the Sisters of the People did their work, the daughters of some of the wealthiest families in Melbourne, living and ministering in the red-light district of Little Lonsdale Street and among the opium dens of Chinatown. It also saw the ministry of many towering figures, especially Superintendent Sir Irving Benson, who served there many decades. But the marriage between the worshippers of Methodism's Cathedral and the work among the poor has never been an entirely happy one.

This project model of working highlights something that Mr Wesley could not foresee, namely, that we might become the victims of our own success. Not that we have forgotten the poor, but that the work grows so large, that it requires more than a handful of volunteers to run it or even oversee it. Wesley Mission in Melbourne became, by the end of the 20th century, the largest provider of social services after the State government. In the interests of sustainability, it needed to take on a life and structure of its own. We have seen the same thing happen in Britain with the growth of organisations such as NCH Action for Children. This is not a criticism of these organisations. But there is, I think, a general recognition of an issue as to how worship and service are meaningfully related in this context and it raises a question over how such work can be seen as diakonia in its true sense.

If project working is one attempt at reconnecting diakonia and liturgia, or at least, holding the two aspects of the church's life together, the other is through a distinctive diaconate. In the recent past, British Methodism decided to revive a diaconal order of ministry and place it firmly amongst the ranks of the ordained. In doing so, it tried to overcome the Order's past as one that, in many ways, institutionalised the subjugation and marginalisation of women's ministry. No wonder then that the Order closed when women were allowed, to become presbyters. Whilst I have the greatest respect for those who are deacons in the Methodist Church, I have to ask whether we have done them, and the Church, a disservice by naming their ministry in this way. Still ignorance of the place and purpose of a distinctive diaconate remains in the Connexion and even among the members of the Order themselves, there seems to be a lack of clarity with regard to identity. The responsibility for this confusion is not with the diaconate but with the wider Church.

One of the fundamental errors in the revival of the Diaconate was the failure to give attention to the place of deacons in worship. All ministries of the Church should find some sort of expression in worship. As a Church claiming to adhere to the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation, Methodist ministry is grounded in the Word. Indeed, still today, the main act of Methodist worship in the British Connexion is the Preaching Service. The appropriate liturgical role of the deacon is now under discussion and that is to be welcomed, but the initial oversight highlights the need for a much wider conversation regarding the integration of diakonia and liturgia in the Church.

The result of this history is a Church that finds itself in a 'Green Zone' of its own making. And like Green Zones in Baghdad or Kabul, they create the illusion of security and even control whilst remaining totally precarious. This is the result of what Hauerwas described as the 'Church as strategy' model, which 'postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority of targets and threats ... can be managed'. (quoted in Wells, 2000, 124). This use of language drawn from the battlefield is deliberate and helps to clarify the model of engagement currently in operation as well as its redundancy. Recent history has demonstrated that Green Zones are not places from which either victory or peace can be achieved. They are evidence of a stalemate and the need for an alternative model.

The church, as a society of the liberated, is thus the necessary paradigm that can offer us imaginative possibilities of social relations otherwise not thought possible. (Hauerwas, 1986, 76)

Imagination, possibility and relationship are key to the work of reconciliation, whether religious or secular in motivation. The insights from this work might be able to offer something to a church seeking to move beyond the Green Zone.

Paul is clear to the Corinthian Christians that the ministry of reconciliation is not committed to the powerful: 'We have this treasure in clay jars'. So reconciliation cannot be entered into from a position of strength or a desire to overwhelm. For most conflicts, it is usually only entered into when other strategies have failed, including the use of significant physical force. Only when force and power have been shown not to work, that insurgencies cannot have a military solution, do the parties to a conflict seek a different way.

Whilst the Church would eschew any notion of the use of force or violence in its work, underlying much of its nostalgia is a desire for dominance. An age where church going was mandatory and behaviour was regulated by Christian morals may be more myth than history, but

the desire for it speaks of a power now lost. The Church finds itself bereft of the influence and resources it believes itself once to have had. The need for control remains, only the means are lacking.

What would the Church look like if it actively embraced its powerlessness? What if we moved beyond mere identification with the ‘cause’ of the poor and instead become poor and powerless? (Hauerwas, Servant, 380) This would entail deconstructing the walls around the Green Zone, and seeking to redirect our trust and security. As such, it is an incredibly risky undertaking. Bill Clinton highlighted the challenges of building a world without walls in 2002, shortly after the attacks of 9/11 when the natural reaction was to build higher defences (Clinton, 2002). Clinton argues that when under attack, the temptation to hit back or withdraw is great, and may even be effective in the first instance. But such strategies lose their effectiveness over time. If the Church has unwittingly adopted this stance, it must now recognize the need to relearn the language of interdependence.

Among people who are used to being dominated (and whose response is, therefore, one of passivity), a Church willing to embrace its own powerlessness offers an imaginative shift that opens new possibilities. Key among these new possibilities is a change in the dynamics of relationship, a chance to transcend the transactional paradigms of the past as the Church moves beyond the safety of its donor role. A re-evaluation of the nature of friendship would, in my view, help the Church to a new self-understanding.

I have spent the last five years involved in a scholarship programme for young Israelis and Palestinians, based in London. Part of the reason it is based outside the Middle East is to allow the creation of an alternative space offering some sort of equality. Students from various parts of Israel-Palestine are able to meet for the first time. Many who hear about this programme immediately invest it with all kinds of hopes and expectations. For some, there is quickly disappointment that a small group of young people cannot achieve in three years what politicians of all kinds have failed to achieve in seven decades. At the heart of the programme is the offering of a meeting place and the chance to develop friendships on different terms than those experienced in the region. How that will play itself out in the future is an open question.

Christians are wont to overlook the significance of friendship in their reading of the Gospels. The contemporary Church has succumbed to the notion that kinship and marriage are significantly more important types of relationship than mere friendship. Yet, in the life of Jesus, it is those intentional bonds of friendship that figure most prominently – no-one greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s *friends* (John 13:13). Despite our best attempts at subversion, Paul’s qualities of love (in I Cor 13) were not written about marriage. This was a love that characterized the bonds between Christians as a whole.

The reason I think friendship is a useful concept is because there is an implied mutuality in it. Friendship has the ability to transcend divisions and hierarchies. It is possible to be friends with people who are higher or lower in social ranking. There does not need to be a balancing of power before a friendship begins but friendship provides the space where attention to the issues of power can be addressed. Friendship demands no special training or qualification. It is something that must be intentional and personal. It demands intimacy and a sense of vulnerability. It cannot be undertaken as a project, nor can it be worked into a nationwide strategy. It is the place where Hauerwas’ faithfulness is most clearly worked out because it is a relationship demanding of trust, honour and mutual respect. New social relations are, in Wells’ words, ‘learning to be friends with people very different’ (2000, 131).

This is why reconciliation work speaks of building positive relationships as a key aspect of sustainable peace building. It is not about processes, theories or policies. Reconciliation is an incarnational process – it is when, as Blessed John Henry Newman puts it, ‘Heart speaks to heart’. Or, as John Wesley highlighted in his sermon on the Catholic Spirit, ‘Is your heart with my heart? Then give me your hand, my friend.’ Within the context of friendships, stories are told and heard and new stories shaped by common experiences; a place where the sharing of resources becomes negotiated hospitality rather than charitable donation. It is in its sheer ordinariness that the transformative power of friendship lies.

If action for social justice, diakonia, looks different in the context of friendship, what effect will this have on worship, liturgia? If worship currently feels like it is constructed to serve the structures of kinship, a family affair cut off from external threats, how can it be reformed? Liturgy can become our social ethic when we cease to try to separate worship from social justice. In the context of friendships built with the poor and the powerless, the Church aims not to Christianize the secular, but to affirm and celebrate that which is already sanctified by the presence of God. Seeking the truth in order to articulate it for the voiceless becomes the chief task of the pastoral liturgist. In this, we look to the experience we have gained from the pastoral offices. On countless occasions, families have been helped to find meaning in their grief through the careful conduct of the funeral rite. Children have been welcomed into communities and love celebrated. Liturgies able to bear the weight of scripture, tradition and human emotion, have been lovingly constructed by those who are attentive to the experiences of others. The preaching that inspires and transforms is to be found in the extraordinary narratives of ordinary lives lived well.

John Morrow warns against the search for the big gesture or the dramatic action, though they may occasionally be necessary. Instead he looks to Jean Vanier, founder of the l’Arche Communities to provide the encouragement to seek the small and the ordinary, by ‘welcoming with compassion those with whom we live and work, those who threaten us, because they are different, those who hurt us, our enemies, because they tread on our toes The basis of true human life is a rooting in the earth of faithful relationships It will be from there that each of us may become an agent of change and of love for the whole of society.’ (*The Broken Body*, quoted in Morrow, 1995, 52-3) Wesley was onto something when he personalised his appeal to holiness. We do him and the Methodist heritage a disservice if we simply individualise it and make it about ourselves. The worship we offer and the service we render must be conducted in the company of friends if it is to honour the friend who laid down his life.

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