Preaching in this cathedral, and from this pulpit, is, I can tell you, an inspiring and humbling experience. Not only are one’s fellow preachers professors of theology, but there are ghosts here of distinguished preachers past – just like this eighteenth-century Dean on my left. They seem to stare at you, as though to say, ‘Who is this that he should presume to speak in this place of ours?’ And there is no more humbling moment than waiting to mount the pulpit steps, and standing on an inscription, dedicated to those giants of preachers, John and Charles Wesley, both undergraduates here in the 1720s, and both ordained in this cathedral.

This coming Wednesday, the Church of England commemorates the Wesley brothers - as Evangelists and Hymn Writers. Charles certainly wins the prize for the latter, and we’re singing two of his 6,000 hymns this morning, but it’s John, the older brother, I want to talk about.

I

John Wesley was born in 1703, the thirteenth child in a family of nineteen children. His father was Vicar of Epworth in Lincolnshire. John’s Christian upbringing was stern and determined. At ten he was sent away to London to board at the Charterhouse. Life there was hard, and he was often cold and hungry. One Victorian biographer says that ‘John Wesley
entered Charterhouse a saint, and left it a sinner.’ As a former Headmaster of that school, I’m bound to wonder whether that can possibly be true.

John came up to Christ Church in 1720, and lived a typical undergraduate life, at least so far as funds allowed. His father urged him to consider ordination. This was in those days a natural enough step for a gentleman to take, and essential if he was to become a college fellow. But for Wesley, ordination had to be taken seriously, and to prepare, he set about a rigorous pursuit of religious discipline. He was ordained deacon here in 1725, and elected a fellow of Lincoln. He joined what was mocked in Oxford as the ‘Holy Club’, meeting with friends for Bible study and prayer, and pledging himself to assist the needy and destitute.

In 1735, John set sail with Charles for the new colony of Georgia as a missionary to the native Americans. This proved a disastrous episode, including a fractious love affair. Worst of all, Wesley felt that all his good Christian intentions, and all his strict religious adherence, were just straw in the wind. ‘I went to America to convert the Indians,’ he confided, ‘but who shall convert me?’ He felt a failure and a sinner, unforgiven and unloved.

But then, on 24 May 1738, when Wesley was 34, everything seemed to change. The story is well known. He went ‘unwillingly’, he says, to a Christian meeting in Aldersgate Street in London. A man was reading from Luther’s Preface to Paul’s Letter to the Romans. ‘About a quarter before nine, 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.’

This is a classic Evangelical conversion because it’s dramatic; it’s emotional; it includes release from guilt and judgment; and that release, that freedom, comes through faith in Christ, and faith alone. Interestingly, just three days before, Charles Wesley had experienced something very similar. The hymn he wrote to commemorate what he called his ‘day of salvation’ describes the intense relief that accompanies this typical conversion:

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.

II

Well, I don’t know about you, but I’ve never had an experience like this. There are plenty of Christians who have, or say they have, or think they have, but I’m not one of them. And I guess that’s probably the case for most of us. So I want to ask whether this kind of experience is necessary,
whether it’s essential, whether those who haven’t known it, are missing out, or are deficient in their faith. And perhaps one way to try to answer this is to compare other classic cases of Christian conversion - the most famous, and by far the most influential of which, are St Paul’s, St Augustine’s, and Martin Luther’s.

1) St Paul, Saul of Tarsus as he was, was a proud, zealous Jew: ‘a Hebrew born and bred; in my attitude to the law, a Pharisee; in pious zeal, a persecutor of the church; in legal rectitude, faultless.’ But on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, carrying a mandate from the High Priest to arrest followers of Jesus, the book of Acts tells us he saw a literally blinding light, and heard the voice of the risen Christ: ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ Three days later, he recovers his sight, is baptised, and begins his mammoth work of preaching the Gospel to the world.

Unlike the Wesleys’ experience, there’s no previous frustration in Saul, no feelings of guilt and religious failure. On the contrary, he was brimming with self-righteousness. But the conversion is most certainly dramatic, indeed the most dramatic on record. And it had to be. This is the most extreme volte-face. One minute Saul is setting out to arrest followers of a crucified blasphemer; the next he encounters him alive, risen from the dead - the Christ, the Messiah after all. This total and instant change, this sudden birth of faith, could not have been achieved without such a striking intervention.
2) Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, is as much about Christian conversion as it is about a shipwreck. In one stanza the poet contrasts the conversions of St Paul and St Augustine of Hippo:

With an anvil-ding,

And with fire in him, forge thy will;

Or rather, rather then, stealing as Spring

Through him, melt him, but master him still:

Whether at once, as once at a crash Paul,

Or as Austin, a lingering-out sweet skill,

Make mercy in all of us, out of us all

Mastery, but be adored, but be adored, King.

Augustine’s ‘lingering out sweet skill’ started with years of philosophical disputes and battles with the flesh. ‘Make me chaste’, he’d famously prayed, ‘but not yet’! Augustine had been brought up by a devout Christian mother, and had ‘drunk in with his mother’s milk the love for the Lord’s Name.’ But lust and pagan ideas kept faith at bay. His *Confessions* describes a long journey of conversion, culminating in an extraordinary experience:

‘I once probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets. I was weeping with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain, “Take it and read, take it and read.’ At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used
to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture, and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. So I hurried back to the place where I had put down the book containing Paul’s Epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: \textit{Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites.} It was as though the light of confidence flooded my heart, and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.’

This is similar to John Wesley’s experience. There’s a Christian background; there’s dissatisfaction with the life being led; and then there’s a sudden, dramatic enlightenment, and one also inspired by Paul’s letter to the Romans. But in this case there’s no conviction of forgiveness through faith in Christ. Instead, there’s a realisation that God is real and present; that he knows what’s in our hearts; and speaks to us, personally and directly. But the biggest difference is that for Augustine this experience is not the end but just the beginning of a lifelong search for truth. It’s a crucial step, but a step on the way.

3) Finally, there’s the case of Martin Luther. As a monk, Luther had devoted himself to fasting and penance, and showed the same kind of zeal as Paul and Wesley. And like Wesley and Augustine, he felt a deep spiritual malaise. However hard he tried, he felt he couldn’t satisfy God’s righteousness. It was his reading too of Romans that brought a sudden
enlightenment and conversion. ‘At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the words *He who through faith is righteous shall live.* Here I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt that I was altogether born again, and had entered paradise through open gates.’ This could be John Wesley speaking. It was, of course, Luther’s conviction of justification by faith alone that informed the Reformation, and those 95 Theses that Luther’s said to have nailed to the church door in Wittenberg, 500 years ago.

III

Well, what are to make of these famous examples of Christian conversion? What do they have in common? And should we be concerned if we haven’t experienced anything like them?

Paul’s is the most dramatic and explosive and stands on its own. It had to be dramatic in order to convert a pious Pharisee who was busy persecuting the Church into the greatest of saints and apostles. Perhaps a dramatic intervention is needed if someone converts to Christian faith suddenly, and from atheism or humanism, or from another religion. Such conversions happen from time to time, but there’s usually a period of preparation - when conversations are happening, books are being read, or prayers said.
That’s the case with Augustine, Luther and Wesley. All three have a Christian background, they know what the religion is about, at least from the outside. Luther and Wesley both strive hard to please God and win forgiveness, and Augustine is unhappy that he doesn’t try harder. All three are frustrated – Wesley and Luther feel unloved, and judged harshly by a righteous God. And then comes a moment of revelation and enlightenment. Augustine realises that God knows him intimately, and wants him to believe wholeheartedly, and follow his ways. Luther and Wesley realise that they cannot please God and be saved by their own efforts. That has to be a gift, and comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

I think the most important message in all this is that God treats each one of us uniquely. It isn’t a matter of ‘one size fits all.’ God knows us better than we know ourselves, and he will move, inspire, convert, in ways that are best for us. For some people, there will be a moment when the scales fall from their eyes, when the penny drops, when they’re ‘born again’, and see clearly the truth of God, or feel powerfully his love or mercy. For others, and I suspect for most of us, there’s a journey, and often a long one, in which all sorts of different things will prompt and nudge us. It may be an event, an incident, that makes us see things differently. Or it may be a sermon or a book; it may be a prayer answered, or a wonderful coincidence, or a sense of God’s comfort when we, or those we love, are in pain or distress. For others, it may be a Christian life observed, or a picture, or a poem, or a piece of music. For some, the turning-point will be a sense of forgiveness; for others, a better understanding of God, or the Church, or the world.
But what is clear, I think, is that Christian faith, if it’s to be real and whole, and not just something habitual and formal, needs at some point, or points, to convert from something external to ourselves, to something acknowledged and internalised, something assented and committed to. To put it another way, belief that there is a God, incarnate in Jesus Christ who saves us, needs to be turned, not just into faith, but into trust in that God and his salvation. And that’s a gift of grace; something we should certainly pray for, but which only God can give. ‘O God, I believe; help thou my unbelief.’ Amen