



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**21 June 2020: Matins Sermon**

**The Second Sunday after Trinity**

**Tercentenary of Charles Wesley's arrival at Christ Church**

**Psalm 48; Deuteronomy 11: 1-15; Acts 27: 1-12**

**The Revd Canon Sarah Foot, Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History**

+ In the name of ...

This week we mark the tercentenary of John Wesley's entry to Christ Church on 24 June 1720 and matriculation on 18 July, which we celebrated with a festal evensong last Friday. After a student career in which, according to his biographer Robert Southey, his manners were free and cheerful and his disposition to uninterrupted labour displayed itself in wit and vivacity, he graduated in 1724, and was ordained deacon in this Cathedral in September 1725. He served as a curate in his father's parish in Epworth and was ordained priest in 1728 but returned to Oxford to a fellowship at Lincoln College in 1729. He then took over the leadership of the so-called Holy Club, established by his brother Charles. In fact, a network of clubs involving several colleges, including Christ Church, its members sought to live a more holy, apostolic life, devoted to prayer, bible study, receipt of the sacraments and service to others. Some of their contemporaries nicknamed them 'Methodists', a term that Wesley would later come to adopt with pride.

Writing in maturity, Wesley was inclined to dismiss his Oxford activities as focused unduly on works. In his journal in 1738, he wrote that he had then had 'the faith of a servant, although not that of a son'. But it is clear that he failed to achieve in Oxford the renewal of the doctrine, discipline and practice of the early Church that he had sought. So, he and Charles accepted invitations from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to go to the recently established colony of Georgia as a missionary to the Native Americans. He wrote in his Journal, 'Our end in leaving our native country was not to avoid want (God having given us plenty of temporal blessings) nor to gain the dung or dross of riches or honour; but singly this—to save our souls; to live wholly to the glory of God.' Wesley and his companions set sail from Gravesend in October 1735 on a ship called the *Simmonds*, together with a party of twenty-six German-

speaking Moravians, who planned to join a group of their compatriots who had preceded them to America.

Wesley's published Journal begins with the voyage to Georgia and provides a self-conscious account of his devotional life and spiritual experiences on board ship. He took particular interest in the religious worship of the Moravians, attending their services regularly throughout the voyage. The Moravians believed themselves direct descendants of John Hus's fifteenth-century movement to reform the Bohemian Church; in exile in Saxony, they had maintained a form of religious life based closely on the New Testament church as revealed in Scripture. It was their aim to revive true Christianity by restoring the piety and general liturgical reforms of primitive Christianity; this (together with their adherence to episcopacy) made them attractive to Wesley.

Even before they had left the English Channel, Wesley struggled with the winter storms that battered the ship, especially at night. He lamented frequently in his diary his own unworthiness and lack of faith, because of his unwillingness to die: 'Oh, how pure in heart must he be, who would rejoice to appear before God at a moment's warning!', he wrote one January night. Out in the Atlantic, the force of the storms grew much worse, and Wesley knew real fear. Yet he was struck by how differently the Moravians responded to the same dangers. Having already noted their meekness, willingness to perform menial tasks for other passengers and their refusal to take offence or complain if they suffered injury, Wesley was presented one Sunday, in his own words, with an opportunity of establishing whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger and revenge:

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their noon service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward, "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die." [Wesley Journal, Sunday 25 Jan 1736]

Already all too conscious of his own spiritual frailties, this episode had a significant impact on Wesley's growing religious doubt.

That encounter with followers of Christ whose faith – in the face of peril – was more sincere than Wesley's own provides a link with the second of today's Matins readings. We heard Luke's account in Acts of the start of Paul's final Mediterranean journey, the voyage that would take him

from the coast of modern Turkey, west towards Rome where he faced trial, and probable martyrdom. The passage described the journey of the group of prisoners with their guard, the centurion Julius, as they hopped from port to port along the coast of Asia Minor, sheltered from the worst of the prevailing winds by the island of Cyprus, until they reached a safe haven on the south side of Crete.

In late autumn, after the fast for the Day of Atonement, sailing had become dangerous. Luke portrayed Paul as a prophet able to foresee that things would go wrong if they persisted at sea. He skilfully used classical motifs about sea voyages, storms and shipwrecks to create a first-person narrative that conformed closely to the Greek literary genre of sea-travel literature. We do not need to read beyond the extract we heard to recognise the artifice that Luke used to set up a predictable conclusion to the journey. Paul warned of the dangers to the ship and to those on board, yet no one heeded his warnings; the storm that he foresaw did indeed materialise, with the inevitable consequence of the shipwreck on Malta.

Crossing the Atlantic during the storms of winter, John Wesley cannot but have had Paul's journey in mind. He was equally familiar with the classical literary accounts of the dangers of sea-borne travel and with psalm verses that talk of God's power over the surging sea (Ps 89:9), or 'the east wind that shatters the ships of Tarshish' (Ps 48:7). Filled with his own fervent desire to spread the gospel among the 'poor heathens' in America, Wesley found that it was his own faith which his travel tested. An encounter soon after landing in Georgia with one of the German pastors, who asked him directly, "Do you know Jesus Christ? ... do you know that he has saved you?" left Wesley uttering what he feared were vain words. On his voyage back to England in January 1738 he confided in his journal, 'I went to America to convert the Indians, but Oh! Who shall convert me?' (24 Jan 1738)

As is well known, it was in May that same year, attending a Moravian chapel in Aldersgate Street in London, that Wesley had the profound religious experience that led to his heart feeling strangely warmed and gave him the confidence to assert that he did trust in Christ, in Christ alone for salvation; that Christ had saved him from the law of sin and death. Although he would later break with them, the Moravians had exercised a profound influence on his spiritual development. It was a Moravian friend Peter Böhler who persuaded him to be open to the possibility of sudden moments of revelatory experience, that God might speak to him when he least expected it. For Wesley, that epiphany did not happen while he was travelling – his experiences on the stormy Atlantic only seemed to fill him with doubt and a sense of the

weakness of his faith. Yet he returned to London profoundly altered by his encounters on board ship and on American soil.

In the current circumstances in which we find ourselves, similar travel to widen our horizons is impossible. But there have been unexpected blessings from the cessation of most activities of normal urban life during this long period of lockdown, which has brought us closer to the natural world, more conscious of the wonders of creation in our midst. Is it possible that we, too, might encounter God in places and contexts that we had not anticipated?

As we continue to journey in uncertainty through the complexities thrown up by coronavirus and the difficulties of restarting the economy, we could profitably heed the advice that Böhler gave to John Wesley. Sudden spiritual experiences are available to anyone able to open themselves to the possibility that God might speak to them through their lives. Those who have been blessed with such epiphanic moments in the past know that they sometimes occur in sacred places, in church services, often on receipt of sacraments. Being denied the opportunity to return to collective worship is perhaps especially painful because it threatens to continue to separate us from encounters with the numinous. But we need to remember that such experiences can also be found when least we expect them – in moments of solitude at home, in the garden, in a socially-distanced queue to enter a shop, even while exercising.

On this occasion when we mark the tercentenary of John Wesley's matriculation in Oxford, we give thanks for the part that Christ Church played in his early formation, for Wesley's work as a missionary and evangelist, and for the revival of holiness in his day which led to the creation of the Methodist movement. Offering our prayers for the Methodist church today, for the unity of the world-wide churches, and for a safe return to collective worship, let us pray in words written by John and Charles Wesley's mother, Susannah:

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.