

CHARLES & JOHN WESLEY MAY 2016

Commemorations and celebrations are very much a part of life. Throughout the year we have family birthdays and anniversaries, and there are national events which are remembered and celebrated. In a few weeks' time the whole country will be celebrating the Queen's 90th birthday with street parties, and we will be having our own party for the Queen after church on Sunday 12th June. It's still a matter of regret that she wasn't able to attend The Queen's Birthday Bash held in her honour last month. What a night she missed!!!!

The Church too has its roll-call of saints and the special days on which we commemorate them. Two weeks after the Queen's official birthday will be St. Peter's Day and our own Patronal Festival.

Last Tuesday was a special day of celebration and commemoration for our friends in the Methodist Church. For them the 24th May is called Aldersgate Day because in 1738, within a few days of each other, both Charles and John Wesley underwent a conversion experience during meetings of the "Holy Club" which met in Aldersgate Street in London. The Holy Club had been founded by Charles as he and likeminded friends decided to take religion seriously and committed themselves to the study of the Bible, to prayer, fasting, and charitable works. Charles Wesley was at this time ordained as a clergyman of the C of E, but ordination had merely been a convention, a necessity to becoming a fellow of Oxford.

John Wesley, Charles' elder brother, had also been ordained but, a bit like Martin Luther, couldn't find any assurance in the faith. On a return from an unsuccessful missionary trip to Georgia in the United States John exclaimed, "I went to America to convert the Indians; but, oh, who shall convert me?"

It was in this mind that he attended his brother Charles' "Holy Club" and found the assurance he needed when he felt his heart "strangely warmed" by God's love and acceptance of him.

For Charles, a few days earlier, his new life in the faith was prompted by a question he was asked. He was ill in bed and the lady looking after him put to him the classic question, "If you died tonight would you be ready to meet your maker?" It was enough to make him think and he underwent a spiritual transformation and was converted to what he described as "vital religion".

The early 1700's were a bleak time socially, politically and religiously. The country was on the brink of civil war and there was great unrest and division. Many took refuge in drink. One sign outside a tavern proclaimed – "Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for twopence. Straw provided."

Religiously it is said that the spiritual life of the church was at such a low ebb the Gospel message was being ignored – not by the people but by the clergy. Sir William Blackstone, an eminent lawyer of the time, visited every church in the city of London and reported that "not a single sermon that he heard contained more Christianity than the writings of the pagan Cicero." And he went on to say that "it

was impossible to tell whether the preachers were followers of Mohammed, Confucius or Jesus Christ!”

When the Wesley brothers wanted to take their new-found faith to the people, sadly many churches were closed to them. Bishops and clergy refused to countenance or welcome what they described as “enthusiasm” in religion, so the Wesley’s preached in town squares, village greens, in jails and street corners. It is said that John Wesley travelled over a quarter of a million miles on horseback and preached over 40,000 sermons. Charles did the same, with his wife riding pillion with him as he travelled the length and breadth of England! She must have loved him!

John Wesley was the preacher. Charles was the poet and hymn writer. In all, Charles wrote over 6,500 hymns in his lifetime, and all our hymns today are from his pen. Indeed, more hymns by Charles Wesley are sung today than by any other hymn writer.

John and Charles were two of **19** children born to their parents, Samuel and Susannah Wesley! Their father was vicar of Epworth in Lincolnshire. However well Samuel got on with his wife, he didn’t get on well with his parishioners. He disliked them intensely and the feeling was mutual. They damaged his land, maimed his cattle and on one occasion set fire to his Rectory. The family were saved but many of his possessions were lost. He went into debt and was sent to Lincoln Jail from which he had to be bailed by the Archbishop of York.

So John and Charles and their younger brother, Samuel Jnr, had a rather eventful upbringing. After all they experienced it’s a wonder that all three became ordained, but there again, religion wasn’t taken seriously and the job did give some security and status. The rest of the children who survived were girls, all of whom, except one, made disastrous marriages.

With churches closed to them, the Wesley’s and their followers set up many meeting houses, and they became known as “Methodists” because of the way their societies were organised. When John ordained Thomas Coke as a bishop to set up the Episcopal Methodist Church for America a break with the Church of England became inevitable, though the brothers insisted that they remained clergy of the Church of England.

Charles eventually settled in London. On his deathbed he sent for the church's rector John Harley and told him "Sir, whatever the world may say of me, I have lived, and I die, a member of the Church of England. I pray you to bury me in your churchyard."

Upon his death, his body was carried to the church by six clergymen of the Church of England. A memorial stone to him stands in the gardens in Marylebone High Street, close to his place of burial. One of his sons, Samuel, became the organist at the church.

So today it is right that as Anglicans we join with the Methodists in giving thanks for John and Charles Wesley on this Sunday after Aldersgate Day. And as we sing Charles' hymns may we be inspired to a deeper faith and what he called "vital religion". We live in an age that for Christians to be enthusiastic about their faith is crucial.

The new figures were released on Tuesday in *Statistics for Mission 2014*, the annual report that pulls together statistics from parishes. There has been much made in the papers about the church in decline.

An average Church of England church in 2014 had 40 people attending worship each week; the average in Liverpool Diocese is 60.

The Bishop of Norwich, Graham James, said that simply looking at attendance statistics did not tell the whole story. "There are many things that churches do that are not included in these data, from running homelessness services and hosting foodbanks, to educating a million children a day in our schools, to providing welcome and care to the least, the last, and the lost in our society." "The story is not one of inevitable decline".

This report made me think there is nothing new under the sun for this is a report that I think the Wesley brothers could have connected with. But it is not doom and gloom and it would be too easy to say the Church of England and indeed Christianity are in trouble. Like the Wesley's we should not drop our heads but be inspired to a deeper faith and be enthusiastic about a "vital religion".

Faith is still important to so many – the question is how are we as 21st century disciples encouragers in the faith. How are we as a parish making it as easy as possible for people to come through our doors and find a place welcoming and comfortable to worship in? How are we helping people make sense of a faith that helps them face all that life brings?

Let us be inspired by the Wesley brothers to a deeper faith reaching out to a world that is searching and in need of God's inspiring and strengthening love. Let us accept the challenge as today's