



WHAT IS THE LORD SAYING TO THE METHODIST CHURCH?

David Hull

It is an important question to ask within these challenging times. We are yet to emerge from a global pandemic that has led to the greatest restrictions to life in peacetime, seems likely to have damaging effects on economies around the world and has caused great suffering to many people. Additionally, the Methodist Church stands at a crossroads within its own institutional life. It is due to make a decision when its annual Conference meets in the summer that is likely to have a profound effect upon the denomination. What is the Lord saying to the Methodist Church at this moment in time?

BUSINESS AS USUAL

As the first national lockdown began, one phrase in particular circled my mind: 'Business as usual'. It was particularly striking because many others seemed to be saying, 'Whatever else this means for the Church, it cannot be business as usual'. It has also been suggested that, even when we emerge from the pandemic, we must not expect to return to business as usual; instead we must expect a 'new normal'. I understand, I think, what they have meant. The significant disruptions to life present us with an opportunity to review our old routines of worship and activities - the style and timing of our services, the role of online streaming and, perhaps most importantly, the nature of our mission to the wider community.

I agree that all such reviews could be immensely valuable, but none of

it should involve changing our core business - unless, that is, we had already lost sight of what our core business is and need to rediscover it. Even as a child, Jesus knew his destiny in life. 'Why were you searching for me?' he asked his parents when they finally found him after a long and distressing search. 'Didn't you know that I had to be about my Father's business?' (Luke 2:49). He knew his vocation was within the family business. As he grew into adulthood, that family business became a partnership: 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working', he said to those seeking to condemn him for breaking the Sabbath (John 5:17).

Surely, though in a lesser degree, our calling is no different - in the power of the Holy Spirit to enter into partnership with our Lord, praying and labouring for his will to be done and his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. The early church continued with business as usual, with extraordinary power under terrible restrictions - and restrictions that were not generally imposed upon the whole population, but viciously focused on Christians. Our brothers and sisters facing dreadful persecution around the world today continue the work of the family business. Surely we can therefore continue under whatever restrictions we face. It may not be done in the ways to which we have become accustomed, but the core business of praying and labouring for the kingdom can, indeed must, continue.

I believe the real opportunity we have, as we begin to emerge from a global pandemic, is not to tinker with the structures we have built, as valuable as that may be, but to look again at our foundations. Are we genuinely still committed to the family business, to working in partnership with the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit, seeking first his kingdom here on earth, or have we somehow lost our way?

CONTEND FOR THE FAITH

It would, of course, be unusual to ask 'What is the Lord saying to the Methodist Church' and not to consider the circumstances within the denomination, particularly the debates which are due to come to a head at the Conference in the summer. I have sensed the Lord speaking powerfully to me frequently throughout these debates. Here, I will highlight just one seminal experience.

Towards the end of a meeting of Conference representatives in 2019 at which we had discussed the proposals arising from 'God in Love Unites Us', I ended by saying I was aware that I was being an immovable object and recognised that an unstoppable force may be coming against me, but I could do no other than to stand where I stood. I left the meeting feeling drained and discouraged and returned to my hotel room. Before getting on with my work, preparing for the next event in which I was due to participate, I turned to my Bible readings for the day. It turned out to be one of the most profound moments of experiencing the Lord speaking to me directly. The reading set was from Ezekiel 3:

'Go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel - not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. But the people of Israel will not listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate.'

Then, remembering the remarks I had just made about being an immovable object, I read: 'But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are' (Ezekiel 3:4-8).

I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my task was to play my part in calling the Methodist people to remain faithful to the Lord and his Word - even though there was no guarantee that anyone would listen. I have had to learn that sometimes faithfulness is simply about speaking out, whether or not anyone listens.

It has been tempting at times to yield to a Jonah spirit and to feel that the Methodist Church has already gone beyond the point of no return within these contemporary debates. An alternative proposal to those of 'God in Love Unites Us' cannot mean turning the clock back and retreating a few steps to where we stood a few years ago. It must surely mean a change of direction, which of course, is the definition of repentance. That, I believe, is the Lord's call to the Methodist Church: to repent and to remain faithful to his Word.



I believe the Lord is calling us to return to the central concerns of the family business; to repent of our current direction of travel; and to rediscover Pentecost.



REDISCOVERING PENTECOST

Finally, I turn to a favourite theme. Last year, I finally completed my doctoral research! Many readers will know that I

have been investigating the legacy of the Revd Dr Rob Frost as an evangelist within the Methodist Church. I am very grateful indeed to have been able to do it. It has had a profound effect on my ministry. I must confine myself to a brief comment about only one aspect of that research.

Rob Frost's first written work was published in 1979, a chapter in a book edited by the Revd Brian Hoare, 'Methods for Mission'. Amongst his last published work was his introduction to the book 'Pentecost: The Church Has Left the Building', which launched the vision for his final initiative, Pentecost Festival. In both this first and this last publication, he called for a rediscovery of Pentecost.

This provided a central theme for my research. Pentecost forms the linchpin between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the church. The disciples of Jesus came to the realisation that, in him, they encountered the very presence of God on earth: 'we have seen his glory,' one of them wrote, 'the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). The glory of God, which had once filled the temple and then departed in the time of the exile, had finally returned to his people, just as he had promised. Following Pentecost, those same disciples came to an equally astonishing realisation: that the very same glory of God which they had recognised in Jesus was present in the midst of their Spirit-filled community as they gathered together. Indeed, he was present within each one of them: 'Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?', wrote the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The church is called to be glorious! We are called to be glorious, 'being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18)! So, where has the glory gone?

As the year turned from 1738 to 1739, not long after his heart-warming experience in Aldersgate Street, John Wesley gathered with some friends in Fetter Lane. That night, as they prayed, they received a remarkable experience of the presence of God, which Wesley described in his journal: 'About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy and

many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty, we broke out with one voice, "We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord"' (1 January 1739).

The glory of the Lord fell upon them; they were transformed and a flame of revival was ignited which spread around the world. Later that year, only six months after that momentous night, there was a sense that the glory had departed from them. The Methodist leaders in London sent a letter to John Wesley in Bristol, asking him to return urgently. He did so and recorded in his journal on 16 June 1739: 'We met at Fetter-Lane, to humble ourselves before God, and own he had justly withdrawn his Spirit from us, for our manifold unfaithfulness. We acknowledged having grieved him ... In that hour, we found God with us as at the first. Some fell prostrate upon the ground; others burst out, as with one consent, into loud praise and thanksgiving; and many openly testified, there had been no such day as this since January the first preceding.' Thus the revival continued. They had rediscovered Pentecost.

What is the Lord saying to the Methodist Church? I believe the Lord is calling us to return to the central concerns of the family business; to repent of our current direction of travel; and to rediscover Pentecost, seeking a fresh revival as the glory of the Lord falls again upon the church and upon the nation.

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