

# SPREADING THE 'WORD' IN ROTHERHAM, SOUTH YORKSHIRE

Joanne Siddall

## SUPERINTENDENT MINISTER JOANNE A. SIDDALL TAKES THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT FOR THE FUTURE IN THE ROTHERHAM AND DEARNE VALLEY CIRCUIT, SHEFFIELD DISTRICT.

I grew up in Sheffield. My Nanan was a Catholic and her little council flat was full of crucifixes with a large 'Blessed Mary' and a 70's framed photo of the Pope, pride of place. The Blessed Mary would watch over us children, as cousins, aunts and uncles met weekly for the 'family doo' - we children thrived on cheering the wrestlers on TV (Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks of course), the footy results (which were teletext t...y.p....e.....d ..... very slowly across the bottom of the screen) and The Pink Panther show. We would eat Peck Sandwiches on a Hovis white with red sauce and generally get up to mischief.

One of my earliest memories of these times was wondering why Jesus looked so sad on all those crosses. And why that one event was considered so good when it looked so bad.

When my Nanan died in 1983 (when I was 8), all the cousins got to choose something of hers to keep. I picked a small white bible crammed full of funeral cards, a crucifix showing Jesus very upset, and some rosary beads. I kept these 'religiously' under my pillow to warn off the Vampires and to protect me from scary monsters. Isn't it amazing how fantasy and fear can cloud the purpose of the scriptures? I would read that little white Bible (KJV), and although I didn't understand what I was reading at that time, something was stirred in my spirit. I knew the words were important, and I needed to keep them close to my mind and my heart (hence under the pillow)!

My journey from Catholicism into Methodism is far too long, and possibly far too boring to share here. In any case, it most certainly would take me on a tangent away from the theme. That being said, my early encounter with the Word and that 'bad' but strangely 'good' act of Jesus on the

cross are essential to my story of faith. I ended up, where I ended up - a presbyter - not too far from my birthplace, now stationed in Rotherham. A town with a bad reputation, but a town in recovery. What I sensed as a child, I know with absolute assurance as an adult - the Word of God must be kept close to heart and mind - in fact more than that - IN heart and mind.

The Bible and its centrality throughout Methodist history is to be celebrated. Our holy scriptures need to be seen, shared and heard, not silenced, erased or hidden.

The typed word on a white page reads us as we read the rich 'God breathed' poetry, history, letters, story. The story of our salvation matters. Our scriptures matter. They do not need modernising, re-writing, sound biting or twisting. The scriptures speak for with the Spirit. The scriptures read us as we read them. Sometimes it isn't comfortable or easy. It is not meant to be.

As we read, ponder, absorb and dance with scripture, we meet the glorious Father. Jesus our Rescuer reaches out to us and the Spirit is stirring us. How blessed we are to have that wonderful book!

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said: 'Visit many good books, but live in the Bible'.

So how do we do this in Rotherham. Let's reach back into history - the history of 1 place and 1 book?

The town centre church, a huge 850 seater Grade 2 listed building has closed. No longer fit for purpose, it is sold subject to contract, the 3rd church on the site, with Methodist worship on that town centre site since 1761. It was too big, and (now) in the wrong place, as much of the town centre has 'moved'.

The first church was an octagonal chapel. By the early 19th century the octagonal building was 'no longer fit for purpose' -

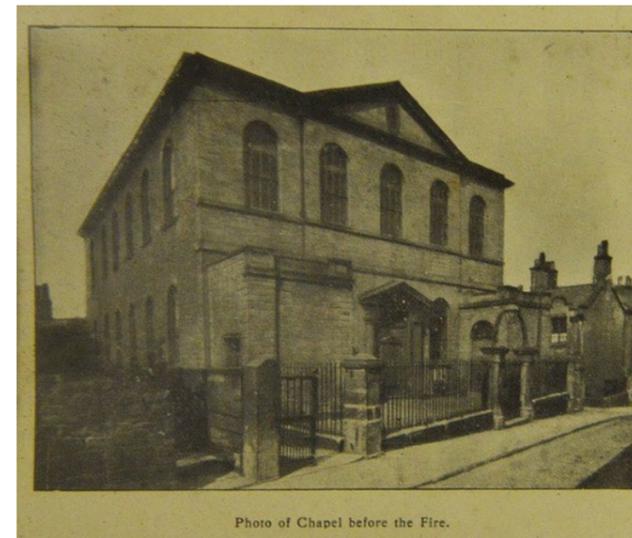


Photo of Chapel before the Fire.

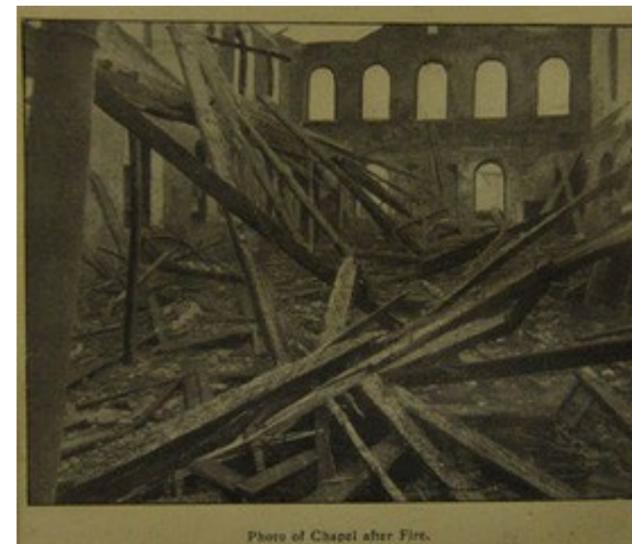
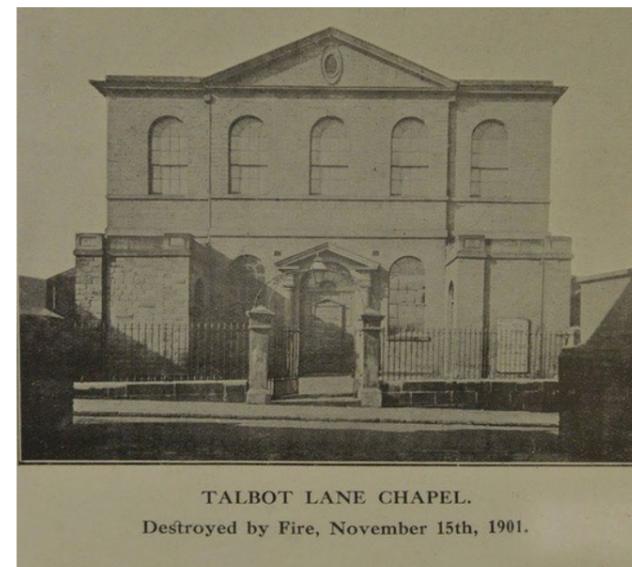


Photo of Chapel after Fire.



TALBOT LANE CHAPEL.  
Destroyed by Fire, November 15th, 1901.

it was too small!! So a huge preaching house was built. Disaster struck in 1901 when the organ-tuner dropped his candle and the place burnt down. A third church, the neo-gothic style 3rd building was completed in 1903.

The first - too small.

The second- burnt down.

The third - too big.

The reason I tell you this is because of what survived.

In the wreckage and destruction, one item was 'recovered'. And it is the same item that can take us all to a place of recovery.

The Word of God.

The Word in Rotherham.

The only item that did not perish was the Bible. More than a metaphor - a parable. Maybe something sacramental, even. An outward sign of a deep, deep reality. The only item salvaged. We need to salvage the Word in every Church and in every story.

I am reminded of Matthew 24:35, 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away'.

Or perhaps Psalm 119:89, 'Your word, O LORD, is everlasting; it is firmly fixed in the heavens'.

So in our circuit, this is our legacy. Our story matters. Where we have come from, where we are now and where we need to be. We hold the great story of our salvation, that was not consumed in the fire. It was not consumed in the destruction. It survived, was salvaged, rescued, celebrated and preserved.

We in Rotherham pledge to do the same.

Salvage. Rescue. Celebrate. Preserve.

Where?

In our new church, based in Rotherham Market. Located in an old nightclub which was once called Adam and Eve's. We take the Bible, into the Market Place. Market place ministry. We might not be in Athens (Acts 17:16-34), but Rotherham is a close second.

We in Rotherham reflect and read and are ready.

Ready for the journey. Ready for the future because of the past. Ready for the rescue.

I still have the white Bible and the rosary and the crucifix. Why? Because where we have come from matters.

I no longer eat Peck sandwiches or watch the wrestling.

*Joanne Siddall is in her 7th year in Rotherham. Previously she served in Huddersfield and before that Sheffield. She is a former Police Officer. Married to Eddie, a Lay Pastor in the circuit, they have three daughters, Elizabeth (19), Abigail (16) and Miriam (9). Jo thinks Eddie deserves a medal with a house full of ladies!*