

FROM THE CHAIR

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Dear Friends,

I hope the new year has begun well for you.

I spent the quiet period between Christmas and the New Year doing some more intensive preparation than I usually have time for, and this included re-reading a number of John Wesley's sermons. It was a wonderful experience!

The first forty-four sermons Wesley published still formally hold authority within the Methodist Church, setting up 'standards of preaching and belief' within our doctrinal convictions. There used to be an expectation that a copy of the sermons would be kept in every chapel vestry, so that a steward could read one out during the service if the preacher didn't arrive. I cannot remember the last time I saw a vestry copy!

I am not sure that is the best use for them, but I do think we are the poorer for neglecting these works of deep devotion and discipleship. Over the years, as the fires have been strangely cooled, it is as if these sermons have become thickly covered with layer upon layer of ash. I feel I want to say to the People Called Methodists, rather as you might to someone in a remote, icy place who is in danger of freezing to death: if you dig through all the ash, you will find fire that could save your life!

Reading the sermons again, I have been struck by a number of insights. I have been reminded how, despite its old-fashioned nature, it doesn't take long to get into the flow of the eighteenth-century language ... The sustained reading of someone's work can become a personal experience, giving the sense of discovering something of the author's personality - much as I

once felt in an archive room as I read a number of Wesley's original letters, written in his own hand ... It isn't explicit in the sermons, but as I continued to read, I had the sense that Wesley was deeply aware of his own flaws as he wrote, and rather than adopting a 'holier than thou' position, he writes as a fellow traveller on the path towards longed-for holiness ...

I was also reminded of Wesley's unique gift as a teacher. John Wesley wasn't, of course, the only leader of the Evangelical Revival. Most notably, he was joined - even preceded - in the task by his brother Charles and their friend George Whitefield. Yet his contemporaries credited John as being the one with the organisational gifts to secure the revival's legacy.

These published sermons, particularly the first volume of forty-four sermons, were one of his organisation tools. In this book, he provided each member of the Methodist movement, through their small group gatherings and leaders, with a handbook for making Christian disciples. Through each of the sermons, he masterfully gathered together and abbreviated the best theological teaching from across the history of the church, in an accessible, understandable, and applicable way for disciples to learn of their faith and grow in grace and holiness. Combined with the organisational structure of society, class and band meetings through which the sermons were taught, and with the hymns of Charles Wesley which reinforced them ('a little body of practical divinity'), it all made for a powerful ferment in which the flame of faith was kindled and fanned.

The experience of re-reading the sermons has reminded me powerfully of the fact that there is clear content to Christian faith - 'the faith that was once for all

entrusted to God's holy people' (Jude 3) - to be received and then passed on. Wesley found a remarkably effective way of doing so, which well equipped the next generation of leaders.

In that way, perhaps there is a sense in which early Methodism operated as a franchise, in which local leaders were entrusted with tools for discipleship, whilst making the commitment that this would be what they taught - they would pass it on faithfully. They were not left to their own devices, or expected to invent their own content detached from the great tide of Christian teaching which Wesley had channelled towards them.

If these sermons, not to mention the structures and many of the hymns, have been long neglected within Methodism, it raises the questions of what has replaced them, and whether there is a danger that the refreshing streams of discipleship may be running dry.

As I conclude this edition of MET Connexion, with its theme of worship and preaching, I am left pondering our standards of preaching, and what in practice 'sets them up', regardless of what the rule book might say about Wesley's sermons. I pray that, where needed, we will find a way of reopening the flood gates, so that 'the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people' may once again flow through the streams of Christian history to us and to our people once again.

Wishing you the Lord's richest blessings throughout the year ahead, and rejoicing in our partnership in the gospel,

David