

Sunday May 21st

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **32** **“Meet and right it is to sing”**
 55 **“Immortal, invisible, God only wise”**
 450 **“Open, Lord, my inward ear”**
 658 **“A charge to keep I have”**

READINGS: 1 Peter 3:13-22
 Acts 17: 22-31

“STRIKING A CHORD”

The observant among you will have realised that we are singing three hymns of Charles Wesley this morning. That is not particularly rare for Wesley’s Chapel but today it is very intentional. 279 years ago, on the 21st May 1738 Charles Wesley had his ‘heart-warming’ experience – three days before that of his brother, John. From that day onwards Charles wrote thousands of hymns. Charles wrote in his Journal, quoting Scripture, ‘God put a new song in my heart.’

Arguably Charles Wesley has had a greater impact on Christians and Christianity across the world than his brother John. People sing Charles’ hymns, in many cases without knowing who wrote those hymns, but not many people read the sermons of John Wesley these days unless they are required to do so to fulfil Methodist Local Preacher or Ministerial examinations.

Charles wrote the words of the hymns but he also looked around for good tunes to set the words to or he collaborated with others who wrote music for Charles’ words. What we often don’t realise is that many of Charles’ hymns were contextual – that is, they were written for particular people in particular situations.

“O thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart”

This was written when Charles had seen the work of the iron smelters in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, people who had a daily familiarity with the power of fire. Fire was, therefore, a powerful and ever-present symbol for those iron workers.

There was an occasion in 1746 when Charles went to preach in Plymouth, a naval place now and a naval place then. As he preached the morning sermon outside, close to the seashore, a group of sailors passed by and decided to have their amusement at Charles’ expense – making noise and mocking his message.

Charles told them to go away and come back in the evening. They did come back and by the time they came Charles had written a new hymn using a melody related to ‘I saw three ships come sailing in’ – a tune familiar to the sailors. Charles hymn began by referring to how music can be put to both secular and sacred purposes.

“Listed to the Cause of Sin
Why should a good be evil?
Musick, alas too long has been

Prest to obey the devil.”

Charles then used the hymn to speak to the lives of those sailors who led such a tough existence. We don't know what the results of this encounter were but we do know that the sailors listened to Charles this time.

Charles Wesley had a genius, not only for packing his hymns with accessible theology but also for making his words and the music that carried them speak into the context of his congregation. His words and the tune struck a chord with his hearers.

I have spent so much time speaking about Charles Wesley not only because it is Aldersgate Sunday but also because his communication of the Gospel links to our reading from the Book of Acts. Charles had the instinct for good communication just like the Apostle Paul.

Let us remind ourselves of the reading from Acts. Paul, the great missionary traveller of the early church was in Athens. Athens was a place for the chattering classes – people were always talking about new ideas and there were schools of philosophers based there. So Paul, as he tried to find a point of contact with the people of Athens, did not face a bunch of rowdy like Charles Wesley did. Paul's protagonists were intellectuals who poured scorn on messages that did not fit into their set ideas. At the outset of our reading we see Paul walking around, listening to what people are talking about and noticing things – in particular that the Athenians had altars to gods all over the place.

Paul noticed a very interesting thing – an altar to an unknown god. The Athenians were suspicious and they also wanted to be sure that they had all bases covered – every god should feel himself or herself worshipped in Athens – hence the altar (in fact there were many) to an 'unknown god' as a form of 'insurance policy.'

So Paul, pointing to an altar to an unknown god, told the Athenians that he had come to speak to them about this god. He was doing this right at the very heart of Athens – at the Areopagus, where the court of the most important citizens met.

Paul then began to explain about his God and the dealings of this God with humankind. Firstly, unlike the Athenian gods, was the creator of the earth and all that is and certainly does not dwell in places made by human hands. Paul then went on to describe his God as not needing anything from human beings but rather that this God is the giver of everything. This was really new news for the sceptical people of Athens.

Paul then told them that his God is God of everyone – of all people on the earth – not a god limited to one city or empire. Paul's God has a message for everyone. Well the Athenians were quite snobby and looked down on other people so I wonder what they made of this statement by Paul.

Then Paul returns to the matter of the altar to the unknown god and tells the Athenians that God has created humankind to search after him, to seek to know him.

Paul follows on with a very effective way of speaking to these Athenians – he quotes their own poets, people they know and respect and uses the words of the poets as a link to what he is telling them.

“We, too, are his (god’s) offspring” one of their poets had written and Paul affirms this strongly, saying that everyone is a child of God.

We do not know what went on in the minds of those learned Athenians but that they continued to talk about what Paul had said to them is without doubt. A seed had been sown in the minds of these philosophers and intellectuals.

So then, Paul in first century Athens and Charles Wesley in 18th century England were seeking to relate the Gospel of Christ to those around them. What has all this to say to us 21st century people drawn from around the world?

Well first of all we are called as much as anyone else to give an account of our faith. The Great Commission in Matthew Chapter 28 is as much for us as for Paul or the Wesleys, ‘go and make disciples of all nations.’

Last week I heard a report on the radio. It stated that although Church attendance was in steady decline, those who ticked ‘none’ in the box for religion on questionnaires, were a very interesting bunch of people. Many said that they believed in God, many of the ‘nones’ said they prayed every day. These so-called ‘nones’ are our workmates, our neighbours and, perhaps, even members of our families. We have a calling to be ambassadors of Christ to these people, many of whom have a mental altar ‘to an unknown god.’

Some evangelists of the Gospel go for the hard sell, the tough approach telling people that they are sinners and will go to hell unless they repent. Yes, we are all sinners but putting the frighteners on people is not calculated to make our sophisticated contemporaries receptive to our message.

The Apostle Paul was always ready to speak of Jesus and his Gospel wherever he found himself. He never did it in a bullying way but, as we have seen from our reading, in a sensitive way, starting from where people are and leading them on to ideas about Jesus and his message.

Charles Wesley could easily have rounded on those intoxicated sailors who interrupted him and told them they were all going to hell. But he didn’t, he called them back and used music familiar to them to tell them of Jesus’ love for them and to encourage them from their ways.

Perhaps we shy away from being ambassador for Christ, from telling others of the hope that is in us. Yet we are surely called by Christ to grow in faith by reaching out to others – and in this week when we commemorate the heart-warming experiences of the Wesley’s in May 1738 that is what I want to call each one of us to do – right where we are, in the contexts where we find ourselves.

In our first reading from 1 Peter we heard these words, 'always be ready to make the defence of your faith to anyone who demands from you an account of the love that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence.'

That is the challenge thrown down to us! Amen