



# End of year service

## Acts 10:36

It is hard to believe that we are hurtling with such speed towards the end of the year. However, the truth that we are celebrating our end of year staff service confirms the fact. As we do so, we:-

- Take stock of where we are and the achievements of the past year
- Celebrate the service of our colleagues; many over a considerable period of time
- Re-affirm that as we meet together we are certainly 'a community of faith'

The landscape of our service provision has greatly changed in recent days and in such a setting we meet and declare our life together and what it is that defines us. There is no conflict with our commitment to the wider church as we concentrate on those things that help to shape us into the uniquely-formed mission that we are today.

In a year when we have celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Samuel Leigh into the then colony, it is appropriate to ask what it is about our Wesleyan faith which helps to explain who we are today. I offer you four insights which I trust will feed into the wider picture of our contemporary mission.

Text: Acts 10:36 –

*"You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all."*

The matter of authority has become an issue for all of us. The overriding theme of God's leadership is critical to what we might describe as our life together. The latter part of Acts 10 contains an account of the verification of the visions seen by Peter at Joppa and by Cornelius at Caesarea.

By pouring out his Holy Spirit in the house of Cornelius, God demonstrates to all that the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, were to be recipients of his grace and love.

We hear Peter preaching and he gives a brief but telling summary of Jesus' ministry (v.v.36-41). It has a genuine feel of Mark's Gospel; the early church held the view that it contained the preaching of Peter.

In just five words, Peter nailed an important truth, "who is Lord of all." So we use this as a starting point, as we return to the issue of what gives shape to the form, nature and passion of Wesley Mission.

It remains a continual reference point that will define where we have come from, who we are now and what our goals are to be ultimately measured by. What then, from our history, can help to inform just who we are?

### **We are reluctant schismatics**

In the very best of our tradition, we don't take easily to breaking up and whenever we identify that spirit we refuse to allow ourselves to be divided. The very story of John Wesley demonstrates this. The Wesleys talked about "the merciful providence of God".



The church of the eighteenth century was moribund and in many ways the new wine burst the old wine skins. However, there was the desire to maintain faithfulness to God and each other. This remains present among us:-

- We look for life and vigour to reignite our purpose
- We listen to those of a different perspective
- We retain an authentic gospel passion

I see all these historic features present in one form or another in our life and witness today. I recall when we lost a large government contract to a “private provider” who incidentally we knew would not deliver a better service (and we were later proved correct), I received a telephone call from a very senior politician, who I shall not name. The person gave me some advice and it was along these lines – “Get yourself down to Canberra and shout outside the PM’s office.” This is not a natural feature of those of us who belong to this Wesley way.

Not that this takes away the need to speak prophetically and directly to issues of concern, even if they don’t suit the mood of the day. I prefer to reserve such speaking for those in need, rather than to defend self-interest.

When we are opposed, either corporately or individually, we are very reluctant to engage in unhealthy fighting. This is not out of weakness, but as a matter of spiritual principle.

I don’t recall in detail too many of the weekly speakers that we listened to on a Friday afternoon at college, but I do remember one address. The speaker was known for his robust presentations, but his address closed and his voice softened as he spoke to a large gathering of people who were training for ministry. In those closing words, he suggested that “we do not have a profession to practise, but we have a debt to discharge”.

## **We practise a religion of the heart**

From the outset we have been a people whose “hearts are strangely warmed”. We know all too well about the excesses of spiritual enthusiasm, but we are quick to remind ourselves that there is no Christian witness without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Charles Wesley’s hymns gave fire and courage to the first Methodists. They, like their leaders, were drawn into difficult situations, often involving conflict and found that their hymns strengthened them for the battle.

We may claim for our hymns and faith what the French found in their songs. It was Lecky, the historian, who asserted that the impact of the Methodist revival prevented England undergoing, or achieving, a revolution of the same kind that took place in France in 1789.

It was alleged that in terms of military power the Marseillaise was worth ten thousand men to the armies of the Republic. We have seen its power in entirely different settings during the past few weeks. Our hymns and faith stir us to the root. What was and is our distinctive force?

- A profound personal experience of Christ
- A religion whose strength lay in the artisans and the creative poorer people



- An appeal which addresses itself to an unbelieving and often hostile world

One of the authentic marks of New Testament Christianity is surely joy, but the hymns of Charles Wesley were not frothy, emotional lyrics. They had clear biblical roots, for example, *“The fire shall always be burning on the altar; it shall not go out.”* (Leviticus 6:13)

*O thou who camest from above  
The pure celestial fire to impart,  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
On the mean altar of my heart!*

*There let it for thy glory burn  
With inextinguishable blaze,  
And trembling to its source return,  
In humble prayer and fervent praise.*

The religion of the heart is without doubt biblical, but it is not uncontrolled, with hearts on our sleeves or fiercely doctrinal, all the time checking “our soundness”. It is an incomparable heritage.

The Glaswegian theological lecturer, William Barclay, when speaking on John’s Gospel, said, “We are chosen for joy. However, hard the Christian way, it is both in the travelling and in the goal, the way of joy. There is always a joy in doing the right thing. When we evade some duty or some task, when at last we set our hand to it, joy comes to us. The Christian is a person of joy. The Christian is the laughing cavalier of Christ. A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces.”

### **We cannot live outside John Wesley’s dictum**

This defining dictum is “Go not to those who need you, but to those who need you most.” It was no accident that the text of John Wesley’s first open air sermon was Luke 4:18-19:-

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

These were the words that Jesus spoke at the synagogue in Nazareth. They had such an electrifying effect upon those who were listening and for me they are the keynote words which continue throughout the ministry of Jesus.

John Wesley repeated those words in a brickyard near Bristol. Yet he loathed preaching in the open air. It offended everything that he had learned both at Oxford and through his Anglican sense of propriety. Over thirty years later, he confided to his Journal: “To this day field preaching is a cross to me.” Nevertheless he did it. He bit the bullet, swallowed his pride, and became a fool for Christ’s sake.

I think we can learn a great deal from this rather staid, conventional clergyman who set the scene for a future revival and a tradition in which we continue today. As one writer put it, “He needed some gunpowder behind him to turn him into a field preacher and itinerant evangelist.”



It can be overlooked by some that Wesley himself had known poverty. He came from a family of nineteen children, of whom his mother reared no less than ten. His father, Samuel, had a continual struggle to make ends meet and on one occasion was imprisoned in Lincoln jail for debt. His mother was in such need that she had to turn to the Archbishop of York to help in her crisis.

This background gave an even keener edge to Wesley's evangelical concern for the poor.

- He never patronised poor people
- He never made light of their troubles
- He never treated them with disrespect

When he was in conversation with the stewards at City Road, Wesley told them when they were distributing monies to the poor, "Put yourself in the place of every poor person, and deal with them as you would God should deal with you."

This is a golden thread which ran through his ministry and to us today. For Wesley it meant:-

- working to relieve suffering among prisoners of war
- setting up dispensaries with free medicine
- founding orphan houses
- setting up some of the first friendly societies

Yet Wesley and those of us who follow in his way know there is a spiritual poverty. In the days of our founder, some ten thousand men, women and children were hanged at where Marble Arch stands today; most of them hanged for petty theft. The fact was that property ranked higher in the scale of values than did human life.

As we seek to understand John Wesley's dictum, we are called to stand alongside those who have little, those whose lives are bereft of purpose and meaning. I see it in a myriad of different ways throughout the services of Wesley Mission today – with the homeless, with families, with those caught within the spectrum of alcohol and gambling, to name just a few.

One of the greatest challenges that we face at Wesley Mission, in whatever sphere we operate, as a Board, as a Council, as staff members, volunteers and congregational members, is the task of defining just who are the greatest in need. When we get near to answering that question, we can be certain that we are near to the calling that God has given us.

### **We are convinced of a whole gospel for a whole**

From the earliest days in our tradition and in the honourable history of Wesley Mission, we know that the word 'compassion' describes something very powerful about not only what we do, but also how we do it.

Before the days of care, there was a proverbial saying: "The poor cannot afford to be ill." In our own great history, we know that truth and we have been appalled by it.

We extol the healing power of the love of God. To return once again to the poetry of Charles Wesley, we can declare the name of Jesus as "Tis life and health and peace".



John Wesley reluctantly took to field preaching or what we call preaching in the open air because many church doors were shut against him. He offered Christ to the crowd. He set that offer within the framework of a living experience of change. The impact was clearly moral, as people's lives were transformed by turning from sin to the everlasting mercy of God.

For us, the gospel is not a mere set of words or a theological proposition; it is a living and dynamic offering which presents "strength, spirit and hope" in the Person of Jesus Christ. This gospel is both demonstrated and embodied in the many ways in which we live out our mission and ministry here at Wesley Mission.

- As we are confronted by the dysfunctional reality of people's lives
- As we work alongside those who slip through the cracks
- As we care for those who are often ignored by the many

Tonight as we celebrate another year of service, we take hold of all that we do and offer it afresh to God.

Let me conclude with the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who was a pivotal Christian thinker of the twentieth century. This Jesuit priest-theologian-anthropologist had a good deal to say. He once declared, "Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God."

The bottom line for you and me is simply this: grimness is not a Christian virtue. There are no sad saints. If God really is at the centre of our life together, then joy is inevitable. If we have no joy, we miss the very heart of the gospel and our service to those in need will never reach its highest potential.