

Homily, St. Andrew's
Sunday, October 19, 2014
The Wesley brothers and Evangelical Revival

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Our journey through the Anglican world transitions today from medieval times to modern times as we enter the 18th century. We took our time in the 16th century because it was the formative time for the Church of England when the foundations of our unique expression of Christianity were set. Alternatively, we only spent a little bit of time in the 17th century to look at some of the poetry of George Herbert. I'm sure there were other people or issues we could have considered but despite on-going conflict between the Established Church of England and the Puritans, it was mostly a century when the consensus was clear.

As the 18th century got rolling, however, that consensus began to be challenged in ways that meant greater consequences. Part of the challenge came from the flourishing of the Enlightenment which we'll talk about in a few weeks, but it also came from a renewal of spiritual energy that is often referred to as the Evangelical Revival or the Great Awakening. This type of movement involving increased spiritual vitality has occurred roughly every 50 years with some arguing that it is one way to understand current movements within the church. An upcoming Wisdom Centre event features scholar and author Diana Butler Bass speaking about this possibility that we are in a time of renewal when God is doing unexpected things. That may be a matter for debate, but there is no debate that the first Great Awakening brought significant changes to the Church of England and the whole of western Christianity.

Brothers John and Charles Wesley were among the key leaders who have had this undeniable influence in western Christianity. Born early in the 18th century and attending Oxford together as scholarship students, they managed to create a whole new Christian denomination. It began innocently enough. At Oxford they joined a group of students who vowed to live holy lives in a structured way by following a rule of life or more pointedly, a method, for religious living. After graduation and ordination, the Wesley brothers travelled to the New World in 1735 to minister to British settlers in Georgia. The appointment was unsuccessful rather quickly and they travelled back to Britain at the end of 1737.

The key defining moment in John's life came shortly thereafter. In May, 1738 he experienced a spiritual awakening at a religious society meeting during the reading of Luther's preface to Paul's letter to the Romans. It changed everything. In his journal, John wrote about the experience: "... while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." It is like a prototype story of evangelical conversion the likes of which have been told by many others since. It led John to follow in the footsteps of his friend George Whitefield to fields in coal mining areas of newly industrializing England. The Industrial Revolution had barely begun but already John discovered masses of poor, working class people, and migrant workers, who were not being well served by the Established Church of England. With the energy and vitality that came with his spiritual awakening, John began his career outside the official system, as a field preacher to the unwashed masses. He remained an ordained Anglican priest but he bucked the system as he ignored geographical parish boundaries and

declined episcopal oversight.

Wesley was a talented and prolific preacher who travelled constantly to preach the Good News and win converts to Christian faith. He and the movement as a whole was driven by the renewal of Reformation beliefs, particularly “salvation by grace through faith,” for anyone and everyone, regardless of class. His theology begins with a desire to answer the question: “What is salvation?” In one of his most important sermons, he describes it like this: “The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul’s going to paradise... It is not a blessing which lies on the other side death... The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question. ‘Ye *are* saved.’ It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of.” This understanding of salvation as being something in the here and now, rather than something mystical in another world, is perhaps THE key idea in a spiritual awakening. It’s the starting place of many theologians today who preach renewal in the lives of individuals and who are leading renewal in the church.

Wesley goes on to explain the process of salvation in two general steps: justification and sanctification... gotta love big theology words! “Justification,” Wesley explains, “is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins, and our acceptance with God.” In other words, it’s the way in which we are justified before God. It is broadly understood among Christians that the crucifixion of Jesus is the key act through which justification occurs. *How* that is the case, however... what it is about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection that makes it so, has a number of possible answers. We won’t delve deeply into the various theories right now except to say that the answer “Jesus was a ransom for our sins” is just one among a variety of understandings - others include Jesus as a definitive moral influence and Jesus as a substitute or scape goat. What’s important for now is that Wesley renews the reformation understanding that justification before God is for all people, regardless of social standing, and it is received by grace, through faith.

More than that, though, the key thing about Wesley is that he doesn’t stop there. Justification is only the first of two key aspects of salvation. The second part is sanctification, which is a fancy way of describing a process of becoming more and more holy, more sacred, more like God. Wesley says that sanctification begins in the same moment that justification occurs as one is “inwardly renewed by the power of God.” As such, the love of God that enters one’s heart produces love for all humanity and expels [quote] “the love of pleasure, of ease, of honour, of money; together with pride, anger, self-will, and every other evil temper - in a word, changing the ‘earthly, sensual, devilish’ mind, into ‘the mind which was in Christ Jesus.’” It is in working out this second step of sanctification that “works” of piety and of mercy are necessary. Things like public and private prayer, reading scripture, tithing, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned and so on... all manner of spiritual practices that embody our faith... are key components of the process of sanctification.

The religious societies that blossomed in the 18th century were intended as an addition to regular parish life and worship, as a way for people to support one another in their path towards sanctification and provide people with a disciplined framework for devotion. The reality was, however, that with Wesley’s drive and enthusiasm, along with his organizational skill, he set up everything needed for an independent church structure. His itinerant preaching and that of the lay leaders he appointed operated outside the parish and diocesan structures and was opposed by bishops and priests. The multiplying societies were connected to Wesley and to one another and met together for their first major Conference in 1744. This conference became an annual event

and was eventually legally constituted as the governing body for the new Methodist Church.

The development of the Methodism could be viewed as a break within the Church of England but it also could be viewed as an expansion, like a growing child who separates from the parent church. Many evangelicals remained and remain in the Church of England and the Anglican Church around the world. It is the part of our church that is most influenced by protestant ideals and beliefs that have been there from the beginning. Anglican evangelicals follow in the footsteps of loyal Puritans with the added elements of the subjectivity and emotional experience of individuals that became important in the 18th century. The focus on becoming increasingly holy also led to a wide variety of social movements designed to improve the ills of society and better the lives of underprivileged people.

John Wesley was undeniably a huge presence and influence in our church. His brother Charles was not so audacious and yet left just as big a legacy with his poetry turned hymnody. In just a few minutes we'll sing one of his many famous hymns expressing the heart of evangelical faith, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul": "Plenteous grace with thee is found, grace to cover all my sin; let the healing streams abound; make and keep me pure within." And we will end our service honouring the Wesley's today with what has become a quintessential Anglican hymn: "Finish then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee, changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise." May we be inspired by Wesley brothers to engage with our faith with renewed vibrancy as we embrace God's gift of justification with confidence and live holy lives of wonder, love and praise in the service of God.