

*Sermon delivered at a Joint Covenant Service to launch the celebrations to mark the 250th anniversary of Methodism in Barnet
Sunday, 10th January 2009*

The year 2010 sees the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the beginnings of Methodism in Barnet. The exact date is unknown but it was probably 1760. In the past 1770 was celebrated as the church anniversary in High Barnet but that was the date when the Shewell family of Hadley conveyed to the John and Charles Wesley a property there which was already being used for preaching and Methodist meetings. John Wesley himself says he visited in 1768 and so there was already a society well established.

I am trying to write a book on those 250 years and it will tell an interesting story. In it I want to put the Methodist story in its wider context, because we are all part of the same story. Sometimes it has felt that Methodists have thought that proper Church history only began in Aldersgate Street in 1738. We may nod, with some condescension, to the Wesley's Anglican heritage, acknowledge the Reformation (though not Calvin) and perhaps look back to the myth of a pure and undefiled early church, but there has often been little sense of belonging to the bigger story, and if there has it has involved being critical of other Christians. This must happen in all traditions.

In my book I want to put the local story in the wider context. Not far from here the first British Christian martyr shed his blood in about 300 AD for his faith and a great Benedictine abbey was built on the spot, which became a place of pilgrimage. Weather permitting we will be ecumenically visiting the Abbey and Cathedral Church of St Alban next week. The first Christians in the area would therefore have been Roman or Romano-British. The Abbey came to own great estates including the forests around here and clearings were made by burning, the origin of the word Barnet. In about 1080, in the reign of William the Conqueror, the monks built a little chapel in a clearing that became East Barnet, about half way between the Benedictine Abbeys of St Albans and Westminster. And so St Mary's was first built, the mother church of this area. Today St Mary's Church and the Methodist Church are joined in ecumenical partnership.

The Medieval church flourished in these parts until the Reformation. Abuses may have been reformed but much that was good and holy was swept away. Under the Catholic Queen Mary, a Protestant from Essex, was brought to Barnet to be burned as a warning to the Protestants here. George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, wondered in the woods near here, contemplating the stillness. Richard Baxter, the great Puritan divine met the Earl of Lauderdale in Barnet, whether at Costas or

Starbucks is unknown, and declined a Scottish bishopric. Independency sprang up in Barnet after the Restoration, David Livingstone rested by Hadley Green between his missionary journeys and General William Booth, the ex-Methodist settled in Hadley Wood. This is becoming a lecture on history but my point is to show that in this area we are part of a story which goes back over 1,700 years with many streams and sub-plots. All of us must avoid the narrowness of being limited to one tradition or denomination. We are part of the same story.

And of course the renewal of our covenant with God today, reminds us that we are part of an even bigger story: the story of the relationship between God and his people from the earliest times. My old history tutor, Diarmaid McCulloch, subtitled his bestselling book, *A History of Christianity, The First Three Thousand Years*. That isn't a misprint but a reminder that we are part of a story going back at least 3,000 years, into Judaism and Greek thought. The reading from the prophet Jeremiah today reminds us of the covenant with Moses and the people of Israel. He also promises a new covenant, a new relationship, which will be written on the people's hearts. Christians believe that Jesus was that new covenant. We also heard from Luke's gospel, the story of the Baptism of Christ. The voice from heaven affirms who Jesus is, the Beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. God came to be part of the story on earth in Jesus. We are a part of the story of the covenant between God and his people and that is why we come to renew our part in the relationship.

John Wesley began celebrating a service to renew the covenant from 1755. We don't know whether he ever did so in Barnet because the diaries are missing for much of the time. He adapted the custom from the Puritans. However some of the great High Church Anglican divines of the 17th century did develop a covenantal understanding of the Eucharist. The covenant theme runs through the Bible and Christian history.

We are part of the story. We are part of the great story of patriarchs, prophets, harlots, priests, kings, shepherds, astrologers, fishermen, tent makers and all the rest. We remember the promises made to the people by God down the ages and the constant failure of the people to properly respond. The creator of the universe commits himself to loving us with boundless love and what do we do? Next week the gospel reading is the sign of the wedding feast at Cana, a glorious sign of the endless outpouring of the love of God, but we still don't respond properly!

Today, we celebrate being part of the story, the story of God's people here and everywhere. And we collectively and individually renew our relationship with God. Collectively as the people of God, Anglicans and Methodists covenanted to work together in this place. Individually, because we are unique creations by God and he loves us so much: you and me, despite ourselves.

Last week we remembered the showing of Jesus to the wise men: the Epiphany. He was revealed to the outsiders, the Gentiles. Those Magi were odd characters whoever they were. They were exotic outsiders, odd balls, people who were different. And they represent all those who are different, and at that point the story includes all of us. The Christian story is open to all. It's a story, a drama, in which we all have a role.

Sometimes we have had play reading evenings at Wesley Hall. Anyone who has turned up can have a role, reading a part. That's different from the polished performance for which everyone has had to be auditioned, where some have to be rejected, and where everyone has to be word perfect. My life has been scarred as a result of the review in the school magazine of my performance in *The Chester Mystery Plays*: "Colin Smith as God was quite good and would have been ever better if he had remembered the few lines he had to say." No one has to be world perfect to be in God's story.

We renew our relationship with God this morning, grateful for the wise men, grateful for 250 years of Methodism (and 930 of the ministry of St Mary's), giving thanks for all who have gone before us (the well known and the unknown), but above all grateful to God for continuing to allow us to keep starting again.

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