

What Methodists believe about Social Holiness

On July 2nd 1789, two years before his death, John Wesley was on his last visit to Ireland. In Dublin he sat down to write a sermon reflecting on how his life's work had unfolded and how he saw the state of the Methodist movement he had brought into being. One might have thought that at 86 he would have allowed himself a little indulgent satisfaction in how it had all gone – the numbers of people converted, the societies planted, the recognition and respect that he now enjoyed on a national stage. The sermon however, which was never preached but printed after his death, contained none of this.

Instead Wesley took as his text Jeremiah 8:22 “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” He was saying that, at the end of the day, the mission of the church was not just about making individual converts – it was about bringing God's healing into a broken and suffering world. Sadly he concluded that Methodism had not been all the force for good that he would have liked. Many Methodists had grown too comfortable and too complacent. Commenting in that sermon on his well-known rule about money “*Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can*” he said that most Methodists had managed the first part, some the second, but few had mastered the third!

Wesley famously said “There is no holiness but social holiness”. Imagine the man, in his eighties, up to his ankles in winter snow, walking the London streets for hours at a time calling at Methodist doors to collect warm clothing for the poor. Think of him offering interest free loans to the poor “rescuing them from lenders demanding extortionate interest that would have compounded their distress.” Picture him using church premises to dispense medicines to people who could not afford medical treatment. Think of him on his deathbed writing to the young William Wilberforce to “Go on in the name of God and in the power of his might till even American slavery, (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.”

Bringing God's healing into a broken and suffering world. What an inspiration Wesley provides and what a challenge for modern day Methodist people! We have a message that can transform individual lives and bring people into a saving relationship with God but we also bear witness to a God who wants to transform and restore the world He loves. Somehow together we must learn to play our part in making a difference in a needy world.

As Irish Methodists this has always been our understanding of what it means to be followers of Jesus. We have no time for those who sneer at “the social gospel”. Reaching out to help those in need is not optional extra – it is the essential outworking of our faith and without it we cannot expect God's blessing or commendation. Our city missions were birthed in this way of thinking. In days gone by they fed, clothed and cared for thousands of the poorest city dwellers and in different ways still do so today. Sunday schools were originally an attempt to bring literacy as well as Christian education to poor children. Evangelism and practical caring, for Methodists, have always gone hand in hand.

Local Methodist churches have always sought to reach out into their communities in practical ways. Each church has a Benevolent Fund which exists to help those in need. Each time we celebrate Holy

Communion we take up an offering for the poor. At different points during the year we raise money for good causes at home and overseas. And it's not just money. Like Wesley we try to use our premises to meet practical local needs. Our members are involved in parent and toddler groups, luncheon clubs for senior citizens, bowling and badminton clubs, uniformed youth organisations and youth clubs. Who would have thought in the twenty-first century that churches would be turning to the creation of food banks to help families in our localities to make ends meet?

It is encouraging to read in this magazine of many instances of our Methodist churches engaging in new innovative ventures. An example of that is the Damask Community Outreach operating out of Seymour Street Methodist Church in Lisburn and running an advice service for people with financial and other problems. Then there is the way congregations in places like Dublin and Waterford have reached out in friendship and fellowship to welcome people from different nationalities. We have also read recently about simple experiments in outreach such as that undertaken by members of Sydenham Methodist as they give out tea and coffee to early morning commuters at the local train station. Without a doubt Wesley would have been completely behind such ideas.

He would surely have loved Skainos - this exciting newly launched project aiming at community transformation and renewal in inner east Belfast. What a witness it presents as it expresses God's love and concern for people of all ages and backgrounds. We all pray that from it will flow a deep river of spiritual and practical blessing for a host of people and for a community which has known its share of struggle and pain.

So back to Wesley's Dublin sermon: Is the world – is Ireland- a better place because of the people called Methodists? Let's keep working to make it so as we head into another new year.