

Lynda – This one is on prayer. Any chance of a pic of Wesley's Prayer Room instead of the one of me?

A few years ago I was in London with some time to kill. It had been years since I had been to John Wesley's home at City Road and I decided that another visit was long overdue. To my surprise and delight I was the only visitor and the curator offered me the choice of either a guided tour or the opportunity to take my own time, have the house to myself and wander around alone. What a pleasure for any Methodist to walk through that simple house where Wesley spent the last twelve years of his life, take in the atmosphere and look at some of the furniture and objects he would have known.

The highlight, of course, was the tiny little back room, no more than five feet in length, just off his bedroom. It has become known as the Powerhouse of Methodism because that is where John Wesley went at four o'clock each morning to spend the first two hours alone with God. I couldn't resist it. I thought of all the blessing and effect that had flowed out from that tiny room and I just had to kneel on the floorboards and imagine the same God doing something equally wonderful in our day also.

Prayer was central to the life of John Wesley. It was the fuel that sustained him during a lifetime of extraordinary activity and energy. It surely lay at the heart of the amazing outpouring of the Holy Spirit that brought Methodism into being. Towards the end of his life he was spending as much as eight hours a day in communion with God. He once said that he thought very little of a man who did not pray for four hours every day!

Makes us all feel a bit shallow, doesn't it? In our busy action-packed lives we tend to see prayer as asking – for ourselves or for others – often presenting God with a list of our concerns which we can run through with Him in about ten minutes. Wesley had a much broader view. He saw prayer as quality time spent with God. Sometimes he was silent, listening and tuning in to hear God's voice; sometimes he read from collections of classic prayers; at other times he read prayer liturgies, prayed in his own words or even wrote out personal prayers to give expression to his thoughts and desires.

Prayer was, for Wesley, a way of life. He brought it into everything he did. He believed that Christians should "pray without ceasing". To explain how this was possible he stated "*Prayer continues in the desire of the heart, though the understanding be employed on outward things.*" In other words prayer is more than formulating requests – it is a communion with God that goes far beyond mere words.

But, of course, prayer does involve asking. Possibly the most challenging thing Wesley ever wrote on the subject was "God does nothing but in answer to prayer." What an incredible insight! He was saying that the good which God wants to do on earth waits to be released by the prayers of His people. Our prayer is somehow built into the outworking of the will and purposes of God. That is the honour and the responsibility God places on every believer.

No wonder the early Methodists took prayer so seriously. Not only did they love to get alone with God, they also loved to meet together for shared prayer. On January 1st 1739, shortly after his conversion, John Wesley and some friends gathered to pray through the night. In his journal he recorded what happened "*About three in the morning as we were continuing instant in prayer the*

power of God came mightily upon us so much so that many cried out for exceeding joy and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice "We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord"'. What a prayer meeting that must have been!

Every early Methodist society was bathed in prayer. There was prayer at early morning meetings; there was prayer at every weekly class and band meeting and there were formal prayers at preaching services and cottage meetings.

Possibly it would be an interesting exercise to compare the numerical decline in Methodism over the years with the steady disappearance of meetings for prayer. Perhaps somewhere along the line we have lost our sense of the privilege, the power, the drama and the responsibility that we have, as believers, to agree in prayer and approach God with confidence that we will be heard.

But it's not all bad news. There are signs that God is stirring us up and giving us a new appetite for prayer. And who would have thought that it would be young people who would be setting the example and pointing the way! Over recent years, with the help of the 24/7 Prayer Movement, many Methodist churches have set up prayer rooms to which people (and not just church people) can go to spend time with God. What is more, many churches now have trained leaders who are willing to pray privately at the close of worship with those who would like to receive help.

Prayer seems to back on the agenda in Irish Methodism in a way that hasn't been witnessed for a long time. That should give us great hope. We still have a long way to go, especially in the area of corporate prayer, but the signs are promising. This year at our annual Conference we will give special additional time to seeking to meet with God and to hear His voice. Hold that thought of Wesley's, "God does nothing except by prayer." Quite a challenge, isn't it?