

Scholars agree about what it was that happened to John Wesley that evening in Aldersgate Street in London on 24th May 1738. He himself was in no doubt. His heart had been strangely warmed; he had found the saving faith that had eluded him for so long; he had peace in his soul and an assurance that God had forgiven him and accepted as His own. We all know what happened next. For the following 50 years Wesley travelled over 250,000 miles across the British Isles presenting the message of a Saviour whose love and whose salvation were for all – rich or poor, learned or ignorant, good or bad.

He often met with opposition. On 20th March 1739 in a letter to James Hervey, a friend who criticised him for invading other clergy's parishes he summed up his attitude like this *"I look on all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty, to declare into all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work I know God has called me to."*

The whole world. No-one could ever accuse Wesley and the early Methodists of being inward looking. If the Gospel truly was "for all" then it had to be taken to all – and especially to places where it was not yet known. They could never have imagined that in 2013 Methodism would exist in 132 countries of the world and have a combined membership of over 70 million.

Irish Methodism has had a very significant role in the story of that growth. In the spring of 1760 a group of emigrants departed from the steps of Custom House Quay in Limerick bound for what they hoped would be a better life in the New World. Among them was a man called Philip Embury. A carpenter by trade, he was also a Methodist local preacher from the little meeting house in Ballingrane, County Limerick. They landed in New York on 10th August 1760 and began their new life. Sadly in that first year the struggle to make ends meet began to take its toll spiritually and although they attended Lutheran worship Embury and others began to drift away from the walk with God they had known back in Ireland.

The person who saw the danger was Barbara Heck, Embury's cousin. She was a lady who could not easily be ignored! She went to Embury, got down on her knees and urged him to start preaching again. He never forgot her words: "God will require our blood at your hands if you do not." The upshot was that Philip Embury did indeed start to preach – at first to five people in his own small rented house and later, as numbers grew, in the first Methodist church built on American soil. In 1769 Wesley sent out the first two Methodist missionaries to help in the work. Fifteen years later events had progressed to the extent that Wesley took the historic step of himself ordaining men to superintend the growth of Methodism in the newly independent United States. Thus American Methodism traces its beginnings to two obscure figures from a small townland in the west of Ireland.

Here is another example. The year 2014 marks the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Methodism in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). Here again Irish Methodism played its part. Wesley had made his friend Thomas Coke Superintendent of Foreign Missions. In that role Coke had organised the work in America, the West Indies, Sierra Leone, Nova Scotia, Gibraltar and Ireland. Wesley gave him the nickname "the Flea" because he jumped around so much! As he got older he became more and more convinced that God was calling him to go to Ceylon and India. Coke often chaired the Irish

Methodist Conference and when in 1813 he shared this vision, Conference immediately supplied him with three Irish volunteers to accompany him on the adventure.

It nearly didn't happen as the British Conference thought that Coke at 66 was too old. In reply the great man said *"God Himself has said to me Go to Ceylon. I'd rather be set naked on the coast of Ceylon without clothes and without a friend than not to go there"*. He never got his wish. He died on the voyage but the work went ahead under the leadership of James Lynch, one of the Irish volunteers. Thus began an association between Irish and Sri Lankan Methodism that continues to this day.

Thus from the earliest days Irish Methodism played more than its part in overseas missions. Dr Coke described Ireland as his chief recruiting ground for workers. Missionaries went out to places like the West Indies, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Canada, West Africa, South Africa, Ceylon, India, Burma, and Australia. It was a flow of sacrificial service that continues to our own day.

What a great heritage we have – and how good it is to see that men and women today still answer the call of God to go to other places. Today the world seems a much smaller place. Nowadays mission partners can email, Skype, Facebook and keep in touch with home in ways undreamed of only fifty years ago. Hopefully we are learning to support them better and keep them more closely in our prayers. We thank God for every one of them. We are also increasingly aware that travel is easier and that it has become possible for more of us to pay a visit or take part in summer mission trips. We rejoice too, in the way that, in recent times, believers from other nations have come to our shores and brought such an injection of new life and vitality into so many of our churches. It seems like things coming full circle.

We're all one parish, after all!