

In his inaugural address made earlier today, 2 July, the Revd Dr Roger Walton, the newly elected President of the Methodist Conference, has reminded the Church of its calling to spread holiness.

At the Conference, held at Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, the Revd Dr Roger Walton focused on holiness as being inherent in everything the Church does and as the echo of God within all of us all.

"In a world where a multitude of truths and an infinite choice of lifestyles seem possible, Christians need to shape their lives by the pattern of Jesus. We have to be Jesus-shaped" said Roger.

The President continued: *"Methodism was called to spread spiritual holiness. Those early Methodists did that, not simply by telling, but by living inside the biblical story; by journeying regularly to holy places and living intentional and ethical lives"*.

Presidential Address:

Like others who have stood in this place before me, I am not quite sure why I am here or that I am adequate to the role. I feel that someone somewhere has made a mistake. Any minute I will receive a note to say, 'Don't worry, the proper President will be along shortly'.

I am not alone in this. Last September I saw the then new Secretary of the Conference and I asked him how he was settling into the new appointment. He told me that ever since the Conference, he had been expecting a responsible adult to come along but so far it hadn't happened.

Now I know this might not sound very reassuring - that the President and the Secretary of Conference are not too confident in their positions, but in many ways that has been the story of ministry for me from the beginning. Being pulled out of college in my last year to go to fill a hole in the stations for a year seemed like an excellent learning opportunity. On my first day, I was asked to visit Mr and Mrs Beckley, a couple who were about to celebrate their 50th Wedding anniversary. The church had planned a party the next weekend and everyone was looking forward to it. Before I left the house I got a phone call to say that Mr Beckley had taken ill on his morning walk and had died. Would I go and speak with Mrs Beckley? The sense of being unprepared was palpable? The feeling of not knowing what I would say or do was frightening. And if I am honest that sentiment has accompanied every move I have made. Arriving in Liverpool as a probationer minister on a challenging estate, taking up a post with the Division of Ministries under the aspirational title of 'Theology for All'; my first day teaching in a theological college; starting as a Chair of District - all felt the same. What do you say and how do you do this - surely there is someone else who could do it better?

I wonder if you have seen the film 'Suffragette'?

The basic plot is about Maud Watts, a 24-year-old laundress who finds herself caught up in the movement almost by accident. Her friend Violet is due to give testimony to members of Parliament but she is so badly beaten by her abusive husband that she cannot and Maud, who was going simply to support her friend, finds herself standing in front of these MPs asked to tell of her experience in the laundry. She is in the wrong place at the wrong time or, as it turns out, in the right place at the right time. She stands for a few moments frozen in the face of these powerful men and then shares her story.

Maybe that was Isaiah's experience too. Maybe he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. We do not know why he was in the temple but we do know when. It was in the year that King Uzziah died. King Uzziah had reigned for over 50 years and it had been a time of relative stability in Judah. His death ushered in a period of enormous political upheaval. Now Assyria was becoming the aggressive superpower intent on controlling the region. For the whole of Isaiah's life and ministry there would be wars and political machinations. Judah was in constant danger of being crushed by this giant beast of the ancient world or becoming collateral damage in Assyria's struggles against other regimes. We know what that looks like. Cities and towns laid waste, people fleeing war, refugees moving into foreign lands.

It is at this moment that Isaiah encountered the holiness of God.

He sees the Lord high and lifted up and the temple filled with smoke. He feels its foundation shaking. He hears the angelic creatures crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. And he realises that he is in the wrong place at the wrong time and there seems to be no one else - but he finally says, 'Here I am send me...'

Like Maud and Isaiah, finding myself here, I need to speak what is on my mind and in my heart.

I want to talk with you on the subject of Holiness. Now I recognise that this might not be an immediate 'turn on'. The idea that you will spend the next 30 minutes listening to someone talk about holiness, may not be what you came for. The prospect might sound as interesting as a lecture on the mathematics of actuarial calculations or the merits of different rubber surfaces on table tennis bats!

But on my heart is the need to re-discover the centrality of holiness in our life as a church and the need to spread the notion of holiness for others to consider and embrace.

If you don't sit easy with the word holiness, let me offer some other words for holiness

Spiritual Fitness. This is the way Graham Tomlin speaks of holiness. He notes that in our society, going to the gym and getting fit is a major preoccupation. 68% of us make a New Year's resolution to get fit, though 37% of folk who join gyms in January stop going before the end of the month! Whether we do exercise or simply aspire to it, we have a massive desire to become fitter. Tomlin suggests that what the church has to offer is spiritual health and fitness.

'If churches became known as places where you could learn how to love, to trust, to hope, to forgive, to gain wisdom for life, then they might be attractive, perhaps even necessary places to belong to.'

Another way to speak of holiness is as Wholeness. Ever since Josef Goldbrunner's 1954 book *Holiness as Wholeness*, the notion has been around and for many people it conveys better what Christians mean by holiness in the 21st century. Wholeness, here, is defined as 'being the best person that you can be, being free of all that inhibits your growth as a human being, being healed and complete not in the sense of never facing suffering or loss or disability but fully human, fully alive, fully open to God and the world'.

Brendan Callaghan says:

'The great religions of the world offer us ways to live at our best and to express those deepest cares. In the eyes of a believer, this is a path towards holiness – a path of responding to the love that God has revealed to us by living in love in return. But to live in such a way is also the path to wholeness.'

Another word might be Resilience - In her book *Resilient Pastors* Justine Allain-Chapman focuses on human resilience – the power to bounce back when knocked by failure, illness, disappointment, tragedy and suffering. It isn't just pastors who need resilience, of course. It is everyone. Everyone needs to be able to live in such a way that the knocks of the world don't disfigure or destroy us but through inner strength and struggle we become, not less, but more ourselves - more able to survive, to thrive and to love.

Resilience, spiritual fitness and wholeness are ways of speaking of holiness. If these images help you, hang on to them. I will stay with the word holiness.

Methodist Roots

The roots of Methodism are to be found in a passion for holiness.

The desire for a holy life animated John and Charles Wesley from their Puritan-shaped home-life, through the Holy Club in Oxford, through the Moravian communities, to the hundreds of small societies they established, that went by the name Methodist. The Methodist Societies were for the pursuit of holiness.

John Wesley's picture image of religion was a house. Imagine, he said, that the porch of the house is repentance. You cannot get into the house without going on to the porch. The door of the house is justification by faith (pardon, forgiveness, reconciliation with God). You cannot get into the house without going through the door. But the house itself, for which the porch and door are means of access, is holiness of heart and life.

There can be little doubt that the hymns of his brother are overwhelmingly about the desire for holiness.

*O for a heart to praise my God,
a heart from sin set free
A heart that always feels Thy blood
So freely shed for me.
... A heart in every thought renewed
And full of love divine, Perfect and right and pure and good, A copy, Lord, of Thine.* (StF 501)

Methodism was a holiness movement.

Yes, early Methodism was a missionary movement – taking every opportunity to preach the faith. In churches and market places, in pulpits and standing on gravestones, they told the good news to everyone who would listen.

Yes, early Methodism was a movement of and for the poor, treating poor people not as fickle and feckless or, to use modern terms, not as ‘scroungers and work shy’ but as people made in the image of God for whom Christ died. And the poor responded. That is why Richard Heitzenrater can say that you could have hung a sign outside many of the first Methodist chapels which said ‘The Poor are Us’ and it would have been true.

Yes, Early Methodism was a fresh expression of church, pragmatically responding to the changing culture of 18th century Britain, so that the gospel could be heard in terms that spoke to people’s lives, circumstances and culture.

Above all Methodism was a company of people seeking holiness and seeking to spread scriptural holiness through the land. We have rightly focused in the last few years on the term discipleship, wanting to re-capture what it means to be a follower of Jesus and to live in the pattern of Jesus – and I have attempted to contribute to that conversation. But the word that needs to be at the centre of all our talk of discipleship is the word holiness. I was delighted when Andrew Roberts’ new book on discipleship *Holy Habits* came out, for it connects again discipleship with holiness.

So what is holiness and how can we speak about it in the twenty-first century?

What it isn’t:

- Holiness is not blind zeal ... it doesn’t call us to narrowness of perception and living. It doesn’t desire the harming of others. Rather it widens our view and makes us more aware, sensitive and compassionate.
- Holiness is not moral superiority ... it doesn’t look down on others. Indeed, it is marked by humility and love. Holiness puts others’ needs first and delights in the image of God in every person.
- Holiness is not isolated existence away from the tarnishing of the world. It is a social holiness that grows in contact, conversation and commitment to others.

Holiness, as Morna Hooker tells us, begins in the revealed character of God. For holiness is primarily the nature of God; the core character of God – God’s purity, and love and beauty. God’s Otherness. Our experience of holiness begins in encounter with God.

That is what Isaiah 6 tells us. This extraordinary passage captures the essence of the biblical story: that the glory of God breaks into human life. God comes to the world in love to redeem humanity. Isaiah sees and is amazed, awestruck and frightened because it is beyond his experience.

In the face of God’s utter holiness, Isaiah recognises his own sinfulness, the brokenness of his society and his helplessness to redeem himself. But God gives His Holiness to cleanse Isaiah and calls him to share God’s Holy endeavour to produce a Holy nation.

In other words, Holiness is God’s yet God gives it to us. It is a gift which God shares with human persons and communities and calls us to share this character.

Holiness breaks into our world in many various places.

This was my experience as a 16-year-old. God’s love – a love above and beyond anything I had known – broke into my life, accepting me as I was, and calling me to become what God wanted me to be.

This experience of God breaking in is more commonly felt than we realise. David Hay and Rebecca Nye have spent many years researching and collecting accounts of people’s experiences of the transcendent: moments where something beyond them broke into their lives – many of these people not connected to church or religion. Here is one example:

‘One day, I was sweeping the stairs, down in the house in which I was working, when suddenly I was overcome, overwhelmed, saturated ... with a sense of most sublime and living love. It not only affected me, but seemed to bring everything around me to life. The brush in my hand, my dustpan, the stairs, seemed to come alive with love. I seemed no longer me, with my petty troubles and trials, but part of this infinite power of love, so utterly and overwhelmingly wonderful that one knew at once what the saints had grasped. It could only have been a minute or two, yet for that brief particle of time it seemed eternity ...’

Hay and Nye argue that people are often afraid to share these experiences either because they do not have the language to make sense of them; or because they think that folk will consider them odd.

Living according to the revealed character of God begins, therefore, in encountering God's otherness and when we feel it, it always contains a call, a call to discover more of this amazing God. As Gerard Hughes put it:

'The call to holiness is the echo of God's longing for each of us'

If Holiness begins in encounter with God, how is it nurtured in us? How are we to continue to grow into a holy people? Let me offer you three ways in which holiness can grow in us as we seek to respond to the gracious, unmerited and glorious holy love of God breaking into our lives.

1. Holiness is nurtured by living in the story of God

When I worked at the Open Learning Centre, I received a letter one day. It said that a couple were clearing out their uncle's house after his death and had found a Greek Bible. They asked whether we could use it. I wrote back saying that we would be delighted to receive it. We ran a small 'Learn New Testament Greek' course and we could pass it on to one of our students. When it arrived, however, I realised that we could not give it to anyone, for there were scribbled notes on every margin of every page. The letter that accompanied the Bible was, however, even more stunning. It said that their uncle had left school after elementary education – around 11 or 12 – and gone to work on the railways. He became a signalman and worked on the railways all his life. He also became a Christian and a Local Preacher and, in order to be the best preacher he could be, he taught himself New Testament Greek. Clearly, he had worked his way through his Greek New Testament time after time after time, in order that his life might be shaped by its content.

He lived inside the New Testament.

Now this is a metaphor for our discipleship. We are not to learn the facts of the scripture to be good at general knowledge or to be able to quote texts to support this view or that. Something much more is called for. We are to enter into, and live in, and see the world from the story of God. The call of holiness is the call to live inside the story of God.

In many ways the story of the people of Israel begins when God breaks into their lives as slaves in Egypt. This was an unmerited act of liberation. They were led out from being slaves into the wilderness and it is at this point that they are called to be holy. The first occasion that Israel is called to be holy as God is holy is found in Leviticus 11.45:

For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.

What this means is learning to live differently. For their experience up to this point is one of oppression, relentless work and brutal punishments. But now in the wilderness they are called to be holy. And they are given the Ten Commandments. Now I was taught in school and Sunday school these ten basic rules that God had given had a timeless character. We learnt them by heart and were quizzed on them. They were not tied to their context or history but a set of rules for living that could be applied everywhere and at all times. But they mean much more, if you read them as spoken to a people who have been slaves and known no other models about how to live than in the regime they had just escaped.

The God that gave the Ten Commandments was very different from the gods they had met in Egypt. Those gods legitimised oppression and relentless work. At Sinai they learned of a God who rested, a God who encouraged community, a God who desired good relationships with parents and neighbours; a God who wanted justice for everyone and who protected each from the extremes of punishment. The models they had in their heads from their experiences in Egypt were very different from this new God.

They did not learn the Commandments off by heart as I did in Sunday school to be able to answer questions, but they had to start to live them, to live in them and through them, to take on a different kind of lifestyle and make a different kind of community. That is what it meant to be holy.

In the New Testament the revealed character of God is seen in the life and person of Jesus: his teaching, his ministry, his death and his resurrection and here we have a new insight into the character of God.

Much of the dispute between the Pharisees and Jesus is precisely about holiness. For the Pharisees, the key to holiness was separation from anything that was unclean and contaminating. For Jesus, holiness was something else. Jesus fell out with the Pharisees because he did unclean stuff – he touched lepers, he laid his hand on corpses, he allowed unclean people to come close and touch him, he associated with tax collectors and sinners. He did all the things that the Pharisees thought were forbidden and would make you lose your holiness. But as Jimmy Dunn points out, Jesus reversed the equation. Instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the leper is made well, the dead are raised to life, the tax collectors and sinners are brought back into the kingdom. He gives his holiness to others and they are made holy. In this he does what God does in the temple with Isaiah. He imparts holiness and enables all to come to God. He gives us another model of holiness as the outpouring of love. He provides a new story to live within.

We who hear the call of Jesus, are to live in this new story of outgoing, selfless love.

2. Holiness is nurtured by visiting holy spaces

Methodists are known for promoting what we call ‘social holiness’. It is one of the lines from John Wesley that has become widely quoted. The original is as follows:

‘the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social religion; no holiness but social holiness’

Like so many of Mr Wesley’s thoughts, it has often come to be used to describe other ideas different from his original intention – anything from an afternoon tea party to Christian Socialism, but as Andrew Thompson has argued, for Wesley social holiness meant something different. To understand this, we need to pay attention to the original context. For the original and only use of this term occurs in the Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems in 1739. Wesley here is making the case for congregational hymn singing – a new thing in the 18th century – and he is attacking the idea that holiness can be found by going off on one’s own and living as a solitary. It is a sideswipe at individualistic retreating to the desert. In fact, the longer quote says:

‘Holy solitaries’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.’

What Wesley meant, therefore, was environments in which holiness can grow; corporate contexts conducive to the growth of holiness or, to use Andrew Robert’s term, ‘holy habitats’. The fact that this occurs in the preface to a hymn book, tells us that Wesley thought Christians gathering together to sing hymns was such an environment. For Wesley, hymn singing was a means of grace – like prayer, fasting, holy communion and Christian conferring – where we can expect to meet the love of God over and over again and so be transformed. We are to take ourselves to places where we can encounter, in the company of others, the holy life of God.

I wonder where you go to find God? Where are the holy spaces? Are they in our churches, our worship, our home meetings?

We are to visit holy spaces and help make holy places. I am convinced that were Wesley following the agendas of Conference for the last few years he would recognise that safeguarding is an important part of creating a holy space – for where people are safe they are more likely to grow – and that supervision of pastoral practice, done well, will help create more accountable and holy ministers that makes for ministry which allows holiness to grow.

But there is another word to say on holy spaces.

Mission and encounter moments can also be holy spaces. Wesley went to preach in the open air. As he put it, he ‘consented to become more vile’. He visited prisoners condemned to death, he went out among and listened to the poor, he got involved in campaigns against the distillers, not primarily because they fermented alcohol but because they exploited the poor, he opposed slavery and set up work opportunities for those who would otherwise be destitute or in prostitution. In all those places he encountered the grace of God. In other words, his actions tell us that mission is a place of holiness. We are formed and transformed by God in mission.

Charles Elliot, in his book *Praying the Kingdom*, suggested the translation of the first word of the Beatitudes, which we normally translate as ‘blessed’, might be better translated, ‘*You are in the right place.*’

You are in the right place among the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven.

You are in the right place alongside those who mourn.

You are in the right place with the meek.

You are in the right place with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

You are in the right place among the merciful.

You are in the right place working with peacemakers.

You are in the right place when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for there is the kingdom of heaven.

You are in the right place because, surprising as it seems, this is where God's blessing is to be found.

In preparation for this year, I went with All We Can to Jordan and met many refugee families from Syria. On each visit, as we were welcomed into a family's home – often as basic as can be – it felt like we were treading on holy ground. For we were privileged to receive their hospitality and listen to their often tragic and terrifying stories. I thought of Charles Elliot's translation – 'You are in the right place'.

3. Holiness is nurtured by intentional and ethical living

We grow in holiness as we seek to embody in our actions the deep convictions that flow from our faith and our relationship with God. We need to translate these convictions into commitments that express the life we have discovered in Christ.

Paying our taxes properly and holding to account those companies who don't; seeking fair and just trade in the world; offering hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers; making space for the excluded and forgotten; being faithful in our relationships; campaigning for a world free of nuclear weapons; working to halt the downhill ski-slope towards environmental and ecological disaster; these are not optional extras for us. They are essential. They are ways of pursuing the hard path to holiness, for it is both free gift and demands everything we have to receive it.

And we should not underestimate the power of intentional, ethical living. It is attractive. It witnesses by action to what we believe. Frances Young suggests that the early Christian church didn't grow because it had public evangelistic campaigns but because it connected with society, it told the story of Jesus and it lived by ethical standards derived from the gospel.

I know how my children's spirituality and faith was shaped by the MAYC campaign of the 1990s. Sleeping out to draw attention to homelessness; writing to local supermarkets about fair trade goods; they learned that it was not only what you said with your words but what you said with your lives that counted.

As Bishop J C Ryle said over a century ago:

'Our lives will always be either doing good or harm to those who see them. They are a silent sermon which all can read ... far more is done for Christ's kingdom by the holy living of believers than we are aware of.'

We need to learn from new monasticism that to tell the story of Jesus we need ourselves to have lives patterned by a rhythm of life rooted in Christ. For in a world where a multitude of truths and an infinite choice of lifestyles seem possible, Christians need to shape their lives by the pattern of Jesus. We have to be Jesus-shaped people.

Methodism was called to spread scriptural holiness. Those early Methodists did that, not simply by telling, but by living inside the biblical story; by journeying regularly to holy places; and by living intentional and ethical lives.

I believe that is still our calling.

Amen