

## London Synod Address, 5 April 2008

When difficult situations are turned round, the people of God praise and thank God. That is the regular testimony of the Bible, especially in the Jewish scriptures. Psalm 30 is a good example. But so are lots of other passages which are read during the Easter season, partly to pre-figure the Easter story. (But more of that later). Here and now I remind us that when things are turned round, from situations of threat, destruction and defeat to freedom and settled living and peacefulness, God's people of old said instinctively: 'This is God's doing. It is marvellous in our eyes'. Of course the primary occasions of such escape and rejoicing were political and military in character. They were about invaders being repelled, against the odds, and so forth.

But the theme is critical in other contexts also. So I invite us to ponder the story of the Christian movement in Western Europe over the past 2 or 3 centuries. Methodism shares much of the general story, though the relative newness of Methodism gives our story some special features, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the risk of massive oversimplification, we know that the Christian movement in Europe has been battered and marginalised, has been forced into a place where the Church's self-confidence has ebbed away and Christian people have huddled together to protect themselves from the icy blasts of the world beyond its thick brick walls.

We can identify, with hindsight, some of the great events and intellectual movements that forced the Church to cry out: 'How long, O Lord? How long must we be on the defensive? How much smaller shall we get? Is there a future for us?'

I simply list now some of the markers on that hard journey.

- The French Revolution and the subsequent political developments (painful and tempestuous as they were) towards secular liberal democracy.
- Charles Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859).
- The work of Sigmund Freud and the varied streams of psycho-analysis, psychology and psychotherapy that flowed from his pioneer work.
- The first world war carnage on unimaginable scales which exploded forever facile religion and talk of progress in human affairs, and demolished easy-going pictures of co-operation and fellowship in international relationships.
- The birth of romanticism, then modernism, then post-modernism in all forms of culture, which moved artistic imagination away from the symbols and stories of our religious past towards the aesthetic wonder of the natural world and towards interior human experience; and eventually to an unchecked individualism disconnected from collectively-owned moral bearings. The outcome? Each individual doing his or her own thing. My truth, my values and my ambitions become determinative of my life's purpose and meaning – if there be such – and they may be pursued independently of anyone else's free-running imagination and lifestyle choices.

Thus we have today a mosaic of disconnected cultural artefacts which do not form into a coherent picture and screeching noises which give people of a nervous disposition a bad headache. And with the advent of modern technology, every separate cultural fragment can circulate the globe in an instant, with little or no control. No one knows their effect on someone who reads this stuff as they sit by themselves in front of a computer screen.

This narrative has led to the terrible battering for the Christian movement that I referred to earlier. But now I want to proclaim that slowly in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more obviously at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *the first glimmerings of things being 'turned round' are visible*. God has not cut us adrift. God is bringing God's people to a new place of freedom and confidence, an arena of blessing. Praise be to God!

I cite as evidence of the beginnings of a turn around the following:

1 The Methodist Church has spent 15-20 years rediscovering its core purpose. From *Sharing in God's Mission* in 1985 to *Our Calling* in 2000 and then *Priorities for the Methodist Church* in 2004.

2 Institutional change and cultural change in the Church. We have moved from reports to be debated and agreed (only to gather dust) to processes of review and practical *change* – in the way we structure ourselves, in the way we do things and in fundamental attitude. I illustrate very briefly.

2.1 The way we structure ourselves. Evidence: I have personally witnessed the long and painful struggle by which the former 7 Divisions became the Connexional Team in 1996 and how, since 2005, through the *Team Focus* process, the Connexional Team has been radically reconfigured to make it a more flexible, efficient and co-operative organism within the connexion, focussing on what it can uniquely and best do, and continuing to learn from its experience how to change in the service of the Church.

There is a parallel set of processes now developing everywhere in the connexion through circuit reviews of a radical kind, bringing under the microscope of 21<sup>st</sup> century mission strategy our buildings, our circuit structures and our financial and human resources. The heading for this 5-year programme of connexion-wide circuit reviews: *Mapping a Way Forward – Regrouping for Mission*. At its culmination will be a review of our district structures. But already you have blazed the trail in exploring new ways of being a district. Well done for that – and more of it, please!

2.2 The way we do things. The most radical assault on opaque and cumbersome bureaucracy in the Church is the review of Part 9 of CPD. This part of our discipline regulates all Methodist property developments and the use of Model Trust money. That root and branch review is now well under way, and its simplified, electronically-based, efficient consent-giving procedures are about to be trialled in this district and in the Nottingham & Derby district, before being rolled out connexionally as soon as possible.

2.3 Fundamental attitude. Through *Our Calling and Priorities for the Methodist Church*, I believe people are rediscovering some key issues about our identity as a Church:

- that we are above all, a *Church in mission*;
- that our focus is therefore on engaging with the society around us and with people who do not belong to the Church;
- that we have to be innovative, creative and determined if we are to embed ourselves confidently in the secular and multi-faith world, and
- that precisely in those strange contexts learn to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to ordinary people going about their everyday lives, struggling with the ups and downs of their experience, their joys and sorrows, but having no intuitive sense at all that their lives are enveloped by the grace of God.

So everyday discipleship is pivotal to our mission – in the workplace, in our families and neighbourhoods and in the groups and organisations where we take our leisure. Confident and meaningful witness in such settings, credibility of character, consistency of moral perspective – these are the vocation of a Church which sees itself again as primarily a lay movement supported by a few ordained people. (Wherever I turn in today's Church, I see lay people taking initiatives and energy for mission being released.)

3 We have informally entered into a new ecumenism. This has many facets. I touch here only on a few of them.

- Wherever you look in contemporary Methodism you see congregations (both traditional congregations and fresh expressions of Church) which are ever so much more diverse than just a generation ago. Obviously so in terms of ethnicity and nationality, and increasingly in the languages that are used. But also in the Christian backgrounds of people there. Few are born and bred Methodists; but for a variety of reasons, people have come together from many Christian traditions: Anglicans, Roman Catholics, URC, independent evangelical, Pentecostal; or from nothing in particular.
- Our worship has been enriched by a far greater range of resources – from Taizé and Iona, from Pentecostalism, from the evangelical song-tradition and from words and music developed first in partner Churches all round the world.
- We are learning to revitalise long-established Local Ecumenical Partnerships, and to develop formal ecumenical relationships with a far lighter touch.
- In many places we are confidently making friendships with people of other faiths, learning from them and sharing with them, working together in support of better communities and taking action together for justice.

- In the midst of this more flexible and generous and broad-ranging ecumenism, we are also slowly rediscovering the strengths of our distinctive Methodist contributions to the Church catholic – our connexionalism; our emphasis on personal and social holiness; our naturally good-humoured approach to life, to faith and to worship: we dislike pomposity; we like people to speak plain; we know what we believe when we sing it with gusto and pray it with fervour in everyday words.

A reflection on this 'new ecumenism'. Much of the movement to greater diversity – and therefore greater vitality and confidence – has come about because of the extraordinary movement of peoples around the world in recent generations. Christian people coming to Britain from many parts of the world have helped to re-shape the Church. People of other faiths coming to Britain from many parts of the world have helped to re-shape our society and the agenda of the Church's mission.

I have said enough, I hope, to illustrate my first substantial point: that I believe that, under the providence of God, the Christian movement in western Europe is beginning to 'turn round' and God is to be praised. Before I move on, however, I need to make some contextual and cautionary comments.

First, you would expect me to say this: While I have illustrated the 'turn around', as I see it, from Methodist experience, it can be observed everywhere in classical forms of Christian identity. So the Anglicans have *Mission Shaped Church*; the URC has been *Catching the Vision*; the Baptist Union has focussed on five core values for mission; etc. However, the mutual learning between these great traditions has not, in my view, been effective enough. We could do better.

And there are engagements on the ecumenical scene, notably with more locally-organised movements among black and Asian Christians – some in radical groups, some in the Pentecostal traditions – which we have hardly begun to tap into. They could help us; and we could help them.

Second, the situation is very untidy, not to say messy. Change is like that. And some groups and individuals within Methodism have reacted badly: they have become intransigent and stubborn in refusing to break out of their historic prisons in which they became locked near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Managing this change is very demanding. There is a huge premium on leaders with clear vision and consistent messages to inspire and guide change.

Third, institutionally we continue to decline and we are likely to do so in the foreseeable future. And this in spite of the strong sense of refreshment and new confidence and manifest growth among so many groups, churches and circuits. Seeing the total picture realistically but accurately is very important. In particular, I conclude that we must not stop what we have set in motion: the determination to re-scale our institutional structures, to release our considerable locked-up resources of wealth and to be as sharp as possible in

deploying to maximum effect our human resources according to clear mission priorities.

We expect ministers (presbyters and deacons) to be a disciplined workforce at the disposal of the Conference. However, we shall only move forward more effectively if we structure and discipline the deployment of lay people, acting in a voluntary capacity. I resist calling Methodists 'volunteers' – which implies they do their own thing on their own terms, in their spare time. Methodists are 100% committed as disciples in every aspect of their lives, and when they have defined, in a balanced lifestyle, their availability to the mission of the institutional Church, they need to be at the disposal of the Church for that gift of time – which is not necessarily focused on their local church. We need a mechanism that enables some direction to be given to lay people: We need you here (in the local church), you here (in the circuit), you here (in the district) or you here (serving connexionally). All in all, we need a fundamental change of attitude here, from voluntarism to disciplined deployment..

I am ready now to move on to my second substantial point.

Actually the structure of this talk is like a child's see-saw. We've jumped on one end. Shortly we shall jump on the other end. But before we do so, pay attention (won't you?) to the fulcrum in the middle. The fulcrum of this talk is a crucial declaration: *God is present and active everywhere – in the world and in the Church*. So: Where is Jesus Christ for us today? In your workplace, among your colleagues and in the workings of the organisation which employs you. In your neighbourhood, among your neighbours, in the shops, offices, community conflicts, environmental struggles and political battles locally. In your family, in all its joys and sorrows. In the great affairs of nations, fighting each other or oppressing one another. In the power-games of the mighty and the in the desperate struggles of the poor for food, for the rudiments of healthy living and for justice. Among the negotiators for peace and the patient who work for reconciliation, community-building and healthcare.

Yes, Jesus Christ is to be discerned everywhere in the world, in the heights of civilised and moral behaviour and in the bestiality with which we destroy each other and our climate.

But this also must be proclaimed: the presence of Jesus Christ is especially to be discerned in the Body of Christ, which is the universal fellowship of all Christian people.

That is the truth: God present in the world and in the Church. The challenge is: Can we see Christ? Can we hear God's word? Can we sense the holy in the secular? And can we enable anyone else to see, to hear and to sense the Holy?

Now I really will move on to my second major emphasis! It is the other end of the see-saw. It is all about the next major emphasis we need to make if the turn around of the Church is to be taken forward to a place of depth, where indeed we shall have eyes to see Christ everywhere and ears to hear Christ's

word everywhere. So, if my first theme was 'Direction and change in the Church', my second big theme is about depth of change – for you and for me. It is about personal transformation.

Ten days ago, Jennifer and I moved from our manse into the home in which we shall enjoy our retirement from September onwards. It was a challenging move. Our new home is considerably smaller than our manse. So, downsizing was the order of the day. Jennifer took a particularly tough line with me in relation to books I have accumulated over more than 50 years. Only a fraction were permitted in the new home. What to do? Obey her dictat, of course! But on what principles? I applied the simplest test we bring to all cultural artifacts. I mentally put each book in one of three categories: a classic, a period piece; or a book which was fashionable at the time of its publication but was basically ephemeral in character. I've kept the classics.; and some of the period pieces. All the ephemera have gone.

The classics were those books which will stretch the mind every time they are read and have the remarkable power of engaging with men and women across the generations, across the centuries and across cultures. The period pieces are those which stand the test of time for a decade or so, even a generation. For that period they stimulate and inform; they merit being referred to; but then their significance fades.

Now to the Christian parallel. For us the scriptures, particularly the New Testament, are the classic text beyond all classic texts. And at the heart of that text is a theme that straddles everything else. The theme is 'death and resurrection' – more particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This theme is far more than 'turning situations round' or 'turning institutions round' – which was my first big theme. 'Death and resurrection' is about radical transformation; it is about such profound transformation that something mundane becomes infused with and redolent of divine glory. This transformation, or transfiguration, is so awesomely overwhelming that the ordinary and familiar become literally unrecognisable. It merits a new name.

And what is at the heart of the deep, all-embracing transformation of the ordinary, to become something different, so that it now radiates the Spirit and the glory of God's holiness? At its heart is one reality only – God's reality: pure, universal love. The result? A human heart, scarred, constrained and soured by the compromises and moral confusions of everyday living, becomes something quite other – a channel of love, a power for forgiveness, a gift of peace, a vibrant source of unqualified goodness.

And the theme of Jesus's death and resurrection confirms for us that there is no power of evil and destruction which can in principle thwart the transforming grace of God, which longs to remake, reconstruct and transform us, 'from the inside out'. So, those deep, mysterious, unconscious and murky places in the human heart can be totally changed to allow the free-flowing, through us, of God's grace, God's love, God's holy presence in the world. We can become Christ to our neighbours.

Back to basics, then. How does God make that transformation? That is God's business. But classic Christian tradition is clear about some closely connected issues:

- (i) God calls us to yearn for, pray for and long for that inner, radical transformation;
- (ii) God's word, through which the transformation is effected, is heard by those who immerse themselves, with every fibre of their being, in the scriptures.

You will surely grasp my emphasis. Yes, we want the institutional Church to be turned round, from defeat to confident mission. We want to re-prioritise our use of resources to cement the 'turning round' of everything in the Church, so that it is more flexible, people-focussed, innovative and daring in witnessing to its faith. But nothing can compare with the vocation to inner transformation. We want to become holy people, integrated or 'whole' people, people of character and stability and wisdom and, above all, people who love everyone they meet, friend or foe, like-minded or stranger.

My reflection is that we are in danger of not getting into this most demanding of vocations with anything like the commitment, the skill and the priority that the classic tradition insists on. We seem comfortable with who we are. We are too accepting of who we are. We excuse ourselves perhaps too easily. We have lost a passion for becoming new people, fully alive, radiant with the glory of God – so that we *are* the witness to God's presence in the world, and others will discern God's presence and God active in and through ourselves! Though radical humility and authentic servanthood absolutely prevent us bringing attention to ourselves.

My appeal, then, is very simple, very classic and twofold –

- (a) To look again at the nature of prayer. So much of it needs to engage with our deepest wants and desires. Prayer is the life-long discipline of purging our desires; of refocusing what we want, to coincide with the truth of Jesus Christ, to which the scriptures point. What ultimately do we want? What drives our most important decisions? What shapes our overriding priority? Is it (or is it not) the heart-breaking yearning to become Christ-like?
- (b) To engage with new energy and expertise with the scriptures. God knows they are complicated enough. God knows we have to bring to the task our best learning, our best critical perspectives, our deepest devotion, our feelings and experience, our knowledge of how the world works and our self-awareness. But here uniquely, our hearts and lives may be enveloped by a whole range of icons and images and stories that open us up to the transforming grace of God, the God of Easter power and love, who makes everything new.

So, I summarise. The Spirit of God is calling the Church forward to engage constructively with the society around us, in all its diversity, change and

complexity. As a Church, we are beginning to accept that challenge, trying to grapple with institutional inertia, to refocus our resources and energy on inventive mission strategies, encouraging one another to be confident disciples and witnesses in everyday settings, using everyday language to speak of God and faith, so that others get some sense of what we might be about.

Simultaneously, within the fellowship of the Church, we are called to a *new depth of spirituality*. And in the midst of all our attempts to make our life together more interesting, more imaginative, more varied and more sensitive to our linguistic and cultural backgrounds, we need urgently to recover the classics of Christian spiritual and moral reconstruction: the searching discipline of prayer that takes each of us deep into the hidden motivations of the heart, to learn what God wants; and the demanding struggle with the scriptures, placing ourselves within their grace-revealing, Easter-powerful domain.

So we are self-consciously needing to be people who move in two directions – outside into today’s world; and inwards, to the heart of the personality. And our special challenge is to make connections – between our everyday life in the world (where God is rarely if ever referred to or deferred to); and the world of prayer and scripture (where God’s classic self-revelation is known).

Or, to make the same point, I return to my earlier metaphor – the see-saw in the toddlers’ play area. Little children sit at either end of the see-saw and enjoy going up and down. Big kids stand over the fulcrum and push the arms of the see-saw up and down with their feet. That’s us – pushing at two distinct but connected issues: the movement outwards, with the encouragement of the institutional Church, to find our confident place as disciples in the world; and then the pushing ever more deeply into the life of prayer and scripture – searching for and tasting the very power of God’s kingdom.

We stand over the fulcrum. And you remember what the fulcrum is: the place of discernment, where the God of the Bible is discerned right in the midst of the everyday world where disciples meet their neighbours. The fulcrum is the moment when we say: Here we are, with our colleagues, our neighbours, our family and local community groups, beevering away at the usual arguments, struggles and actions for justice, trying to get liaisons and relationships going for the common good; and suddenly, at the heart of it, we – and our companions – see God, feel the faithful, pure love of the Eternal and know the truth that our lives are set within the reality of heaven. And heaven is here in the mundane, the ordinary, the less-than-satisfactory world we inhabit; but here with power to make everything different. Easter invades the everyday, and so great is the glory of God infusing everything at Easter that the familiar and routine is hardly recognisable: it is irresistibly transformed into something good and wholesome and beautiful for God.

Now that is the power that can literally change the world!

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