

The themes today include Jesus' prayer in John 17:1-11, and how our historic traditions can prompt change and renewal. Today is also Aldersgate Sunday.

"Stay safe" is a familiar greeting these days. In our reading Jesus prays, "Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one." (John 17:11). It is a prayer for the first disciples that they may survive and stay together. That is a very topical prayer also for us. Jesus wants to protect and unite us in God as he and the Father are one. We could say that Jesus wants to draw us towards the best, and to draw the best out of us.

John Wesley visited Bath, the city of my birth, when he was in his early sixties, about the same age I am now. There are contemporary descriptions of Wesley's visit, some of them amusing, and some less sympathetic. One of the venues for this event was the church in which I was baptised. Horace Walpole's Gothic style was an influence on the new Countess of Huntingdon chapel where Wesley was invited to preach to Lady Huntingdon's invitees in 1766. The windows, the eagle lecturns, and the turn of the mahogany rails were shaped by social influencer Walpole. Visit his home in Strawberry Hill and you can see why he was a beacon of style. Despite this the church failed to please him, nor was he overly impressed with Wesley whom he described as, "a lean, elderly man, fresh-coloured, his hair smoothly combed, but with a soupçon of curls at the end. Wondrous clean, but as evidently an actor as Garrick. He spoke his sermon, but so fast and so little accent that I am sure he often uttered it, for it was like a lesson. There were parts of eloquence in it; but towards the end he altered his voice, and acted a very ugly enthusiasm, decried learning and told stories [of his old college]..." This description sounds like preachers I have known.

As Wesley was about my age I'm a little de-chuffed to hear him described as "elderly". Perhaps I also have smoothly combed white hair with curls at the end. Maybe something is lost when we repeat our sermons, but evidently the great man did the same. Surely there must have been more to the early Methodist movement than Walpole could admit. This was a time of revival which went much deeper into society than implied by celebrity appearances in a private chapel. It was not the impact on the aristocracy who frequented Bath that made the difference, but a wider impact on the lives of ordinary people, bringing out the best in them.

As a United Reformed minister, I joined with URC colleagues in a Spring School last week, via Zoom. One of the speakers was an Anglican who was very enthusiastic about early Methodism and its transformative effects, a mantle that she believed later passed to the Salvation Army. She claimed it was not the great open-air gatherings, or the indoor worship services that impressed her, but the way in which this movement of revival got alongside ordinary people and helped them to change for the better under the influence of prayer. This does not mean that prayers in church are irrelevant, but there is a particular power to insightful prayer with someone struggling to give up their addiction, or accompanying a person learning to cope with their mental health. In a modern context such prayers might be prayed privately with Betty who is making progress at Weight-watchers, or Ron is who just about managing to control his outbursts of anger. In other words, the ordinary struggles of life that decide whether you and I thrive or take a dive. Changes like that can happen with prayer support. The person changes, and soon society changes too, and people gain a confidence that turns into civic responsibility and honest politics.

If you are a TV watcher perhaps you have seen Grayson Perry's Art Club on channel 4. I am struck by his humanity and empathy for those who venture to contact him and share what creative work they have been doing during lockdown. Some of those who have linked in by video are vulnerable in one way or another, but Grayson seems to know how to buoy them up with enthusiasm for art. Showing compassion for one another and listening in that way is close to the pastoral prayer of Jesus: protect them, make them whole, overcome division and make them one.

The United Reformed Church, according to our Anglican speaker at Spring School has a different gift and inheritance, which comes out of a tradition of dissent. Dissenters are still needed today in each of our communities – people who get stirred up about the concerns of ordinary people and involved in bringing about change through whatever godly means are acceptable. A dissenter's prayer can take the form of protest, like the prayers of complaint in the Book of Psalms. In the past Dissenters have got stuck in to issues such as freedom of worship; or children's access to education regardless of ability to pay; of the right to a university education without having to belong to the state church; of participation in the magistracy and shaping the politics of some of our big cities. In early days some of our forebears fought for the right to elect their own minister, and to build a more democratic church that is less reliant on patronage and top-down rules. These are grand themes, but sometimes we have forgotten that we are here to facilitate change.

The prayer of Jesus in today's gospel calls us to unity of purpose despite all our differences. It is a prayer about protection from evil, personal transformation, and helping to bring a

godly society. This is not about knowing best, but about accompanying others as we each seek to become better people and a better society.

Speaking of turning around, a little before dusk some evenings, and occasionally during the day our garden is populated by a family of hedgehogs. Others have mentioned that they are seeing more hedgehogs in their gardens, an inspiring thought when the human impact on wildlife and the environment is such a big concern. At dusk the other day I saw three hedgehogs enjoying themselves doing a pirouette – or so it seemed to me. A hedgehog pirouette involves sticking a snout in the ground and keeping on walking, so that you spin round in a circle and end up facing a different way. Don't try it yourself if you value your nose, but how about committing to a change of direction by tuning in to the prayer of Jesus that division may be overcome and unity of purpose may become our goal.

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