

# Aldersgate Sunday

The Story of John Wesley

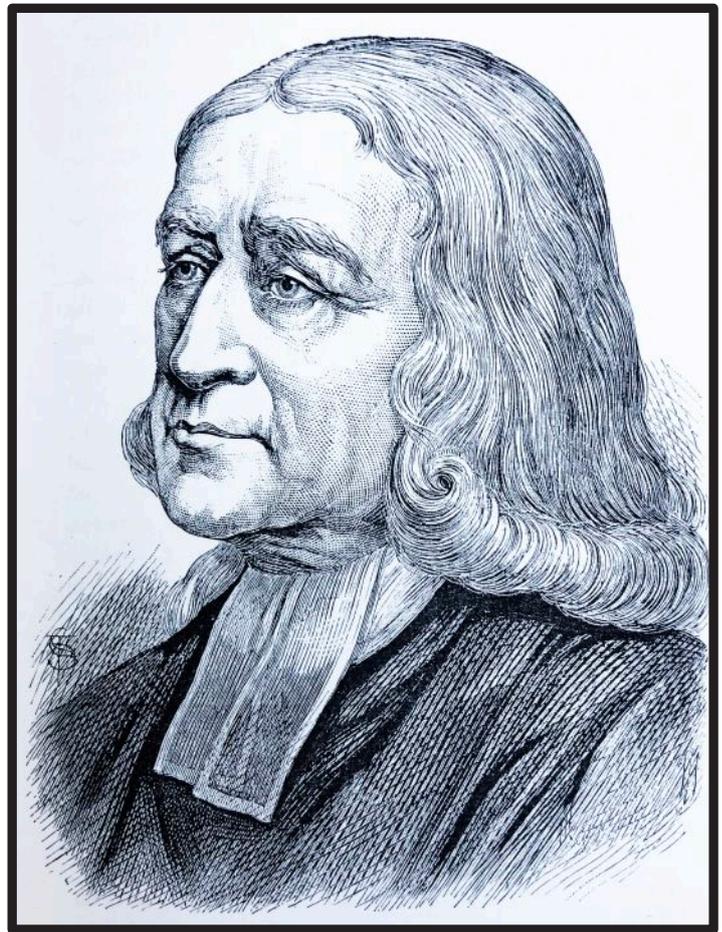
## Story One

### A Brand Plucked from the burning

The story begins in 1703, the 28th June to be precise, when John Wesley was born, or young 'Jacky' as he was known by the family. John's father Samuel was Rector of a place called Epworth, then a remote spot in Lincolnshire. John was one of 19 children in the family and life was not that easy for the family. It was said that Susannah, John's mother, was very beautiful, but some said she was also very harsh. Bringing up 19 children at that time must have been very hard and she needed to be a disciplined person. The family didn't have much money and in fact two years after John was born his father, Samuel was thrown into debtors prison in Lincoln Castle. Samuel was a very loyal father, but struggled all his life to keep out of debt. So much of the children's early learning and development of faith and character came from their remarkable mother. His mother was also his teacher and taught the family and other children in their home in Epworth. In 1710 she wrote to one of her pupils, Sukey:

'The main thing now to be done is, to lay a good foundation, that you may act upon principles, and be always able to satisfy yourself, and give a good reason to others for the faith that is in you- for anyone who makes a profession of religion, only because it is the custom of the country in which they live or because their parents do so.. will never be able to stand in the day of temptation.'

John was six years old when a disaster nearly ended his life. All were asleep in the house when suddenly there were heard cries of 'Fire! Fire!'. Old Samuel stirred himself from his slumber and realised that the thatched roof was on fire. The children were called and the nurse grabbed



Charles and all the other children got out of every door and window to safety. But young Jacky slept on, unaware of the fire that was by now raging. Once the family had assembled outside they realised the horrible truth, Jacky, who was by now at the upstairs window calling out for help, but at the same time, I suspect, making his peace with his maker as he was sure he would not survive. There was no time to fetch a ladder, but one of the villagers saw the problem, bravely ran to the side of the house, another stood on his shoulders and managed to grab John and bring him safely down. The next moment the roof fell in and the house burnt to the ground.

In later life, John Wesley reflected on this event and described himself as a 'a brand plucked from the burning'.

So the Wesleys were homeless, but a kind parishioner took them in. It was suspected that the house was deliberately set on fire by some parishioners who did not like Samuel's preaching! Nowadays people either fall asleep or even now fast forward the sermon!!!

Susannah continued to be John's teacher until he was ten years old,

when he managed to gain a place at Charterhouse School in London. For John this was a brand new journey of learning that eventually led him in 1726 to Oxford University and the founding of "The Holy Club". But more of that later.

## Story Two

### A Heart Strangely Warmed

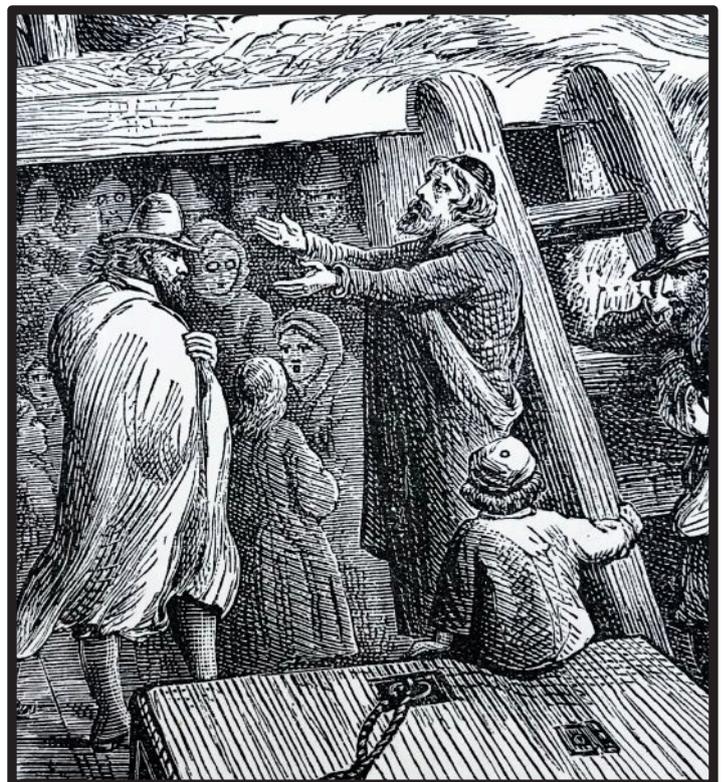
John kept a diary while he was at Oxford and its worn out pages tell the story of a young man who struggled to pay his way through university. He had very little live on but needed some expenses such as money, for books, tea and sugar, as well as a horse so he see his friends the Kirkhams in the Cotswolds! At Oxford he avoided all the drinking and rough behaviour and gathered around himself a group of like-minded people that were nicknamed 'The Holy Club'. He set his sole purpose to get closer to God. He was a very methodical person and not even sleep escaped this treatment. 'I found I wakened every night at around 12 or 1 and would lay awake for some time'. He put this down to his belief that he stayed too long in bed. He bought himself an alarm clock and set it to go off at 7am, then 6am, but he kept waking in the night, so he then set it for 4am and that did the trick! Until his dying day John got up at 4am.

John finished at Oxford. His father wanted him to go back to Epworth and take over as Rector there, but by this time John had other plans. He had met General James Edward Oglethorpe who had the plan to take 10000 debtors from prison and transport them to North America to begin a new life and he wanted John to go with them as their Pastor. Charles, his brother was to join him too. Just before they were to sail their father Samuel died. Susannah insisted that they went rather than stay behind.

All this time John was struggling to find his own faith. The 'brothers Wesley' continued their

strict religious practice on board ship. On board ship there was a religious group, a german group of Moravians. John was so impressed by their Christian witness. They were humble, forgiving. They even willingly took on the lowest of jobs that the English travellers refused to do. Their loving saviour had done more for them' they said. As they were sailing a great storm brewed up. The mainsail was split in two and huge waves came overboard. There was a very real chance that 'the brand plucked from the burning' would be drowned at sea! They survived, but the calm influence of the Moravians lived with John and Charles to the end of their days.

There are many stories to tell about the adventures John and Charles had in America, but not time to do them justice. Instead we move forward a few years. They had returned from America on 1st February 1738. John was now living with inner turmoil. He has seen and lived among the Moravians, but he felt he simply did not have their relationship with God. He remembered the words of the Moravian Peter Bohler who told him to 'preach faith until you have it and then, because you have it ... you will preach faith'. He began a small religious community and began preaching in the churches, telling them about 'the love of God for all'. This did not go well! Eventually the doors of churches were shut to him. 'Sir, you must preach here no more.'



Then on May 24th, 1738 he opened his bible at about five in the morning and came across these words, "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should partakers of the divine nature." He read similar words in other places.

That evening he reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate. Someone read from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans. About 8:45 p.m. "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

John had found the faith that he so desperately wanted.

## Story Three

### The World is my Parish

On Monday, 2nd April 1739 John preached his first sermon in the open air. It was reported that he stood on a mound in the brickfields outside Bristol to a crowd of about 3000. This was the beginning of his open air ministry. From then onwards he preached all over the country. Being shut out of the churches did not stop him, wherever he went he would draw crowds of people wanting to hear his message of God's love for them all. It is said that he travelled over 10,000 miles by horseback preaching his message. Sometimes it was received well and sometimes not! On one occasion, a mill owner emptied the water from his mill into the millpond hoping that would stop the gathered crowd hearing John Preach.

John kept a diary throughout his life and is interesting to see how he told the story of his journeys, all over this country and abroad. He even made a few visits to the Richmond and Hounslow Circuit, although not while any of us were around! All Hallows church reports

that one John Wesley, its most famous regular preacher who is recorded as preaching from it on 28 December 1789, and it is known to be where he preached his first extempore (off the cuff) sermon.

John Wesley frequently visited Brentford, where a Methodist group existed since 1745. Congregations met in a large building, perhaps near St. George's Church. On one occasion he records in his diary that he rode to Brentford on Monday 3rd November 1766. He preached there the next day and reported that 'all was quiet, both in the congregation and the society.' Coincidentally it was on 3rd November last year, 254 years later we gave thanks for the life and witness of Methodism in Brentford at the ending of its current chapter.

Wesley also saw himself as a medical man, with considerably less success at this than at his preaching!

He believed that drinking cold water and taking cold baths could cure most illnesses, but his suggestion of drinking chamomile tea for an upset stomach has survived. For asthma he prescribed dried toad, made into tablets; for a cold he suggested orange peel up your nostrils; for toothache... a clove of garlic in the ear and to cure an Ague, which is remarkably similar to the current covid 19, he suggested pills made out of cobwebs. Perhaps we could offer that as a suggestion?!? Perhaps not!

Despite his failed career as a medic, John Wesley's influence lives on. His exclamation that 'the whole world is my Parish' is a reminder of his passion and desire that the good news of Jesus was for everyone. Wesley preached where anyone would hear him. He was a passionate advocate for the abolition of slavery and saw that:

"All need to be saved. All may be saved. All may know themselves saved. All may be saved to the uttermost."

In 1791 John preached the last of 42,000 sermons preached over 54 years. On his deathbed he was heard to sing some lines from one of his favourite hymns 'The best of all is; God is with us'.