

## The President's Address to Methodist Conference 2020

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The Presidential address always begins by expressing thanks and appreciation to the Methodist community. This I gladly do from my early days of faith as a teenager in the small rural chapel in West Yorkshire, via Wesley College in Bristol in the late 1970's, the circuits where I have served, Blaydon, Berwick upon Tweed, both in the Newcastle upon Tyne District, Beverley in East Yorkshire and then to serve as Chair of the Cumbria District returning last September to circuit ministry in the Driffield Hornsea Circuit, again in East Yorkshire. The people who I have served and worked alongside in these varied appointments have greatly influenced and enriched me, and without them I would not be standing here today. Thank you. In particular I thank my family and friends and I will not mention any names except one—my wife Susan to whom I owe an enormous amount.

In 1980 I heard the then President of the Methodist Conference preach a sermon at the New Room in Bristol, the President that year was Rev Dr Kenneth Greet, whose writings and speeches had made a great impression on me as a young man. He commenced his sermon by making a confession. He said 'I am using three points tonight from one of Mr Wesley's sermons, but the content of the points will be different from his'. Well I thought if Dr Greet could do that then so can I. So, I also confess that I am using three points for this address by Walter Brueggemann but again the content will be different.

Brueggeman maps the Psalms against the human life cycle which moves through times of **orientation**. Those times of stability in our lives when we know who we are; we know what life is about and we know what we have to do.

**Disorientation:** Those times when the rug is pulled from under our feet and we feel wobbly, uncertain or insecure

And **reorientation:** Those times in our lives when we find the light at the end of the tunnel and emerge blinking on the other side, changed by what we have lived through and ready to face a new day.

I have chosen these points because these themes – orientation, disorientation, reorientation, which we find in the heart of the Psalms, speak so powerfully to us today in these concerning times.

Today the Psalms- the oldest prayer book- have never had more contemporary relevance. They are used daily in the devotion of the faithful and they nurture peoples own prayer life to draw guidance and strength. Their words and message speak into every situation that humanity finds itself in- situations of joy and serenity, experiences of love and vulnerability, of hurt and aloneness. The psalms address these raw human issues of disorientation when people are driven to the extremities of emotion, places where human beings are not meant to be, through, to situations of joy, thanksgiving and praise, again part of our human existence of orientation and reorientation. The Psalms are richly and disturbingly human. So, we think today about the Psalms speaking to us through orientation, disorientation and reorientation.

### **1: Orientation:**

The Psalms which fall into this category are those where life is good. Take a perfect example: Psalm 104 v 24-28:

How many are your works, O Lord!

In wisdom you made them all;

The earth is full of your creatures.

There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number, living things both large and small.

There the ships go to and fro, and the Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.

Here in this Psalm life is good. There is a contentment about it and a feeling of thankfulness. There is unfailing joy in this Psalm as the psalmist meditates on creation and the wonders of nature, which reflect coherence and reliability and indeed the Psalm ends with words of praise. Orientation is when everything is going well and all makes sense. This is a comfortable time in life, there is an inner peace, calm and purpose to life.

I shall never forget the feeling both at seeing and then holding my grandchild just a few hours after he was born. Words could not begin to explain the feeling. Emotion welled up inside me and I found it hard to hold back tears of absolute joy, thanksgiving and love. It was a moment of personal orientation.

And what about Methodism? Listen to a passage from John Wesley's Journal when he visited Cornwall: 'Both this morning and evening the congregation was as large as the house of God could well contain. In the society God did indeed sit upon his people as a refiner's fire. He darted into all the melting flame of love; so that their heads were as water and their eyes as fountains of tears'. What a wonderful depiction of a time of orientation for Methodism – when we were so clear who we were and what we were about.

### **2: Disorientation:**

The Psalms also take us to a very different place, a place of disorientation. There are times when you can see the human landscape change before your eyes. The pandemic known as COVID 19 has changed our lives and communities of the world for ever. The German poet Bertolt Brecht expresses what many people are feeling at this time-

**'In the dark times, Will there be also singing?  
Yes, there will be singing, About the dark times'.**

This is how life sometimes feels and to cover it up as if it never happens is not true to being human. We can feel distressed and life can collapse, we can feel resentment and indeed anger at the way we feel or the predicament we find ourselves in and we long to be back in that place of orientation. Disorientation is the time of COVID 19, we get the sense that there is a profound shift taking place all around us. It doesn't just affect a few people, it affects all, it isn't just for people somewhere else it affects us and indeed everyone we know. We are surrounded by vulnerability, powerlessness, frustration, doubt, fear, feeling lost. We are living in a time of disorientation.

Psalm 88 is a perfect description of disorientation. Listen to its opening verses and hear them on the lips of a patient on a ventilator in the Intensive Care Unit of one of our hospitals:

O Lord, the God who saves me,  
Day and night, I cry out before you;  
Turn your ear to my cry.  
For my soul is full of trouble  
And my life draws near the grave  
I am counted among those who go to the pit;  
I am like a man without strength.  
I am set apart with the dead,  
Like the slain who lie in the grave,  
Who you remember no more,  
Who are cut off from your care. (v 1-5)

In this Psalm the writer is speaking out of intense personal suffering. There seems to be little hope and he is totally disorientated. It is at moments or times like these that we may feel that God is distant or absent. R.S. Thomas, a Welsh Anglican priest and poet, wrote about the absence as well as the presence of God.

He wrote a poem called 'Shadows', **'It is not your light that can blind us; it is the splendour of your darkness.  
And so, I listen and hear the language of silence, the sentence without an end.'**

Our Christian faith has its roots firmly in Judaism. Jewish history reveals a people who often found themselves in a time of disorientation, where they would cry to the Lord in their pain, isolation and anguish, for they felt deserted by God. For them this experience is expressed in the word 'Lament'. Indeed, one third of the Psalms are Psalms of Lament. Psalm 88 is a Psalm of Lament. There are many people who find themselves in a situation like this and find it hard to remember God, and recount his mighty deeds. The relevance of the Psalms is that they understand this and offer us a way forward.

On a personal basis I have spent much of this past year preparing for my role as President of the Conference. My diary had become packed with anticipated visits around the Connexion where I was so looking forward to engaging with the wonderful Methodist people, and hearing their faith stories, in the communities where they live. In partnership with Global Relationships my first overseas trip at the beginning of March was by the invitation of the Methodist Church in Kenya and I came home inspired by the growth of that Church and the joyous faith of the Kenyan Methodist Community, which I was hoping to share on my travels. Within a few days after returning home we were in lockdown, and as far as the Presidency is concerned, the diary has had a lot of special visits cancelled and Conference, with all its joy and brightness of worship and fellowship has changed from its normal format to what we are doing on line today. For a period of time I have found myself feeling insecure and totally disorientated.

What about disorientation more widely in the Methodist Church? Who would ever have thought a few months ago we would have had to close our doors and lock them, even at Easter! Many of our congregations are feeling totally disorientated, fearful and cut off from the fellowship we enjoy with each other. We have been unable even to go out and visit our most vulnerable members. This has left us asking how we can keep faith and hope during this strange experience? How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

### **3: Re-orientation:**

Thankfully the Psalms go beyond the fog we are in right now and are full of verses of Thanksgiving and Praise.

These Psalms speak of surprise and wonder, miracle and amazement when a breakthrough is found, a path emerges out of the woods, a friend gets better and we move from disorientation to re-orientation. These Psalms speak of a totally new circumstance in life, where there is rightly celebration springing out from a place of difficulty and pain. Listen to the opening words of Psalm 40:

'I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord' (40 v 1-3)

There is huge realism within these words. God acts but, in this Psalm, action requires waiting and patience. The Psalmist does not expect God's action in a crisis situation to happen instantly. The Psalmist has been in a crisis in his life as we have been. How then can we move to sing a song of Praise and Thanksgiving like he did? For the Psalmist it did not happen instantly, but there are lessons to learn and if we learn from them, the Kingdom of God will move closer to us. The values of the Kingdom so often turn our human values upside down. What are, those upside-down Kingdom values in our present situation which enable us to move from disorientation to reorientation? May I suggest three:

### **1: Seeing people through a different Lens:**

The Incarnation is about God in Christ becoming one of us. 'The Word became flesh' writes St John. Here Christianity stands alone and is unique. God doesn't practice social distancing but becomes close and personal, close enough to infect us with grace and love. Jesus Christ is the ultimate face of God's reorientation of life and history as we know it. Who did Jesus get up close and personal with in those three years of his ministry? Not the wealthy or the privileged but the least and lowest. This is reorientation writ large. The last become the first, the first the last, the mighty humbled, the lowly raised. Reorientation sees everything through very different eyes.

I have a poster on my office window which greets people when they come to the Manse. In the middle of it are the words of St Paul,

'We always thank God for all of you'. Around those words are symbols which represent shops and supermarket workers, lorry drivers, Post Office staff, NHS, Pharmacies, Police, Farmers, Foodbank, local businesses, a rainbow and so on. People who have been risking their lives to serve the community. This must raise questions about the absurd discrepancies and inequalities in such things as pay and social status between those who earn vast sums of money in our society and those who labour hard for very little. Look how we have moved in a very short space of time from austerity to the praise and applause of the National Health service and how neighbours who have hardly ever spoken with each other stand at a safe distance at eight o'clock on a Thursday evening in the street to applaud the National Health Service and Key Workers, thereby creating community.

A highly paid business man was telling me recently how he now profusely thanks the staff at Aldi where he shops and buys them all a bar of chocolate every week in appreciation of them. He said to me, 'Richard I have changed. I see people through very different eyes'.

Revd. Peter Storey in his book 'With God in the Crucible' wrote that 'life is like a shop window where somebody has broken in at night and exchanged all the price tags so that the things that are really cheap have been marked most expensive and things that are really valuable are now marked dirt cheap. That's what life has done; that's what society does. Something has to happen in us to get our values right again'.

Possibly COVID 19 has done that as far as people today are concerned. Pre-Covid, we knew the price of everything and the value of nothing, now with COVID 19 this is being reversed and the upside-down kingdom comes to the fore. Different people all of a sudden become very important in society. We see through a different lens about who is of value, and see the gospel – God's dynamic energy unleashed in our world and causing us to tell and hear different stories of good news to that we have been used to.

### **2: Seeing the Environment through a different Lens:**

There was a growing recognition of the challenges to the environment before COVID 19; the way we were living as a world-wide community was bringing devastation. Because of COVID 19 we have not only talked but been forced to live differently and that difference in our living has begun to change our environment. The climate crisis is having a devastating effect on communities around the world, and many of the poorest are bearing the consequences. We have the opportunity to bring some of the things we have learnt from coronavirus into the way we respond to the urgent climate crisis we face. As a global family we are becoming more connected than ever-so together we must continue to work for climate justice, which supports the vulnerable and shares responsibility. Our world is showing signs of healing and improvement: Let me share with you a Global example of this change.

New data suggests that global CO2 emissions are set to fall by nearly 8% this year which will be to their lowest level since 2010. This is the largest drop in recorded history (greater than the oil shock, financial crisis or periods of conflict). This gives us an opportunity to reflect on the way the global economy can be redesigned to accentuate our role as stewards of God's creation and make sure that we love our neighbours by emphasising sustainable development and social equity.

And two very different local examples: In the United Kingdom, the period of lockdown has rapidly led to significant improvements in air quality. Within the first two weeks, levels of nitrogen dioxide fell by more than 60% in some British cities which is directly due to a reduction in traffic and will contribute to improvements in respiratory health for

adults and children alike. At the same time ground nesting birds of all types are set to have their most successful breeding season in recent years. When we are allowed to get back into the countryside, we should anticipate seeing more birds and other vulnerable species than has recently been the case.

Recovery from Covid-19 offers a huge amount of choice and opportunity. We can, if we wish, choose to invest in new jobs, cleaner air and improved wellbeing. As we rebuild our economy, we can do so alongside rebuilding the wellbeing of the environment, the two are not mutually exclusive. The biggest mistake would be to go back to the version of normal that we had been used to and lock in high emissions, social deprivation, a stressed environment and a lack of well-being.

It is true to say that Jesus did not preach in his ministry about climate change, global warming, travel emissions or other environmental issues, but he did preach about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God means the reign of God over the whole earth, which he created as good. Throughout his ministry, Jesus revealed to us aspects of what the kingdom of God is like. He did this because he embodied in his person the kingdom of God and told parables about the Kingdom: it is like a mustard seed, a Sower in the field, Forgiving Father, sheep and goats, rock and sand and so on. In these parables he spoke about ordinary everyday things around him, and in so doing he opened windows to the kingdom of God- that ultimate reign of God on earth. The call of Jesus Christ applies to the whole of our lives which includes our treatment of the environment. The scriptures tell us that human kind was given dominion over the whole created order and it also tells us that humankind was made in God's image. That means we must exercise our dominion responsibly and in a God like way. Creation is a gift; therefore, it is imperative that humankind renews and strengthens it. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI 'that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying'.

### **3: Seeing the Church through a different Lens:**

What are we going to do when we lift our heads up from our many Zoom meetings and online worship and reopen our church buildings? Will we revert to what we knew as normal or will a new normal emerge? I have been amazed at the interest in, many new ways of being church during COVID 19 but particularly for me I have been interested in online worship. Its creativity has been wonderful and if I can prepare, simple online weekly worship anyone can. The numbers of people who have been viewing worship has been staggering. Indeed, in the small market town where I live, I have had a number of emails and letters from people who never darken the doors of a church building to express their appreciation for this ministry and are asking for it to continue post COVID 19. What an opportunity, encouragement and outreach.

But we need to dig much deeper as we look through this different Lens. What will be the new normal for the Methodist Church, indeed what will be the new normal for the Christian church? Personally, I really hope it will mean two things:

Firstly, I hope that a new normal – post Covid will bring

#### **1: a renewed emphasis on the Faithfulness of God:**

One of the great truths which the Old Testament has given to us is of the faithfulness of God, come what may. The Psalmists knew this in the depth of their being. The Psalms express through all the difficulties and trauma of God's people in their history, that God was faithful come what may. The Covenant relationship never wavered on God's side, even though his people broke it many times. He was Faithful! Throughout their history right through to today that faithfulness has been part of God's nature.

Dr Colin Morris in one of his writings illustrates this truth with the true story of the American preacher and novelist, Lloyd C. Douglas. When he was a university student, he rented a room in a big house, on the ground floor of which lived an old music teacher, housebound through infirmity. Douglas would visit him every day, popping his head round the door and asking the same ritual question, 'Well, what's the good news today?' And he would get the same ritual answer. The old man would pick up a tuning fork and strike it on the table. 'Hear that? It's middle C. It is Middle C today. It was Middle C yesterday and the day before. It will be Middle C tomorrow and the day after and for a thousand years to come. The tenor across the hall sings flat and the piano upstairs is out of tune. Noise! Noise all around me, but that my friend is Middle C.'

We do not know at this stage what the middle C, the new normal for the people called Methodist or indeed for the church of Jesus Christ will be. For some people this is exciting, for others it is frightening and concerning, but there is one certainty, God will be faithful to his people as he has been in the past, as he is in the present and as he leads us into the future. For this God became personal in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever. To live the Kingdom is to fundamentally believe that God is faithful and won't go back on his promises!

My second hope for our new normal is that:

#### **2: There will be a greater reliance on the Cross, Resurrection and power of the Holy Spirit:**

John Wesley said, 'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, but I am afraid lest they should exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.'

A church which loses its memory about its basic foundation has no future.

Yet we are a resurrection community empowered by the Holy Spirit. Without this message of faith, and the life which Easter gives us we are helpless. We all know from the pages of history that there have been many times when the church seemed to be failing, even dying out and then the community of faith has sprung back to life, because the Cross and Resurrection are central to who we are, this is the pattern of the church's secret history. As I said earlier, a few weeks ago I had the enormous privilege of visiting the Methodist Church in Kenya. A church which had begun to decline but was now springing back to life. I made an altar call on the second Sunday I was there and seventy people responded to the gospel of grace and love. To be part of this growing exciting church at every level of its life was a life transforming experience for me. Cross and Resurrection, lost and found, dead and alive are the heart of our faith.

To see the church through a different lens is to acknowledge the reality we find ourselves living in. The church of Christ has been hit hard in the last few months by COVID 19 but we live by the much older and enduring story of Jesus, who's cross and resurrection declares that his life is not over. For the community of faith to believe in the resurrection is to trust that we live by the generative power of God who brings, in the words of Rowan Williams, 'transformation, recreation and empowerment in the present'. Now that's the sort of new normal I want to see. Not a return to the same old same old but a church which has the reputation for transformation, for recreation and for empowerment of what we are living through in the present in response to a faithful God who redeems history and promises the brightest of futures.

We do not know what the new normal will be for the life of the Church of Christ, but one thing we do know is that it will be transformed, recreated and empowered by the heart of its faith, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The Vice President and I have chosen the final words of John Wesley as our theme for this year, 'The best of all is, God is with us'. What better words could there be for a time such as this. Amen

Richard J Teal May 2020