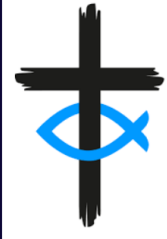




**United Stockport  
Circuit's  
Lent Course 2022**



# **AND CAN IT BE? LENTEN EXPLORATION**

**On Zoom,  
Every Thursday at 7pm  
10th March to 7th April 2022**

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**[www.stockportcircuit.org.uk](http://www.stockportcircuit.org.uk)**

**Zoom link is available  
on the calendar of the website**

## **Lent 2022**

### **'And Can It Be'**

And can it be that I should gain  
an interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: the immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
to sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
let angel minds enquire no more.

He left his father's throne above –  
so free, so infinite his grace –  
emptied himself of all but love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
for, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray—  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head,  
and clothed in righteousness divine,  
bold I approach the eternal throne,  
and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

### **Singing the Faith Hymn 345**

*By Charles Wesley*

The Christian Season of Lent represents a period of forty days leading up to Easter, and for many Christians it is a special time in which particular attention is given to our life of faith, to listening to the word of God, and to thinking about what being a follower of Christ means to us. We are challenged to make Lent a time in which we create SPECIFIC space in our lives for God. Both to speak to God, and to listen.

Thank you for making a choice to commit this year to our Circuit Lent Course which uses the iconic Charles Wesley Hymn 'And Can It Be' as the basis for our reflection. 'And Can it Be' is a hymn which puts us in mind of Paul and Silas and their prayer and praise from within a prison cell as recounted in Acts 12. In Lent we might reflect upon and repent the many ways in which humankind is held prisoner in the world today – through poverty, environmental degradation, self-centredness and violence. How can we be prayerful and praiseful in the face of these things in which we are all incontrovertibly bound up yet, through which we long for God's justice and transformation to be revealed?

To mark the 230th anniversary of Charles Wesley's death (29th March 2018), the team behind the Methodist hymn Book Singing the Faith asked people to choose their favourite Charles Wesley Hymn. And Can it Be' won hands down with nearly a third of all votes. It has been said that Wesley's hymns are "theology and poetry-filled, true, but difficult to understand for children and newcomers to our church". It may not only be children and newcomers! Perhaps you will have sung 'And Can It Be' hundreds of times in your life, but how often have you really stopped to think about the depth and variety of meanings contained within it! Perhaps with the exception of the classic lines, "My Chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose went forth and followed thee" the entirety of the lyrics and their depth can be lost in the stirring, triumphalist and emotionally evocative tune 'Sagina' to which it is classically set. The great modern hymn writer Brian Wren suggests we should try singing the hymn to the tune Abingdon instead. If you're not sure, that's the tune that we normally sing to his modern revisioning of Wesley's words – Great God Your Love Has Called Us Here (Stf 499).

In this course, we are exploring the hymn through five themes, each of which seem to inhabit the various verses. Inclusion, Mystery, Incarnation, Liberation, Salvation. The course is accompanied by a traditional Lenten Liturgy which we will be using in the online course and in all the churches across the Circuit from the first Sunday in Lent. Like an Advent Liturgy, each week we will sing the relevant verse of And Can it Be.

With the liturgy, traditional symbols of Lent will be placed around the bare cross. This year, these symbols have been chosen to reflect our own culpability in the continued suffering of the world and God's transforming presence through Christ in even the seemingly most hopeless situations. Alongside the traditional symbols, each week, whether in church, on Zoom or at home, *we are asking you to bring a small piece of clean rubbish to add to the foot of the cross as part of our liturgy. These discarded items can be gathered together and transformed on Easter Sunday as a symbol of hope and resurrection, for humanity and for the planet. How you do this is up to you.... be creative... everything can be re-shaped and re-purposed!*

Whether you are joining this course online, or in a group, or using the booklet on your own, we hope that both the course and the liturgy will give you a focus throughout this Lenten season and that God will speak to you through it.

## **Week 1**

### ***The Lenten Liturgy***



#### ***Symbol: A crown of thorns***

We remember that in the isolation of the desert Jesus was tempted by the vision of power; of becoming the ruler of the whole world by conforming to the twisted standards of that world. He replied simply, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him'.

**Lord, we remember your trust and faithfulness which led you to forego a crown of gold for a crown of thorns. You suffered to show us that true power is found in love and justice.**

We have brought pieces of rubbish to lay at the foot of the cross. This week these symbolise for us the laying down of human ideas of power and authority.

**Lord, in the laying down of these symbols we ask your forgiveness for our part in supporting authority without compassion, rules without understanding and power without love.**

*We sing, or listen to verse 1 of the hymn:*

And can it be that I should gain  
an interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

## All this for me: Inclusion

By Katie Smith

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Today we consider the first verse of the hymn.

May 24<sup>th</sup> 1738 is a key date in Methodist history, and each year the Sunday nearest to May 24<sup>th</sup> is known as Aldersgate Sunday. This marks the date of John Wesley's conversion. In his diary he wrote:

*"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's 'Preface to the Epistle to the Romans'. About a quarter before nine, 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's brother, Charles, had had a similar experience three days earlier, and between John's work as a travelling preacher and Charles' as a hymn writer, they brought Methodism into being. The hymn "And can it be" was written by Charles within a year of their experiences and celebrates the sense of personal assurance from God that both brothers found.

It seems strange though to speak of the Wesley brothers as being converted in 1738. They were the sons of a clergyman, and were themselves clergymen by this time. They had been on missionary journeys to the colonies in America, and both had been part of a holy club at Oxford, a group noted for their particular devotion to bible study and regular attendance at communion services. It is clear from their writings that despite much striving, both felt a lack of something in their faith and struggled with that. Wesley later wrote that Aldersgate marked a change from him having the "faith of a servant" who serves God out of reverential fear to having the "faith of a son" who serves God out of gratitude and love.

This first verse of the hymn expresses the wonder the Wesleys found at this change and finding themselves to be loved by God. As we sing it we are drawn into that wonder of realising that it is **for me** that Christ died.

One of the most famous conversion stories in the bible is that of Saul (who became Paul) on the road to Damascus. **Read Acts 9:1-9** for the story of the conversion and **1 Timothy 1:11-17** for some of what Paul wrote about his conversion. Paul's conversion is more dramatic, a blazing light that utterly changes the direction of his life, from a persecutor of Christians to one of the greatest evangelists. Perhaps though, one could argue that Paul was always seeking to please God and like the Wesleys what really changed was his understanding of God.

What of our own "conversions"? Many of us will have grown up in churches and may recognise something of Wesley's struggle to get it right.

### **Questions For Discussion:**

- Do you have any sympathy for thinking about Saul as someone trying to follow God before his conversion?
- Share something of your own experience of “conversion” – or is this an uncomfortable word if you grew up in church?
- Share something of a time when God’s love felt personal to you.
- What feelings does the phrase “Died he for me, who caused his pain” summon in you?

The way that Paul talks about his conversion in his letters often reminds people that he was not just ambivalent to Christ, but actively working against the early church. If God’s love could reach him and be for him personally, then surely it could reach to anyone. For both Paul and the Wesley brothers, their recognition of God’s love for them as individuals became a driving force for them to tell other people about it and draw others into the same understanding of God.

### **For further discussion:**

- What do we think those with no faith might think it means to follow Jesus? Are they more likely to think it is about following the rules of a distant master (Wesley’s “faith of a servant”) or about responding to the love of a perfect parent? (what Wesley calls “faith of a son”)?
- How might this impact our mission?
- What do we expect conversion to look like for those who don’t come to church?

### **Prayer**

*The words of the baptismal prayer in the Methodist Worship Book emphasise the love that God has for each one of us; that he died and rose for each one of us. We can use that prayer to pray for one another.*

### **Name**

for you Jesus Christ came into the world;  
for you he lived and showed God’s love;  
for you he suffered death on the Cross;  
for you he triumphed over death,  
rising to newness of life;  
for you he prays at God’s right hand:  
all this for you,  
before you could know anything of it.  
Through our relationship with Christ  
the word of Scripture is fulfilled:  
‘We love because God first loved us.’

Loving God,

We thank you that through Christ we see the depth of your love for us, and that this is true for each one of us, with all of our gifts and talents, our strengths and our weaknesses.

Renew in us a sense of wonder at your love for us.

Empower and enable us to share the message of your love for the people we meet in our daily lives.

Through Christ our Lord and Saviour,

Amen



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## Week 2

### *The Lenten Liturgy*



***Symbol: A warning sign***

It was often the custom to post on the crosses of those being crucified a notice of their crimes to act as a warning to others. The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus' notice said simply, 'This is the King of the Jews' a goad to the Jewish leaders and an example of Roman oppression – 'this is what is done to those who oppose us'

**Lord, we know that in our world many people are 'labelled' because of where they live, their nationality, their faith. Yet you treat everyone as an individual, you look past the prejudices that divide us.**

This morning, our pieces of rubbish symbolise for us our willingness to label others just because they are 'different'

**Lord, as we lay these symbols at your cross, forgive us that we too easily label people because in some way it eases our fear of the one who is different. Help us to see the individual and to work with others to banish prejudice, hate and oppression.**

*We sing, or listen to verse 2 of the hymn:*

'Tis mystery all: the immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
to sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
let angel minds enquire no more.

## Celebrating the Mystery of God in Christ

By Raj Bharat Patta

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Today we consider the second verse of the hymn.

Paul when writing to the Corinthian Church explains about the wisdom of God and says, “But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden...” (I Cor 2:7). This is how the NRSV has translated this verse. Catherine Keller in her book, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divine Process*, was at pains with this translation, for the NRSV has totally left out the word *en mysterio* (in mystery) in translation from the original Greek version. In my quest, attempting to know about it, I also have looked other versions of the Bible for the translations of this verse. The NIV translation of this verse is as follows: “No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden...” This version has added ‘mystery’ but left out ‘in’ into that statement of Paul. What I understand, which Catherine Keller agrees is that Paul is saying here in I Cor 2:7, “we speak God’s wisdom (*Sophia*) in mystery,” allowing us to know that God’s wisdom comes in mystery, dispelling all our presumptions of God, digressing all our dogmas, and discounting all our absolute claims of God, for God’s wisdom comes in mystery.

Many years later, in response to encountering and experiencing the grace of Christ in his life, Charles Wesley while penning this hymn ‘And can it be’ in verse 2 engages in the mystery of God, echoing what Paul has written in I Cor 2:7, “we speak God’s wisdom in mystery.” In a way Wesley was saying, “we sing God’s wisdom in mystery.” This hymn is an exploration of the wisdom of God and the theology of God that can be spoken or sung only in the spirit of mystery. Alluding to Keller who explains, “often what is called “mystery” (“Don’t ask questions, it is a holy mystery”) is mere mystification, used to camouflage the power drives of those who don’t want to be questioned,”<sup>1</sup> it is important to acknowledge that the ‘mystery’ that Wesley mentions in this hymn is not a kind of ‘mystery’ driven by power or authority. Rather it is ‘mystery’ based on his experience expressing that the love of Christ for him is inexpressible, unspeakable and incomprehensible, allowing the love of Christ on the cross as a mystery to celebrate and sing aloud.

In this verse we recognise the wonder of the mystery where Wesley articulates a theological oxymoron ‘immortal dies’ about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Oxymoron is a combination of words that have opposite or very different meanings in it. Immortality and death are antonyms to each other, and nowhere else in poetry or in real life immortality and death can co-exist, except in the life and death of Jesus Christ. He is expressing the wonder of mystery by asking ‘who can explore God’s strange design?’ upholding the design of God as a mystery. God’s strange designs include celebrating the oxymorons like ‘immortal dies’ which is again a way to recognise the finitude of human strengths and celebrating the infinite gracious spirit of God, the mystery of God in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). P. xi

Such a mystery of 'immortal dying' explains the depth of love divine, which remains a mystery not just to human beings but even for the angels and for the firstborn seraphs. Any effort made by them will be in vain to crack open or untangle the mystery of God, where mystery is part of the nature, identity and design of the divine. The reason Wesley brings in angels into this verse is to explain that even for heavenly beings or non-humans or super-humans the mystery of 'Immortal God's death' is beyond their strength to understand, which is only to explain how deep and mysterious is the love of the divine towards the entire creation.

Christ the origin of life, the Sophia of God, the immortal, dying on the cross is all about God's mercy towards the creation of God, is to say that God loves God's creation even to the point of death. So, in encountering such a mystery of God, what then should be our response? Wesley says all the earth should do is to only adore, and sing adorations to the mystery of Christ's love for creation. It is interesting to note that Wesley brings in an ecological perspective, bringing in the earth to respond to the mystery of God, calling the earth and all those in it to adore, which includes the flora, the fauna and the humanity. Adoration is one of the responses to the mystery of God. Wesley also calls on the angel minds to inquire no more, but only to adore. This call is an invitation to all those who sing this song to adore the divine mystery and not to be confined to any particular theory making absolute claims about it.

The relevance of this verse for our Lenten journey is primarily about celebrating the mystery of God in Christ, for God's love is beyond any confines and is open to all, and all means all. Secondly, in Christ even the opposites can co-exist, like the 'immortal dies.' So, the call for all those following Jesus Christ is to celebrate the diversity of perspectives, holding each other in love. As a church, this verse of Wesley calls us to be an open space, an open table, a hospitable place, holding together the 'contradictory convictions' in graciousness and in love, for only in Christ we find unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Thirdly we are called to interrogate what does it mean to 'adore' the mystery of God for our times today? Mark Olivero in explaining a theology of presence brings in Pope Benedict's speech on adoration as "mouth to mouth" with God. Such a notion he says has come from the Latin etymology of the word 'adore,' which is *ad* as towards and *oratio* as mouth – bringing in the need for God's word on our lips.<sup>2</sup> Adoration to the mystery of God in Christ on the Cross is about 'mouth to mouth with God's mystery' which is about being the mouth of God, speaking the wisdom of God in mystery and also about speaking God's justice into our contexts today. Finally, in the light of the mystery of the divine love of God on the Cross, we as human beings are called to acknowledge our finitude and limitations, and to recognise and depend on the infinite love of God, the wisdom of God, the mystery of God.

### **Questions For Discussion:**

- 'Immortal dies' – what do you infer from this oxymoron? Why do you think the immortal might die on the Cross?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://politicaltheology.com/a-political-theology-of-presence/>

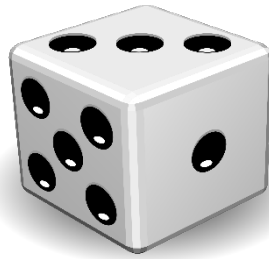
- Can you think of any other theological oxymorons? What are the ways that Christ creates the possibility of hospitality and welcome in the face of the contradictory convictions of our times today?
- For Wesley, his response to the mystery of God is adoration; what are some of the ways in which you might respond to the mystery of God in Christ today?

***Prayer***

God, the Sophia, the Immortal, the Mystery,  
Help us to celebrate your being and becoming like us in Jesus Christ,  
Fill our hearts and mouths with your adoration,  
Speaking your justice and acting your vision  
In transforming our earth today to be a better place for all.  
In the name of Christ, our wisdom and our power, we pray. Amen.

### Week 3

#### *The Lenten Liturgy*



#### ***Symbol: A dice***

We remember that as Jesus hung, suffering on the cross, the soldiers 'diced' for his clothes. A game of chance willed away the last vestiges of his dignity. A turn of the dice decided who was the richer that day. Yet Jesus offered the message that all are equal in God's sight. God does not play games with his love.

**Lord, we recognise that all people and nations are equal in your sight. Your love freely given is not a game of chance dependent on our deserving, our status or where we are born.**

As we lay our pieces of rubbish at the foot of the cross may they be symbols of the inequality between people and nations; the dice that determine the quality of life that we are born to.

**Lord, as we lay these symbols at your cross, forgive us for all the ways we uphold the inequalities of the world so that we live in comfort whilst others have no life at all.**

*We sing, or listen to verse 3 of the hymn*

He left his father's throne above –  
so free, so infinite his grace –  
emptied himself of all but love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
for, O my God, it found out me!

## Let me go there: The Incarnation

By Cathy Bird

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Today we consider the third verse of the hymn.

In reflecting upon this verse, I am immediately put in mind of RS Thomas' wonderful poem 'The Coming'

And God held in his hand  
A small globe. Look he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour. The light burned  
There; crusted buildings  
Cast their shadows: a bright  
Serpent, A river  
Uncoiled itself, radiant  
With slime.  
On a bare hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. Many People  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed  
Boughs. The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said.

*R.S. Thomas*

"Let me go there he said"

**"He left his Father's throne above."**

These are explicit statements about incarnation – about God living willingly **as** a human being, **among** human beings.

For many centuries, the early church argued about what it meant that God should come to earth to live, apparently, as a human being. The early Christian community struggled to express what Jesus had come to mean to them. They knew his words and his actions had the power to transform lives, they knew that although he had been violently killed, he was still very much alive in their hearts and minds, inspiring them to want to share the essence of his message with the whole world. They instinctively sensed that in Jesus they had glimpsed the very nature of the God of love and justice they had been worshipping all their lives. But was Jesus fully God? If so, how could he also be fully human? Was he God just trying to *give the*

*impression* of being a human? Or was he a human who just happened to have a really special connection with God? Such questions were, for a long time, the cause of persecution and subject to claims of heresy. Eventually in the year 451 a position was arrived at in which Jesus was deemed to be both fully human and fully divine. It's a position that we more or less hold onto today and it is expressed within the Nicene Creed that remains a lynch pin of traditional liturgy. *[If you want to read more about this, and about how it might impact our lives as Christians today, get hold of a copy of Robert Van de Weyer's book The Call the Heresy.]*

But what might it say to us today, this idea that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine? This third verse – the centre of the hymn – seems to offer a summary of everything about Jesus we know and have come to believe. As an act of compassion (**“so free, so infinite his grace”**) Jesus chose came to live among humanity, as a human being (**“he left his Father's throne above.”**) He lived a life to show humankind what God's intention is for humankind (**he “emptied himself of all but love”**), he was killed as a direct result of that life and ministry (**“he bled for Adam's helpless race”**) and his life, teachings and ministry continue today in the lives of his followers (**‘tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God it found out me.**) In this verse is all we need to know! In order to fully appreciate the divinity and humanity of Jesus we need to take the whole story on board.

Yet our lives as Christians can very easily focus just on the birth and death and resurrection of Christ. We move from Christmas to Easter so quickly, and even when we are in Holy Week, we talk about the death of Jesus forgetting that it only came about as a consequence of a life lived in a particular way. Incarnation is not just for Christmas! Crucifixion is not just for Good Friday! Resurrection is not just for Easter Sunday! Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection all come together in the pivotal line of the verse in which we sing that God **‘emptied himself of all but love.’**

For the human Jesus, we can understand this emptying as God ridding Godself of all the trappings of divinity – the throne, the crown, the omnipotence, the cherubim and seraphim waiting upon God. This human Jesus embodies pure, unadulterated love. At the same time, Jesus as a manifestation of that which is Divine, shows us that God is pure love. God is love. Love is God. Nothing more, nothing less.

And it is this absolute purity of love - this transformative, compassionate, challenging, angry, not to be diverted, justice seeking love – which plays out in the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus and which ultimately leads to his death. This is a love which seeks to bring the mighty down from their thrones, a love which understands that ‘levelling up’ can only happen if the rich and powerful also empty themselves, a love which crosses divides and accepts humanity in all its glorious diversity and imperfection.

It is also a love which continuously chips away at the self-centredness and greed which undermines and veils God's blessing and against which some, whose hearts have become so hardened fight back in a desperate attempt to protect their own position and status quo. Make no mistake, Jesus bled and died because he took the side of the helpless – the poor, the marginalised – and demonstrated God's bias for the poor. Jesus' death happened because he led a life of pure love and it was just too challenging for some people. Jesus' death was a sign

of the incredible lengths to which God's love was prepared to go for the sake of the world which God loves.

So, when we come to think about the death of Jesus, we miss out thinking about his life and ministry at our peril! For here is the key to resurrection!

Jesus knew that he was choosing a way that would lead to his own suffering and death, but he also knew that his dying would have a purpose. That somehow, in some way, as a result of his death, people – you and I - would be brought into a closer relationship with God. That in seeing his self-sacrifice in dying for what he believed in, that in opening up the way for the discovery of resurrection and new life, that in all these things, people would see and comprehend the face and will of God more clearly.

**“’Tis mercy all, immense and free,  
For, O my God, it found out me!”**

God’s love is an unconditional love. It is immense and free. God is like the sower in the parable who is profligate in his throwing of the seed knowing not where it will land, but trusting that some of it will take root and grow. God’s mercy is for me, and that also means it is for you, and for all people; and when it lands, it takes root and germinates and pushes the small shoots of hope which have lain dormant for too long into the open air; we can no longer stay where we have been. Once we are touched by the reality and depth of Jesus’ life and ministry we can no longer sit back and accept the injustices of life – the war, the violence, the hate, the exclusion. We follow a path that leads us away from the places of familiarity and security and safety. A life following Christ is a life lived to reveal the love of Christ to others through compassion and campaigning, through simplicity, acceptance and anger so that together God’s people and God’s world may be set on a path to healing and wholeness.

***Questions For Discussion and Reflection:***

- How do you understand the incarnation of Jesus?
- What do we need to empty ourselves of in order to be able to express pure love?
- In what ways today is humanity a ‘helpless race’? How might the followers of Christ today need to bleed in order to transform that helplessness?
- In what ways has God’s love and mercy’ found out you’? How has this changed you?

***A Prayer***

Dear God in Heaven,

We give you thanks that you left your throne above to live among us.

We thank you that in Jesus, you have given us a pattern for living.

Empty us of all that gets in the way of our offering service to you.

Fill us with the goodness of your love, grace and mercy, that we may live to serve you, and walk the costly path of justice and peace.

As we seek to follow in the footsteps of the one who is both human and divine, remind us that we are made in that image, and that in Christ we are free to be the people God calls us to be. Amen.



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## Week 4

### *The Lenten Liturgy*



#### ***Symbol: A cockerel***

As the cockerel crowed the eyes of Jesus and Peter met. Peter wept, realising that he had denied his dearest friend. For Jesus this must have marked a moment of immense emotional suffering, a bereavement. We remember that Jesus not only suffered physically at his passion but emotionally as well.

**Lord, we remember that there is nothing that humankind can suffer that you do not feel and understand.**

The rubbish that we have laid down today symbolises for us the suffering of people in our world. Suffering that is physical, through illness or torture or emotional through bereavement, abandonment or separation from family.

**Lord as we lay down these symbols today forgive us that we don't always try to understand the depth of others suffering. Help us always to be sensitive to others feelings and to support those who work for reconciliation and repatriation.**

*We sing, or listen to verse 4 of the hymn*

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
thine eye diffused a quickening ray –  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,  
my chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

## **My chains fell off, my heart was free: Liberty**

**By Lindsay Kemp**

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Today we consider the fourth verse of the hymn.

<https://youtu.be/S2NGtRJ5h8Q> is the link of the song “I am free” by Roger Daltrey.

Back in the day, Roger Daltrey of The Who sang ‘I’m free, I’m free, and freedom tastes of reality’ in the rock opera *Tommy*. I’m sure that for many of us, a bell is now faintly ringing, but before you go off down a path of Pinball Wizard and so on, just hold the question in your mind: ‘What is freedom? What is liberty?’

The character of Tommy had, in childhood, witnessed something that was so traumatising that he lost the powers of speech, sight and hearing, and grew up, literally, in a world of his own. Somehow, he developed great sensory skills and was brilliant at playing pinball, hence the song Pinball Wizard, but no-one knew how he could play. Then, one day, his situation reversed and he could, once more, hear, see and speak.

And he sang *I’m free*.

For a couple of decades, he had been imprisoned in a very isolating place, and his chains fell off, his heart was free. For a moment, just imagine living in a world that is totally dark, silent and which you can’t communicate. It would be very frightening.

Many people are imprisoned just as tightly as bonds from which they can’t escape. We could think of people actually in prison. But we could also think more widely – people who are bound by chains of debt – they might start off with a small loan to tide them over, but it grows and grows and then they can no longer control their finances.

We could think of people bound by chains of addiction – it started off with one little scratch card, or a work’s Christmas event at a casino, or maybe that couple of drinks on a Friday evening no longer dulled the pain.

We could think of people caught up in County Lines – for the children who have been drawn in and can see no escape and for the parents or carers who find out about their offspring’s activities in the most awful circumstances.

We would think of people caught up in the need to maintain a front – it could be like Hyacinth Bucket in keeping up appearances. All her contacts see her in one light – a woman determined to be in the best of circles, whatever it took and whatever it cost, but others may be students at university who are not able to keep up with their studies, or people in work who struggle to keep up with their colleagues – maybe they have been promoted one level beyond their capabilities.

Whatever it is, sometimes the bonds that bind us often start small, loose and manageable – a bit like a fly caught by a spider. For a short while it would be able to make a supreme effort and fly away, but very quickly the spider has spun the trap, and the fly is well and truly caught.

Whatever it is, whatever the bonds are – and if you think just for a few moments, you will be able to think of so many other circumstances people get caught in – people feel absolutely trapped, without hope, they're sinking and there's no way out. Often in those situations, wrong decisions are made as people try to fight their way out. And it can feel like being bound in chains.

So how can Jesus help?

He won't magically get rid of the thugs that run the county lines. He won't, usually, miraculously turn an addicts' feet in the opposite direction to the casino, or the office. He won't stop the loan sharks and bailiffs knocking on the door.

But God could well be whispering that voice that we hear in the back of our heads words which might tell us to turn in another direction where someone is waiting to show us how to stop, or to pick up the phone, or to tell someone what has been going on, or to swallow our pride and ask for help.

That will probably not solve the problem but being set on the right path, with a plan in place and people who can offer support can help set people free of their chains. Or maybe if we listen to God's voice, we will get our priorities straight and no longer be bound by striving to conform to the wrong ideals, or to achieve the wrong goals.

Tommy was in one sense free. He could make choices, he could come and go – he was an adult, but in another sense, he was bound – he needed help to get around, he needed people who knew him to communicate his wishes and thoughts.

People who are bound by debt, fear, addiction, other people's opinions or holds over them are in some ways free, but in other ways are stuck and do not experience liberty to make their own choices freely.

And us. Are there ways in which we are bound? That is for us, and possibly those closest to us to know.

Putting our hand in our Saviour's hand might not always lead to a blinding light and a wonderful sense of freedom, but it might help us to loosen our chains, shake them off and start off on the right path with hope in our hearts and a new direction for our feet.

We are still bound by the laws of the land, by thoughts of others – no-one is totally free to do just whatever they choose. We all have to abide by a variety of laws and rules and regulations. But we can be free to reach our full potential, to become the people God made us to be, once we are free of chains that bind us.

### ***Questions for Discussion:***

- What are the things which imprison and bind people in the world today?
- From where might freedom ultimately come?
- What might it feel like to have reached your 'full potential'?

***Pray for all those you have talked about, that they may experience compassion and liberation and healing.***

## Week 5

### *The Lenten Liturgy*



#### ***Symbol: A bag of Coins***

Today we remember how Judas, one of Jesus' own friends was so concerned with the monetary value of things that he failed to see the true cost of his words and actions. He devalued the generosity and love of Mary when she anointed Jesus' feet, and he would betray the one who loved him for the thrill of human riches.

**Lord, we remember that your values are not based on wealth; that you did not see a person's worth by what they owned or how much they were able to give. You saw into people's hearts and cherished them as images of your Father, God.**

The pieces of rubbish that we lay at the cross this week symbolise for us our reliance on worldly ideas of wealth and status.

**Lord, in the laying down of these symbols we ask your forgiveness, for we forget to measure people's worth in the way you do. Help us to live in ways that proclaim the values of your kingdom and not this world.**

#### **Hymn 345 v 5**

*We sing, or listen to verse 5 of the hymn*

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head,  
and clothed in righteousness divine,  
bold I approach the eternal throne,  
and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

## Salvation through Grace

By Annette Sharp

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Today we consider the fifth and final verse of the hymn.

*The Companion to Hymns and Psalms*, published in 1988, notes that 'The range of theology has rarely been equalled in a single hymn; it includes the Fall and the Redemption, the freeing of the soul from the imprisonment of sin and guilt, and the personal experience of salvation'.

This final verse is just bursting with joyfulness and confidence; the joy and positivity of coming to know Jesus as a personal Saviour and all that that entails. It is easy to feel the excitement and certainty of the Wesley brothers, John and Charles following their 'conversion' experiences and some researchers think that this Hymn was actually their original conversion Hymn rather than that which is credited with this title (Where shall my wondering soul begin? – 454 StF). Both were written in May 1738.

In the preceding verses, the writer has set out what God has done; what is on offer for the redemption of all human kind, yet making it intensely personal. In this final verse he moves from a sense of incredulity at God's generosity, bringing all of these themes together with a new certainty.

Yet, just because of its positivity, this final verse also points us quite clearly to the opposite condition that we might experience without this openness to the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Each line encourages us to explore a separate theological concept but the driving theme is that of personal salvation through God's Grace. Within this one verse we have presented to us, God's prevenient Grace and forgiveness, the concept of us being co-heirs with Christ, gaining eternal life, achieving 'Christian perfection', and ultimately claiming our 'reward' in heaven. All foundational themes of Methodism, although not exclusively so.

Phew! There's enough in there for a whole study series never mind one session.

It is said that Methodists sing their theology and this is clearly apparent in this verse of our Hymn. It is interesting to look at the parallel Gospel references against the lines of each verse.

*No condemnation now I dread; (Romans 8:1)*  
*Jesus, and all in him is mine! (Romans 8:17)*  
*Alive in him, my living Head, (Ephesians 4:15)*  
*and clothed in righteousness divine, (Ephesians 6:14)*  
*bold I approach the eternal throne, (Hebrews 4:16)*  
*and claim the crown, through Christ, my own. (2 Timothy 4:8)*

➤ Preachers are often greeted after a service being praised for choosing 'nice' Hymns or chided for 'poor' or 'difficult' ones. What do you consider makes a 'good' Hymn? and does this have anything at all to do with the theology (our understanding of God) that it expresses?

### Questions For Discussion

- Considering the themes mentioned earlier - God's prevenient (anticipatory) Grace and forgiveness, us being co-heirs with Christ, gaining eternal life, achieving 'Christian perfection', and claiming our 'reward' in heaven – What do you struggle with? The language, the concepts, or both?
- The assumption that we are all 'sinners' in need of salvation is uncomfortable for many people. The Hebrew word that we translate as 'sin' is an archery term, 'Chata' meaning to miss or fail to reach the goal (target). Do you think this helps at all in understanding our human condition?

Through God's Grace we are offered salvation through faith in Christ, and as Methodists we are encouraged to develop and deepen this faith through reading and 'grappling' with scripture (using our reason), through openness to the Holy Spirit and building on the insights of those who have gone before us (tradition). It is understood that salvation will be made outwardly visible by changed lives.

Wesley encouraged those who were 'saved' and were members of the Methodist Societies to strive towards Christian perfection, the 'righteousness' of line 4 in this final verse. Perfection or 'wholeness' is again covered by God's Grace but as believers we have to do our part – we strive for perfection and God covers the shortfall. The practices seen as assisting us to grow in wholeness are regular repentance, prayer, Bible reading, Christian fellowship, and acts of service.

#### **Further Questions for Discussion:**

- We spend so much time talking about how we can 'get people to come to Church' What do we really mean by this?
- Do we emphasise fellowship and acts of service at the expense of the other spiritual practices?
- Everyone claims to live such busy lives, how can we order the rhythm of our days to include the practices that lead to wholeness?

#### **Prayer of St. Columba**

Kindle in our hearts, O God,  
the flame of love that never ceases,  
that it may burn in us, giving light to others.  
May we shine for ever in your temple,  
set on fire with your eternal light,  
even your Son Jesus Christ,  
our Saviour and our Redeemer. Amen

## Week 6

### *The Lenten Liturgy*



#### ***Symbol: A palm leaf***

We remember your triumphal entry into Jerusalem; how the people sang your praises, clothed your path with cloaks and waved palms. Today they sang your praises, you were their King. Yet so soon when it became dangerous to know you, they melted away, became the mob that found safety in calling for your death.

**Lord, we remember that neither adulation nor condemnation could change your purpose. You let God guide you and, though frightened of what was to come you continued with the task you had been given.**

Today, as we lay our pieces of rubbish at the cross, they become for us symbols of the world's fickleness and our weakness.

**Lord, in the laying down of these symbols we ask forgiveness for the way we support or condemn people and the work that they do, so as to avoid condemnation ourselves.**

*We sing, or listen to all 5 verses of the hymn*



## Easter Day

***The Cross and Rubbish are transformed into beautiful, living things.***



***All: Today we celebrate!***

*Leader:* What do we celebrate?

***All: We celebrate Christ risen and declare God's transforming love.***

*Leader:* Why do we celebrate?

***All: Because of the new life, the joy and hope that God offers us today and every day.***

*Leader:* God calls us to possibilities; to fresh ways of thinking; to restored relationships. He calls us to care for his creation and to offer ourselves and our abilities in loving service to each other and to our communities.

As our rubbish springs to life and we transform this cross with our flowers, we think about the stories we hear of groups and individuals making a real difference to the world. We give thanks for them. Let's realise that no step we take is too small for God to use.

***All: Lord, help us to live with vision, hope and joy. Give us courage to step out and speak out; to share your message of love and transformation with the world.***

**Amen**