

Readings used in the Gathering in Brecon Cathedral to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the death of Rev Dr Thomas Coke on May 3rd 1814

The readings were prepared by John Gibbs, principally from John Vickers book 'Thomas Coke: apostle of Methodism' and agreed with the individual readers

Links with Brecon, Early Ministry and Contact with John Wesley

I am Sarah Middleton. I cannot claim, like Thomas Coke, to have been born and brought up in Brecon but I was brought up in South Wales. Thomas Coke spent part of his life working for the Methodist Church in the British Isles and so have I - partly at the Connexional office in London and partly out in the country. I am also a Methodist local, or lay, preacher.

The Brecon of Coke's day was one of the biggest towns in Wales, lying on the main road to Ireland and being an important administrative and commercial centre.

Thomas Coke was born in 1747 a stone's throw from St Mary's church where he was baptized just a week later. He grew up an only child in a fairly prosperous family, was a pupil at Christ College here in Brecon and then in 1764 he went up to Jesus College, Oxford to take his degree, like many a Welshman before and since.

His father was a long standing member of what was called the Common Council of Brecon and served twice as Bailiff – what we would now call Mayor. Thomas was elected a Councillor at 22 and, a year later, in 1770, elected as Bailiff. However he was pursuing a career in the Church and from 1771 he did not spend much time in Brecon, although he went on paying his contributions to the Council dinners!

Throughout his travels, he kept in close touch with Thomas Williams, his man of business in Brecon, principally to raise funds to support his projects. And wherever he was, sights of natural beauty would remind him of home. For example in Virginia he wrote 'At a distance was the Blue Ridge, an amazing chain of mountains. I prefer this country to any other part of America: it is so like Wales, my native country.'

In 1771 he became a curate in the parish of South Petherton in Somerset but he found the work unrewarding. In 1776 he had a crucial meeting with the elderly John Wesley at Kingston St. Mary near Taunton, the two being brought together by the vicar of that village.

To Wesley it was an encouraging encounter. He saw in Thomas Coke a man young enough, and with sufficient qualifications, to be groomed for leadership. However for Coke, the first response was one of disappointment. Perhaps he hoped that there would be a call for him to throw in his lot with the Methodists. Instead Wesley advised him to return to South Petherton, 'doing all he good he could, visiting from house to house, omitting no part of his clerical duty' - in a nutshell, turning it into a Methodist stronghold. Whatever disappointment he may have felt, Coke did just this. The result a few months later was the ringing out of the church bells to celebrate his being driven from the parish.

For the next few years Coke was kept busy travelling on horseback around the country, using his legal training to work on Wesley's behalf to sort out the problems that arose as the Methodist movement began to develop an existence of its own.

The work in America

I am Robert Williams. I was born and brought up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was ordained as a Methodist Minister and served as pastor for 35 years in New Jersey. For almost 9 years I have been Head of the Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church and because of Thomas Coke's impact on the United States, my life has been influenced by his work and witness

It was on 18th September 1784 that Thomas Coke set sail on what was to be the first of no less than 18 journeys across the Atlantic. When the War of Independence was over, many British born preachers and many Anglican clergy fled and Methodists in the fledgling United States found themselves deprived both of preaching and the sacraments. John Wesley responded by sending out Thomas Coke and two other preachers to organise the Methodists into a separate denomination. He consecrated Coke as Superintendent of this new Church - a title which was quickly translated into 'Bishop'

The most important event of this first visit was the so-called 'Christmas Conference' in Baltimore, when American preachers rode in from all directions to debate and agree on a constitution for their new Church, a church with a potential for growth beyond imagination!

An issue that arose immediately was that of slavery. The plantations in the southern States, in particular, were run on slave labour and many Methodists were slave owners. Coke lost no time in opposing this evil publicly, sometimes at risk of being horsewhipped for his pains. He also raised the matter when, together with his fellow-bishop Francis Asbury, he dined with the future President George Washington at Mount Vernon overlooking the Potomac river.

In describing his commitment to the cause, I must just touch on the enormous difficulties of the journeys he undertook, both on land and sea. On land there were arduous horseback journeys to be made through vast forests and across wide rivers sometimes swollen in spate. At sea many days - and sometimes months - were spent in small, wooden sailing ships, with the ferocity of mid-Atlantic gales to contend with.

Here is Coke's account of just one day on his second voyage across the Atlantic in 1786. Thursday, 30. . I came out of my state-room, and found that a dreadful hurricane had just arisen. The ship was on her beam-ends. They had not time to take down the foresail, and were just going to cut away the main-mast as the last remedy, expecting every moment that the ship would be filled with water and sink. It appeared as if the clouds, the air, and the water were all mixed together. After the immediate danger was over, we drove with the wind, which carried us with nothing but the bare poles at the rate of six miles an hour for eight and a half hours.

The Call to Mission: in the UK and abroad

I am John Gibbs, Chairman of the BS&MF (which Society is one of the sponsors of the commemoration) and I was born in Breconshire. However, my links to Thomas Coke go back seven generations to the islands of Portland and Jersey, where my ancestors were influenced by the Ministry of Robert Carr Brackenbury. And Brackenbury's work on Jersey was commended by Thomas Coke in his important 1786 paper - 'Address to the Pious and Benevolent, proposing an annual subscription for the support of Missionaries' This support was to be directed to four specific areas: the highlands of Scotland; the Islands of Jersey and Guernsey, parts of what is now Canada and the West Indies.

This Address can be regarded as a blue-print for Methodist missions, both home and abroad and the response that it evoked goes a long way to justify the claim that it marks the birth of the Methodist Missionary Society some 30 years before it was formally constituted.

And it is impassioned stuff: 'Blessed be God! Our spiritual resources are amazing.

Numerous, I am fully persuaded, are the preachers among us who, in the true spirit of the apostles, count all things but dung, that they may win Christ and win souls to him; who carry their lives in their hands, and long to spend and be spent in their Master's glorious cause.'

As far as Jersey is concerned, Coke visited the island several times, *once* with John Wesley. On this latter occasion he was threatened by a mob; the ringleader of which assaulted him in a most brutal and ignominious manner 'almost lifting him from the ground by his ears'. (you will remember that he was only five feet high)

Coke was always someone who leapt to the defence of the persecuted and this is illustrated by his actions in support of the Methodists on Jersey. At this time the Channel Islands were on the front line in the confrontation between Britain and France. Military exercises were often held on Sundays, and the Methodist people opposed this on conscientious grounds. Coke took up their cause and when in 1798 a law was passed imposing banishment on any who refused the Sunday military service, he used all his lobbying skills to seek its repeal. Thus he wrote to members of the Privy Council 'Even supposing that these people carry their regard of the Sabbath to a little extreme, should a company of loyal men for this be persecuted to imprisonment, banishment and ruin - at *any* time, but especially when there are so many enemies in the bowels of the Empire, longing to *destroy* it'.

The campaign bore fruit and the Bill was annulled. This was a major achievement and achieved at some considerable cost. As Coke wrote 'this business has engrossed my time almost day and night for about ten weeks'.

Here is a story about Thomas Coke that could be repeated for many times and many places.

Mission to the West Indies

I am Cathy Gale Superintendent minister of the Gwent Hills and Vales Circuit of the Methodist Church. I was brought up in Wales – in a village called Cwmafan just outside Port Talbot - and went straight from University to the West Indies at the ripe old age of 22, first to the island of Dominica and then to Jamaica. I taught in a Methodist High School in Dominica, and from there candidated for the Methodist ministry. I was trained at the United Theological College of the West Indies in Jamaica, and then I served in the Jamaica District of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas for 14 years, including preaching several times at the Coke Memorial Church in Kingston. I came back to Britain in 2007, having spent 21 wonderful years in the Caribbean and steeped in its Methodist heritage.

There is little doubt that for most of his ministry, the islands of the Caribbean held pride of place in Thomas Coke's affections, even though the four visits he paid to them occupied less than seven months.

His first landing, on the island of Antigua, occurred on Christmas morning 1786 and followed three months at sea during which the original intention of going first to Nova Scotia had been frustrated by tremendous storms which left the boat leaking at every seam.

Coke wrote 'in going up the town of St. John's we met brother Baxter going to perform divine service. After a little refreshment I went to our chapel and read prayers, preached and administered the sacrament. I had one of the cleanest audiences I ever saw. All the negro women were dressed in white linen gowns, petticoats, handkerchiefs and caps; and I did not see the least spot on any of them. The men were also dressed as neatly.

Quite soon Coke realised that this smartness of outward appearance was often more than matched by spiritual maturity, as for example in the patient endurance of two women slaves who were unmercifully whipped for the crime of attending a Methodist prayer meeting. 'Giving', as Coke put it, 'such indubitable evidence of the proofs of the genuine power of religion, of patient suffering and triumphant faith that some of the principal settlers on the island were moved to pity, though the Governor remained unmoved'.

The missionaries, and indeed Coke himself, were in a dilemma. Slavery in the West Indies was much more vicious than in the United States and their sympathy with, and concern for the slaves was unmistakable. On the other hand, they were dependent on the good will of the plantation owners for their access to the slaves whom they hoped to convert as well as champion.

In the West Indies at this time we are witnessing the birth of the worldwide expansion of Methodism, with Thomas Coke as the key figure. He fully deserves his unofficial title of 'Father of the Missions' - without initial his combination of enthusiasm and dedication, it would have been many years before Methodist foreign missions would have got 'off the ground'

Concern for the Welsh Speaker

Parchedig Jennie Hurd ydw i, Cadeirydd Synod Cymru yr Eglwys Fethodistaidd. Mae Synod Cymru yn gweithio trwy gyfryng y Gymraeg er mwyn cefnogi ein capeli Cymraeg eu hiaith ac i ofalu amdany'n nhw. Dydw i dim yn Gymraes – Saesnes ydw i – ond dw i wedi dysgu'r iaith (ac yn parhau i ddysgu) er mwyn gwasanaethu fel gweinidog yn yr wlad hon.

My name is Reverend Jennie Hurd, Chair of Synod Cymru of the Methodist Church. Synod Cymru works through the medium of Welsh to support and care for our Welsh language chapels. I am not Welsh myself – I'm English – but I have learnt the language (and am still learning) so that I can serve as a minister here.

And here in Wales, it seems clearly right that we should pick out Thomas Coke's concern for the native speaker of Welsh – though one can note that his concern for the speaker of Irish was just as strong. In the late 1790s he became convinced of the need for a mission, and moved Conference by a speech in which he said that 'His heart was being consumed for his kinsmen: The Welsh of North Wales. Did not darkness encompass the land and were not many being doomed through ignorance?'. It was agreed that two Welsh-speaking ministers, Owen Davies and John Hughes, should be appointed to North Wales, and the work prospered. Within five years, 'nineteen Welsh travelling preachers and a society of near four thousand' had been raised.

One matter which very much occupied Coke was the production of printed material in Welsh. He wished to ensure that there was a good translation available of his Commentary on the New Testament, and during his tour of North Wales in 1808 he sought to engage the services of the Calvinist poet and schoolmaster, David Thomas, whom he described as 'the best translator, I am told, in all Wales and a classic scholar'. He commented that 'The Welsh preachers were very eager for the translation to be made', and added, with a touch of conceit, 'as the Welsh have very few well-written books in their own language, it becomes to me a call of duty which I dare not resist!' In the event he called on the services of John Hughes, one of the two ministers mentioned earlier, who moved to London to supervise the work, and then found himself – not surprisingly – working with a printer who did not understand the Welsh language, with all its intricacies and complexities. *Such* was the price Coke paid as a monolingual English speaker for his part in promoting Christian literacy and scriptural holiness among his fellow countrymen!

The following passages are taken from Coke's Commentary on the New Testament, first in the Welsh translation and then its English version. The passage referred to is Matthew 28: 19, where Jesus tells his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."

Mae y cennadwri y roddes Crist yn y geiriau hyn i'w Apostolion, yn nodi allan y gwhaniaeth rhwng y ddau oruwchwiliaeth y ddeddf a'r efengyl: y cyntaf a gyfyngwyd i'r Iuddewon; yr ail sy'n cyrrhaedd i holl hiliogaeth Adda. Ond er mai diben ein Iachawdwr oedd i'r efengyl gael ei phregethu i'r Cenhedloedd yn gystal ac i'r Iuddewon, fe ddarfu i ragfarn yr Apostolion wneuthur iddynt dybed, mai meddwl Crist yn unig oedd, eu bod i bregethu yr efengyl i'r Iuddewon y rhai oeddent ar wasgar ar hyd y byd, neu y sawl a fyddent ewyllysgar i gofleidio y grefydd Iuddewig a chadw cyfraith Moses.

'This commission of our Lord marks out the difference between the Mosaic and the Christian dispensation: the one was confined to the Jews; the other was extended to all the sons and daughters of Adam. The whole tenor of the succeeding books of the New Testament shews,

that Christ's design by this commission was, that the gospel should be preached to all mankind without exception, not only to the Jews, but to all the idolatrous Gentiles...'

The Final Journey

I am Soba Sinnathamby, a Methodist Minister, currently serving in Chipping Norton and Stow Circuit. I was born in Sri Lanka, Thomas Coke's destination on his final Journey, and I would like to say that the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka is celebrating its bicentenary in a few weeks' time with the commemoration of Thomas Coke and the early missionaries.

Thomas Coke died, as he had lived for so long, in harness. At the Methodist Conference of 1813, following the death of his second wife, he pleaded eloquently for a *new* missionary venture - to the Indian sub-continent. Conference eventually gave its consent and on New Year's Day 1814, he, and the six young preachers he had recruited and equipped, sailed from Portsmouth. This was no sudden impulse. Coke was realising a vision he had cherished for *thirty* years. Trans-Atlantic and other commitments had merely delayed its fulfilment. And he was determined to accompany the missionaries in person.

The Indiamen, namely, Cabalva and Lady Melville in which the party sailed, were much larger ships than Coke was used to; and because of the war with France, they sailed in convoy. There was, of course, no short cut through the Suez Canal; the voyage was a long one and weather conditions prevented them from putting in at Madeira or the Canary Islands. So they rounded the Cape and entered the Indian Ocean without spending any time on shore. On Tuesday May 3rd, *four months* after sailing from Portsmouth, Coke was found dead on the floor of his cabin. He was buried at sea later that day.

He *had* expressed a clear wish to be buried in the Priory Church at Brecon, but it was *not* to be. For someone who had chosen to be homeless, it seems fitting that he should lie in *an unmarked grave* beneath the waters of the Indian Ocean.

There have been Church buildings and schools named in his honour in many parts of the world, including Galle, where the first group of Methodist missionaries landed in Sri Lanka. But His *lasting* memorial is *not* in any of these buildings but in the *continuing causes* to which he gave himself so unstintingly.

And I have been asked to end by reading the verses from Matthew, on which we have just heard Thomas Coke's commentary: The Great Commission - Matthew Chapter 28, verses 16 to 20.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'