

In 1729 a group of young men, centred round Charles Wesley began to imagine a new future for themselves in Oxford. This imagination became known later as *The Holy Club* and it remains a matter of opinion as to whether these men believed they were starting something new, or were simply seeking a different way of being. These men received the sacraments regularly, met together for fellowship and the reading of 'the Greek Testament' and at the behest of William Morgan they began in 1730 to visit the debtors and condemned prisoners in the Castle and the city gaol. Heavily influenced by Charles' older brother John the movement took on a life of its own and within 100 years the people called Methodists were 'spread abroad'.

But there was more imagining to be done. 31st May 1807 saw the realisation of a different kind of thinking in the form of a different kind of gathering. As the third camp meeting was planned for Norton-on-the-Moors the Burslem Circuit appealed to the Wesleyan Conference at Liverpool in 1807 to discipline the organisers of such events. Conference responded:

It is our judgment that even supposing such meetings to be allowable in America they are highly improper in England and likely to be productive of considerable mischief and we disclaim all connexion with them.

The meeting still took place and that June, Hugh Bourne's name was removed from the roll of members and William Clowes' name was omitted from the circuit plan and in the September his class ticket was withheld. In May 1811 this imagining came into focus as the Camp Meeting Methodists and the Clowesites united to form the Primitive Methodist Connexion. And all in the shadow of Mow Cop.

But more had been imagined. In 1797, a year after Alexander Kilham was expelled from the ministry for writing an article urging the Wesleyan's to give greater import to laity in the governance of its church, he and his supporters formed the Methodist New Connexion. Around 1815 William O'Bryan and James Thorne were founder members of the *The Bible Christians* and in 1907 these two new denominations joined the United Methodist Free Churches to form the United Methodist Church.

It was then, perhaps, that some of the most daring and costly imagining took place. A new, unified vision was discerned and after careful negotiation and many hurdles The Methodist Church re-emerged in 1932. There has been many more secessions and unifications within our Methodist heritage but these give a flavour of both the necessity and cost of movement. What we can discern is that the people called Methodists have always tried to recognize

new and compelling ways of being God's faithful community and that change and complexity belongs in our lifeblood. It also hints at the capacity of the Methodist People to imagine a new future for themselves and the church. Nearly a generation has passed since the Deed of Union of 1932 and I believe that it is time for the Methodist People to imagine again.

What do I mean by imagination? I mean *to perceive a future that is radically alternative to our present, but informed by the tradition and memory of our past*. It is in this radical alternative that we must focus our attention.

'Mapping The Way Forward' is one such alternative within which we might discover the Divine Imagination. This alternative offers us a new place to inhabit. This new place is not easily identified, it does not have a map and it does not have a precedent. To merge circuits into fewer mission circuits, to reduce the number of Superintendants, to pay out for an administrative base and to offer leadership to lay people in the presence of presbyters is indeed radical.

Yet the most far-reaching consequences lie in what is not written but is certainly intimated. The outworking of this regrouping for mission will stand or fall on our ability to accept a new culture, a new imagined church. The mobilising of laity, a community of theological enquiry and reflection, a refocusing of fiscal policy, a redefining of recognised roles, a reforming of local ecclesial community, ... are just a few of the many issues that we will need to be attentive to.

What is on offer is the radical alternative offered to Moses. Are we willing to leave the known, comfortable, yet oppressive present in order to inhabit the wild wilderness of uncertainty and wandering? Are we willing to leave what we know to be destructive and yet familiar trusting our faith-informed instinct that the 'I am' is calling us beyond our known into an elusive future?

We have no burning bush, no obvious sign that God is leading in one direction or another and yet, like Moses, we are asked to consider a new kind of future. For Moses this future was so alternative that it was beyond comprehension. The Hebrew's were slaves; they had no land, no government and no military power. All that could be perceived was the reality of the here and now, the oppression and pain of the present.

Yahweh, however, had a memory. He had heard the groaning of his people, he had seen their despair and he remembered his covenant with them. Perhaps this is a place for us to begin. To articulate the pain of the

moment, to be angry about the situation we find ourselves in and to recognise our struggle. Instead of gathering to praise God for his goodness, it might be more pertinent (and certainly more human) to lament and protest. Maybe, in the midst of our incarceration God might remember his covenant with us.

But what was Moses' response when he was confronted with the Divine Imagination? It was one of impossibility. Who was he to do such a thing? Why should this future come into being? And who was he to be a part of it?

What was the source of this sense of inadequacy? I suspect, although we will never know, that Moses knew only too well who he was. He was a man who didn't quite belong; he was a Hebrew, but was raised within the Pharaoh tradition. An Egyptian, but his roots were Hebrew. Not only did he not belong, but he was unworthy – he was, in fact, a murderer. Abandoned by his mother, brought up by carers, thrust into the world of Kingly Court (where Pharaoh was seen as Divine) and an escaped murderer. These are the things of Hollywood! And yet it was to this man that Yahweh revealed a hope for a resilient people; The Divine Imagination offered to a man who had yet to realise the full implications of such a revelation.

Is this task too great for us? Have we, the Methodist people in Chester and Stoke, got the audacity to accept a radical alternative for a future? Possibly not! This may well be too great for us, beyond us, far greater than anything we have imagined. So should we give in before we have started? Yes! That would be a sensible conclusion. And yet.... we are drawn by the burning bush; a strange but deep and profound sense that we are being called to something new, something different. It is mysterious, unusual. The bush is not consumed. We are desperately trying to understand the revelation when suddenly it speaks and we, un-saddled, find ourselves standing on Holy Ground.

But how can we trust what we hear? Is it the Word of God, or just my fancifulness? The age old question that has never been given a satisfactory answer. There are at least two ways in which we can test this revelation: Firstly, we can look for an alternative. Where is the other burning bush? Who else can turn a staff into a snake? Or make his hand leprous and then healed? What options are there for structuring the district, circuit and local church? How else might we fulfil our call to participate in God's mission?

Secondly, we must cherish our memory. We must immerse ourselves in our tradition take it seriously in the shaping of our own field of perception and system of language, so that we are so at home in that memory that the points of contact and incongruity with the situation of the church in culture can be discerned and articulated with proper urgency.¹ Is this not the God of

¹ Brueggemann *The Prophetic Imagination* pg2

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Is this not the God of Covenant? Yes it is! and Yahweh is only too happy to remind Moses. The question Moses has to wrestle with is this – ‘do I recognise, in this divine imagination, those charisms that belong peculiarly to the covenanted people of Yahweh?’ Equally the question for us to consider is this ‘do we recognise in any new proposal those charisms that belong peculiarly and particularly to the people called Methodists?’

What might those charisms be? What is there in the original Green Paper presented to our district that evokes the memory of Methodism? Firstly, we are reminded that Methodism is a movement. In that sense it is not established and it is non conformist and, therefore, there is a place for radical redirection. It also reminds us of the need for order and accountability. The Methodist Church is bound by its ability to hold one another to account in mutual cooperation – Connexionalism. It also offers us a shared vision of lay and ordained ministry but does not insist on a pre-described model. It hints at the necessity of small group ministry and authentic whole life discipleship of individuals. However, its greatest, most evocative memory is not in what it says, but what it represents. Methodism has always been willing to engage with the Divine Imagination, to be confronted by revelation.

So two questions remain – can we begin to recognise the Divine Imagination? (Can we see within it the memory of our tradition?). Secondly, do we have the courage, despite our failings, to re-imagine the Methodist Church? (Do we have the capacity to move beyond this place, to inhabit a new situation?)

I believe that God has heard our cries, and is beginning to bring us up out of the misery of our present condition towards the Promised Land, a new habitat, a place that will promise us much, but will cost us everything. I for one am willing to travel with the traveller. I for one am willing to re-imagine the church.

And let us not forget, that when Moses said ‘this is beyond me’ God sent him a helper, Aaron ... a Paraclete ... perhaps.