

THE GOD WHO INSPIRES

THE GOD WHO INSPIRES – Presidential Address 2005

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It is customary to begin the Presidential address by expressing thanks to the Methodist people. This I gladly do for within the Methodist family I have found friends, fulfilment and faith. You have honoured me so that I can honour God, but I can only do this with your prayerful support. I wish to thank particularly the members and officers of the Southampton District for their affirmation and support over the past years. The gift of cassock and scarf will remind me of your prayers and love. I also thank my colleague Chairs of District, the General Secretary, the Co-ordinating secretaries and members of the Connexional Team. Your job is not an easy one, as I have discovered, and I salute you. You have enriched my ministry through your experience, wisdom and general good humour. I am delighted that so many of my friends are here with me and my family. I resist the temptation to name names apart from one - my wife Christine to whom I owe so much.

In his Presidential year, Neil Richardson, put God firmly on the agenda with his message about a Christ-centred Church. Will Morrey and Myrtle Poxon, as they have travelled around the Connexion rekindling our hope, have been reminding us that God is a God who listens. I want to build on this God centred theme and talk about 'the God who inspires'.

In my year of Presidency I want to address two of our Church's priorities. First: to help us develop confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved. Second: to encourage us to develop fresh ways of being Church. In our session after tea we shall be looking at the report '*Time to talk of God*'. I draw your attention to a couple of paragraphs. The first tells us that Methodists are good at conversations but only up to a point. While comfortable with socialising and being a welcoming church 'we are much less comfortable with seeking out or providing contexts of conversation that allow us to go really deep, and to get real with each other about our faith' 'This', it goes on to say, 'is strongly linked to our reluctance to evangelise...if we never have searching conversations with our fellow Christians about our faith, it is hardly likely that we shall feel able to express a reason for the hope that is in us to anyone outside the Church.' Talk about God works best when it stimulates talk with God. Evangelising and spirituality are inter-dependent. There is a single word which encapsulates 'conversation with God'. It is the word 'theology'. I suggest that we no longer know how to evangelize because of our neglect of theology.

We do not have a God centred Church because of our neglect of theology. I am puzzled when after a service in which I have preached people say 'you made us think today'. Does it mean that the congregation is not normally given much to think about? Or does it mean that they didn't understand a word I said? I get worried when I hear ministers and local preachers say 'of course I am not a theologian'. What has happened to theology – to thinking and speaking about God? I believe we shall become a God centred Church when we genuinely engage in theology.

In my visits to the districts and circuits I hope we can set up study days and other opportunities for ministers, local preachers, lay people to get together to explore the Bible and to think and talk about God. You can get a foretaste of what I hope to do if you buy my book *Beyond the Box*.

Talking with God involves not only speaking (for which Methodists have an unbeatable reputation) but also listening (which as the Review of the Conference report says, we seem to find harder). With regard to the second priority, mentioned a moment ago, if we are to develop 'fresh expressions of church' then we must listen more carefully to the Holy Spirit who is speaking to us both within and beyond the Church. In the Youth Conference Report you will find the following sentence. 'Youth Conference recognised a lack of presence of the Holy Spirit within our weekly services and the need for the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to be more widely understood and appreciated.'

The Word and Spirit

There is a remarkable passage in Ezekiel 37 describing Israel as a valley of dry bones. Is God saying to Methodism 'can these bones live?' Some churches appear to have a death wish in their resistance to change. 'Over my dead body' is their slogan. Ezekiel's response to God's question is, 'O Lord God, you know'. God responds. 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord ... I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you...and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.' The prophet obeys and there is a lot of rattling, clattering and reconnecting. Note the three stages: the first is about the skeleton or structure, the bringing together of bone to bone. This has been taking place in Methodism over the past few years as we have sought to reconnect ourselves around the 'our calling' initiative and the priorities. Then Team Focus and Local Church development plans have sought to put muscles and flesh on the bones. However, structures, clear priorities and plans enable but they do not give life. Only the Word of God and the Holy Spirit can energize. We have not caught the vision because we have yet to fully experience the breath of God and the power of the Holy Spirit! 'O Lord God you know'

The Holy Spirit is rattling our bones! What is the Spirit saying to Methodism? God is telling us that he has not finished with Methodism but is preparing us for a new future. He is calling us to radical change. He is speaking to us about repentance and conversion! God telling us to create fresh expressions of Church alongside and within the old since much of the old, in its resistance to change, will not survive. Life can come to our dry bones through prophesy, that is speaking the Word of the Lord

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(theology) and through the power of the Spirit. Word and Spirit need each other. When the Word is without the Spirit the Church dries up. When the Spirit is without the Word the Church blows up. When Word and Spirit come together the Church grows up. If we are to re-capture vision we must give attention to theology and the work of the Holy Spirit. Let's do some theology on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit in God

In its doctrine of the Trinity, the Western Church emphasises the one God who happens to be revealed in three subsisting persons. St. Augustine, an influential theologian who lived in the fourth century wrote about this using analogies from the natural world. He speaks of the Trinity, for example, as the sea, the river and the spring. This way of describing the Trinity using labels has continued. A local preacher, who is to be congratulated for preaching on Trinity Sunday, told me how he explained the Trinity. He said 'I am father to my children, son to my parents and husband to my wife'. I suspect that most of us have looked at the Trinity like this. Of course, every way of looking at the Trinity involves a danger. The danger here is that we end up thinking of three aspects or a single person rather than three persons in partnership and communion. Concentrating on the oneness of God creates a static Church, keen to organize, centralize and control so that diversity is swallowed up in the drive for unity.

The early Greek theologians of the Eastern Church emphasises the distinctness of the persons of the Trinity. They use the word *perichoresis*, which literally means 'to proceed about each other' to describe movement within the trinity. There is a sort of barn dance of movement and flux going on within God; a finding and losing, a circling and spiralling of partners until both are transfigured in each other, lost in a love-making out of which new universes are conceived and born. When the Trinity turns towards the world, the Word and the Spirit become the two arms of God embracing all humanity. In the cross this dynamic partnership of Son, Spirit and Father is stretched in pain to its ultimate limit so as to encompass all in love. In the resurrection the partners hug each other and us in the joy of a world redeemed. So the Trinity, to change the imagery, is like a vast cosmic sea ebbing and flowing; ever changing yet ever the same.

There is a story, apocryphal no doubt, about St. Augustine. He was walking up and down on the sea shore at Carthage, puzzling over the Trinity. He had written a hundred chapters on the subject across his fifteen books and was no closer to unravelling the mystery. This theological bishop saw a little boy running backwards and forwards across the sand with a bucket. He filled the bucket with sea-water and ran back across the beach to pour it into a hole he had dug in the sand. He kept repeating the exercise in an attempt to fill the hole. St. Augustine watched him for some time. Finally he went over the lad and said 'what are you doing?' 'I am trying to get that', said the lad pointing to the sea, 'into that', pointing to the hole. Augustine then realized why he was having trouble describing the Trinity.

We Methodists, who have neglected theology, have done something far worse; we have dumbed down the message and we have domesticated God even when we have turned up the emotional heat. We have lost the mystery. In our talk of a God of love we have forgotten, that like the raging sea, God is dangerous. We have not only put God in a box but we have become so used to transporting God around in buckets that God has ceased to be God. We have tamed the terror. We have managed the mystery. Not all of us may have done so but we must examine ourselves on this matter before God. One thing is required of us, 'we must repent!'

The Spirit in the World

The Holy Spirit has no image of her own; rather Jesus Christ is the face of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is ever active in creating, recreating and sustaining the cosmos. Just as through the 'Word' the Triune God is active 'toward' creation, so in the 'Spirit' God is active 'in' creation. The Spirit is God 'turned inside out' in the world. Theologians are not confined to those who write incomprehensible books. Composers, sculptors, painters, artists are theologians indeed maybe theology is better served by the creative artists? I regard Michelangelo as a theologian exploring the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual. His statue of Moses radiates power; spirit breaking out of stone. That is what we can become yet so often we are like his 'prisoners' unfinished statues of figures struggling to free themselves from the grip of marble.

The Holy Spirit is blowing in the world today, raising up new Christians amongst the poor in the Southern continents. In the rich West, the same Spirit is surfacing in people outside of traditional Church. In our post-modern, post denominational culture, religion has not died. Spirituality flourishes but has rather become de-regulated as individuals, rejecting traditional Church chase after myths and Da Vinci Code fantasies. The Holy Spirit is raising the consciousness of many beyond the Church to ecological, global and justice issues. My prayer is that this rising tide will become a powerful force for good leading to the cancellation of debt in the poorer parts of the world as we seek to make poverty history.

The Nicodemus story in John 3 reminds us that the Holy Spirit is blowing through the windows of the world. His conversation with Jesus fizzles out. Like many within the ecclesiastical institutions he cannot grasp the vision of the kingdom because he will not recognise the necessity of a new birth for himself and for the institution. Not so for the woman at the well in John 4. She turns out to be a better theologian than Nicodemus. She relentlessly presses Jesus to explain and even when she wriggles away from the difficult bit, the conversation continues. She wants living water to bubble up in her life. She tells Jesus that when the Messiah comes he will unveil all things. The man, who has just told her all the things she ever did, replies, 'I am the one'.

She is an outsider. I am persuaded that it is in our encounters with people outside rather than inside the Church that we shall encounter the 'I am' of God. Inderjit Bhogal when he was President told us this story:

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Graham was homeless and lives on the streets of Sheffield. People regarded him as a tramp, but Inderjit had got to know him. On one occasion they got into a conversation.

'I'm working on a sermon about tables, bread and parties in the wilderness', says Inderjit.

'I love bread.' said Graham.

He then broke off a large piece and gave it to Inderjit who took it said, Amen and slowly ate it. Inderjit comments, 'all around us in this city environment there were people with a lifestyle of grabbing, greed and profit. People racing about yet here I was being fed by one of the poorest people I know. I was his honoured guest at a table in the wilderness'.

The Holy Spirit is surfacing especially in our encounters with the poor and the marginalized. It is often here that 'word' and 'spirit' come together turning the common place into a holy space.

The Spirit in the Church

He came home from the church meeting exasperated and said to his wife 'I don't think I will go again'. Andrew has a highly responsible job. Arriving home from work at 7.30 he spent a few minutes with his young son before rushing out to the Church Council. There had been little time to talk or eat. The church meeting finished at 10.45. The minister had no idea how to chair it and they spent nearly an hour talking about the flower rota. He had so much to give but the meeting was preoccupied with trivialities. Like many of our young people he has abandoned the church.

This story tells us that the institutional Church is in big trouble. While the world rushes by like a river in flood, nice people spend hours debating whether to take out a few pews. It is hardly surprising that disillusioned members drop out. John Wesley's great fear may be realized when he said, 'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, but I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.' It is as if we are trying to preserve telephone kiosks in the age of the mobile phone. The Spirit is seeking to make the Church into the vibrant vehicle of God's tomorrow. Look at this passage from the *What is a Circuit Superintendent* report.

Methodism arose as a missionary movement. Wesley's focus was upon the Spirit of God burning like a fire in the hearts of converted individuals, renewing the Church, firing communities and spreading until scriptural holiness covers the whole earth. His vision was of the restoration and renewal of all things through grace.

That's the vision. We have the structure. We need the Spirit and the faith.

Bevans and Schroeder in their huge book on mission published last year begin with the sentence, 'One of the most important things Christians need to know about the church is that the church is not of ultimate importance'. This is a stunning sentence for two Roman Catholic theologians. What is ultimate for them is mission. What is mission? 'Mission is seeing what God is doing in the world and joining in.' We in the West have substituted 'Church' for 'Spirit' as the third person of the Trinity and in so doing have reversed God's understanding of mission. God has a mission; we are invited through the Holy Spirit to participate in it. When the Church does not join with what God is doing in the world then Church ceases to be Church and becomes a club. What some view as the decline of the Church institution is simply God passing judgment on nostalgic religious clubs.

Yet alongside this pruning activity, the Spirit is also creating fresh expressions of Church in touch with the culture of those who can no longer relate to traditional Church. We have some sixty examples of these in the Southampton District. Is the Spirit doing something similar to what happened when Wesley set up his societies alongside the established Church for those seeking full salvation? If so we as Methodists with our circuit system are better placed than most other denominations to pioneer these 'fresh expressions'.

If I had my way I would do two things. First, I would make sure that in every circuit there was at least one member of staff, presbyter, deacon or lay-worker, who having the gift of an evangelist was released from pastoral charge and given responsibility for generating a 'new form of church' either through chaplaincy or through work with young people. Second, in order to release money and staff for this purpose I would shift power from the local church to the circuit meeting and really make it the primary unit of mission. Given extra legal authority, the circuit meeting would then be able to close resistant churches, sell off the buildings and use the proceeds to employ and deploy staff in imaginative ways.

Spirit filled person.

As the Holy Spirit passes judgement upon the Church and pushes us in new directions we can feel a bit like Corporal Jones in *Dad's Army* who stamps around in circles bleating out 'Don't panic, don't panic.' God is punching holes in the institution because he wants to reshape it. We must reclaim our heritage as Methodists and remind ourselves that we were a missionary movement of the Spirit with a particular concern for the marginalized. Our historic emphases on 'assurance' and 'perfect love' point to an experience of the Spirit which demonstrates itself in burning conviction, inner motivation, and an incentive to journey in faith.

William Arthur, an Irish Methodist loaned to the Wesleyan Missionary Society, was one of the influential theologians of the nineteenth century. He was a President of the Conference, as well being Principal of the Methodist College at Belfast. His book

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The Tongue of Fire published in 1856 called for a re-examination of Pentecost as the source of power for mission. 'There is only one way', he says, 'prayer, prayer, all prayer, importunate, repeated and united prayer'. His was no narrow book. Like Wesley, he believed Christianity to be a social religion aimed at the renewal of society.

It is hard for ministers and church leaders to maintain a passion for God in a declining Church. There comes a time when one's energy runs out. This happened to me in my second appointment. It was the era of the 'radical Christianity' of Harvey Cox and the first bubbling of the 'charismatic movement'. In my spiritual need I sought God. Following an experience of the Holy Spirit, my theological mind, conditioned by endless reading of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* saw the defects of the sectarian and egocentric theology which sometimes went along with the charismatic package. Another theological framework was required; one which incorporated the radical and political critique of the sixties, and which also embraced the inclusiveness of Methodism. A Roman Catholic priest helped me. From beyond Methodism I have since learnt about the significance of silence, of contemplation, of dialogue and the importance of inculturation in our missionary engagements. Without Spirit we dry up. Without Word and reflective theology we blow up. But what holds both together is not our strength, but our vulnerability, for this treasure resides in earthen vessels.

So I return to Ezekiel 37, and the valley of dry bones. I do so because some of us, in our struggles to follow Christ, still carry hurts and are ever aware of our own frailties and failures. Some of us know inner pain too deep for words. There has been and there is a wilderness within, a valley of dry bones. Yet this place of brokenness is the renewing and restoring place of Spirit and Word.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything,
That is how the light gets in.

The waves of Spirit are beating on the shore. We sense the restless rhythm of unimaginable depths. God is calling us to launch out into the deep until our feet no longer touch the bottom. But we dare not stop here if we are to be sustained by the optimism of grace. Methodism is not finished. It stands on the threshold of a new discovery of itself. Come Holy Spirit. Disturb our complacency. Drive away our fears. Remind us of the faith we have forgotten. Breathe your fluid life into us until the living waters of Spirit well up, washing, cleansing and renewing. Then carry us on the tides of your love into the very mystery of your being.