

Learning from history: People and Movements that Changed the World

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, September 2006.

Part 1: The Celts (Mark 1:29-39)

Today we're starting a series called Learning from History. For the next three weeks we're looking at significant movements or people in the history of the Christian faith. We're looking at their lives and seeing what we can learn from them, and how they can help us in our own lives today.

And we're starting this week with the Celtic church. And one thing to note right at the start is that it is pronounced 'Keltic' – not 'Seltic', like the football club. The club is 'Seltic', but the people, their culture and their church are 'Keltic'! So who are the Celts, or who were they?

The main way we can trace where they came from is by tracing the development of languages. And the earliest group using what we now know as Celtic languages lived in central Europe, around Germany and Austria, about 500 years BC. They spread across Europe and when they were at their peak, a few hundred years before Christ, there was a Celtic empire across most of Europe. They were a warrior culture, who produced great tools and jewellery. They also had their own religion which was led by druids and was a kind of nature-religion.

The Celtic empire stretched as far as Britain, but eventually the Celts were forced to the outer edges of the British Isles – in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Northumberland, and also in Ireland. Mostly they were squeezed out by the invading Roman armies. But the Romans also brought something else with them, and that was a new faith called Christianity. By about 200 years after the death of Christ, there are signs of a Christian church in Britain which had a very Roman flavour to it.

This Roman-style church survived until the Romans left Britain in 409, and when the Romans went, a lot of the Roman Christians went back to Italy. All that was left were small pockets of Christians, particularly in the Celtic areas of Ireland and Wales. The centres of the faith in these areas were monasteries. And the main influence on the monks was the church in the Middle East, especially in Egypt. So they developed Christian communities, in effect, small villages, around the monasteries. And these communities developed what we now know as Celtic Christianity, with its distinctive art and writings and styles of worship.

And this Celtic tradition thrived for several hundred years. It produced the amazing Celtic crosses, and the illustrated manuscripts of the Bible like the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels. And the Celtic church had its heroes too. There was St Columba. He was from 6th century Ireland, and founded a number of monasteries in his homeland before he set up a community on the Scottish Island of Iona. There was Columbanus, who was a missionary from Ireland to France. There was St David in Wales, and Aidan, who was an Irish monk who went to the Island of Lindisfarne off the Northumbrian coast and set up a mission base there.

Probably the best known Celtic saint is St Patrick, because the Irish have adopted him as a national symbol. Ironically, Patrick wasn't Irish at all, and he certainly wasn't a Roman Catholic. He was born on the West coast of Britain, probably in North Wales. He was playing on the beach with some friends one day, when he was captured by some Irish slave traders and taken to Ireland. To cut a long story short, he eventually escaped but had an incredible sense of calling to return to Ireland and share his faith there.

So when we're thinking about the Celtic church, we're looking at a period from about the fifth century and lasting for a few hundred years till about the Norman conquest. Of course, the vision of the Celtic church and its art have stayed with us to the present day, especially in Wales, Ireland, Scotland and Northumbria.

But that might make it sound as if we're looking at a world which has mostly vanished, that it's like looking in a museum – interesting but not very relevant for today. I believe it's possible to learn from the Celtic church, and be helped in our faith today by some of their insights.

So I just want to run through four areas where I believe we can learn from the Celts and their faith. The first is their celebration of creation. They loved the natural world and they found a sense of God in creation. And if you read prayers and writings from the Celtic church, they're full of references to nature and encountering God in everyday things.

Why's that important for us to learn from? Because some religious people live as if they hate the world, as if being spiritual is about rising above the things of the earth, and seeing the earth as completely evil and corrupted. But that's not what the Bible tells us. Remember our first reading, Psalm 148, which is about how all the creation praises God, and how we can find God at work in creation. The earth is God's, and the Celtic Church reminds us to find him there.

Secondly, the Celtic church loved and celebrated creativity and art. We've already mentioned the Celtic crosses, and the amazing manuscripts of the Bible they produced. They believed that only the very best art would do to glorify God. So why do we need to learn from that? Well, some churchgoers are very negative about art. They want plain, empty churches with no banners or pictures or images. And other people feel it's OK to palm the church off with second rate art, tacky pictures or sentimental statues. And some church hymns and choruses are frankly not very good, as music or poetry. But the Celts challenge us to settle for nothing less than the best we can manage, for the glory of God.

Thirdly, the Celtic church had an astonishing awareness of the supernatural realm. The accounts of the lives of Celtic saints are filled with stories of miraculous healings and supernatural happenings. And the temptation of lots of Christians today is to say: Well, it's all made up. It's just pious stories which have been exaggerated down the years. And I'm sure that is true of some of the stories.

But I don't think we should just dismiss it all. After all, Jesus himself saw the world as a place where there are forces of good and evil at work. Where angels and demons are a reality, where God acts to heal and perform miracles.

I once read of a man who hated the supernatural and miraculous bits of the Bible. He found them an embarrassment in a scientific rational age, so he decided to cut them all out with a pair of scissors. But by the time he'd finished, his Bible was like a string vest. More holes than bits holding it together. He found that it simply won't work to say you can cut out the supernatural and miraculous and still have Christianity. The faith has to involve the reality of the supernatural world, the battle of good and evil, or it's not Christianity.

The Celts understood that. And the daily experience of the Celtic church was that the world around them was the battlefield of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, and a place where God performed miracles.

The other thing I think we can learn from the Celtic church is this: the importance they attached to community. The whole of the Celtic church centred on communities of people. They had strong, close communities based around their monasteries. A lot of the monks were married, and had children, and there was a daily routine of work, study, prayer and mission. They live and worked together, and met together daily to pray.

So the fourth thing we can learn from the Celtic church is the value of community. We live in a very individualistic society. The main value for so many people is ME First! People do hobbies for what they can get out of it, they enter relationships for their own fulfillment. People even go to church to have their 'own religious needs met'. That's all wrong. We belong to each other. We need to be working to build communities of love and care, in our society, and most of all in our church. The church is called to be God's prototype community, which shows the world how it can be done, a better way to live than the 'me first' attitude in our world.

So even though the Celtic church is largely a vanished world today, we can still learn from those great Celtic saints and ordinary Celtic believers. We can learn about how to celebrate and enjoy the creation around us, to use and appreciate art and beauty, to be more aware of the supernatural realm, and we can be challenged to work at building a strong sense of community and belonging.

Part 2: The Wesleys (Romans 5:1-11, Luke 24:45-53)

Last week, we looked at the Celtic church. This week we're onto the Wesleys, John and Charles, who're best known as the founders of the Methodist Church.

Now, to understand why the Wesleys are so important, you've got to know a bit of background. We're in the mid-18th century, about 250 years ago. It's a time when Britain's changing beyond all recognition. It's the start of what we call the Industrial Revolution, with the rise of the steam engine, canals and railways and the textile industry, and it's the era when agriculture becomes more and more mechanised.

Factories and mills are springing up across the country and hundreds of thousands of people are moving into the cities and towns, to get jobs. Often these people are badly paid and live in slum housing. So there's real poverty, with related problems of bad health and alcoholism. And as they move to the cities, most people stop going to church.

It's easy to assume that in the past, everybody went to church. In fact, in the 18th century, numbers going to church in the country are already low, and they fall even lower when people move to the cities. In the countryside in the 18th century, only about 10 per cent of the people go to church, about the same as today. But when they move away from their villages, even the people who used to go to church stop going.

So how does the Church of England respond to this new challenge? All these people moving to the cities, with great spiritual and social needs? The answer is: the church doesn't respond at all. It pretends nothing's happening. The clergy of the day are leading comfortable lives in their country vicarages, earning good salaries, on the tea and scones circuit. If you've read Jane Austen (or seen film adaptations of her novels), you'll know what I mean. Clergy were from educated and aristocratic backgrounds. Often, going into the church was a career move rather than something you did out of conviction.

The church is a part of quiet village life, very genteel and refined. And the sermons of the day are learned philosophical essays. In fact, clergy are very scathing about groups who get excited about faith. Lots of clergy denounce what they call 'enthusiasm in religion'.

And there's another very practical reason why the Church of England is slow to rise to the challenges of the new urban poor. It took an act of parliament to create a new parish, and that could take years. So there were no parishes when all these people moved into the cities. The new working people in the cities were untouched by the Church.

It's into this background that John Wesley emerges onto the scene. He's a vicar, and his father was a vicar too, in a place called Epworth in Lincolnshire. And Wesley's big concern is to liven up the Church of England – and especially, to make it relevant to the ordinary people who'd moved to the cities.

He can see that people aren't going to the churches, so he abandons the churches and goes to where the people are, in the marketplaces, the inner cities and the open fields and even the prisons. He travels 5,000 miles every year on horseback, at a time when even the main roads are dirt tracks. He stops at different places and speaks to anybody who'll listen.

And the result is that the face of Christianity in Britain is transformed, especially the working classes. The numbers of people with a Christian faith rises dramatically, and the crime rate in Britain is halved. Some historians even say it was the Wesleys who saved Britain from a Revolution like they had in France, because the working people channelled their energy into their faith rather than civil unrest. It even reached the stage

where you'd have miners and mill workers reading books from the early church fathers and discussing theology over meals.

The new converts set up groups known as Methodist Societies. These weren't separate churches, they were essentially home groups within the Church of England. In fact, John Wesley remained a C of E vicar all his life. It was only after his death that hostility from the Church of England drove them out and led to the setting up of the Methodist Church. His younger brother Charles shared the vision, and he became a hymn-writer as well as a preacher. He wrote 7,000 hymns, often using popular tunes of the day and putting new words to them.

So what can we learn from John Wesley? I think there are three main things. First, our faith has to touch our heart as well as our head. The Church of England in Wesley's day had lots of head knowledge; it had some very clever vicars who loved to debate and write. But they lacked passion. In fact, Wesley's own background had been like that. He'd had a very religious background and he'd even been ordained as a vicar and gone as a missionary to America, without ever having any heartfelt experience of God.

But then, on the 24th of May 1738, he's sitting in a church in Aldersgate Street in London. And he's listening to somebody speak on Paul's Letter to the Romans, which we heard part of earlier. And he has an experience which he describes as his heart being 'strangely warmed'. Some people say this was his conversion to Christianity, but it wasn't really. He was already a Christian, but his faith had never touched his heart. It was a cold, rational thing, like the faith of so many other vicars of his day. What happens in Aldersgate Street is that he feels God as a living presence, and that's the thing that fires him up to go out into the streets and pubs and prisons and tell people about what he's experienced.

So the first thing we can learn from Wesley is that a faith that's real, that will make a real difference to ourselves and others, has to be from the heart. Faith shouldn't just be a dry, formal experience for us.

The second thing we can learn from is his passion to share the faith he's found. Just think about it. 5,000 miles a year, in the days before cars and proper roads. The memory of his own encounter with God burned within him, and he just longed to share it with anybody he met, especially people who felt the church wasn't for them, and who'd been put off by formal religion.

And there's a challenge here for those of us with a Christian faith. What about you and me? We live in a society where it's sometimes seen as not quite polite to discuss things like faith, in case it's controversial. Well, that's the world Wesley was also brought up in, and it's that attitude which he had to question in order to become such an effective church leader. What Wesley found is that it's OK to talk to other people about his faith, and his questions and doubts as well. In fact, most people are far more open to questions of faith than you might imagine. People are always interested when a friend discovers something meaningful and helpful in their life. Don't be afraid to have those conversations.

And the third thing we can learn from the Wesleys is this: in a changing culture, the church has to adapt. Any church that says: 'Well, this is the way we've always been, and this is how we'll always stay', is a church that won't survive long in a changing world. Have you ever heard the last words of a dying church? Let me tell you. The last words of a dying church are: 'We've never done it that way before'. Now, I understand why some people don't want to see too much change in church. In a world which is rapidly changing, we want to know there's one place where we can find stability.

But this is precisely what the Church of England in the 18th century was saying. 'We're comfortable, what's the problem?' The problem was that church attendance was 10 per cent, and falling. And as people moved to work in the cities, it was plummeting. There was a serious possibility that the Church of England wouldn't even survive a couple more generations. Victorian churches like this one, Holy Trinity, would never have been built.

My fear is that some churches today are saying the same thing. 'We're comfortable, this is what we've always done, what's the problem?' The problem is that church attendance in many parts of Britain today is again well below 10 per cent and falling.

The sad reality is this. When you have a church that can only offer dry, formal religion, the next step is that the church dies and becomes a footnote in history.

And it's not just a matter of traditional versus modern. You can use tradition in a way which is exciting and creative, and you can have modern churches which are dry and uninspiring. It's about whether a church is open to God – and to rethink and change the way it does things, and a church wants to make sure it's relevant and welcoming to newcomers.

I once spoke to a vicar in north London. What he was telling me about his church was tragic. He said his church members were proud that they'd managed to block any change for decades. So nothing ever changed there. The moment a new person came in and wanted to try something new they were frozen out, and made to feel out of line. So they never stayed. The existing congregation liked it that way, because they got what they were comfortable with. What's sad is that that church will close in less than 20 years, when the present congregation have all died. What's tragic is that they don't seem to mind.

Churches that grow are churches that offer a vibrant faith, a faith for the real world. And churches that find new ways to express that faith. A church needs to hang onto the timeless message of the Gospel, but be constantly adapting and rethinking how it does things, to live out its message and communicate it in a changing world.

So the challenge from the Wesleys is not that we should all become Methodists! The people who're faithful to the example of John Wesley are not people who have a certain church label. It's people in any church tradition who believe we should have a faith that touches our hearts as well as our heads, people who're happy to talk about their faith, and people who know their church needs to be creative and constantly rediscovering faith in new ways, in a changing world.

Part 3: Azusa St (Acts 2:1-13, John 14:22-31)

We're onto the third part of our sermon series: Learning from History. We've already looked at the Celtic Church and at John Wesley in the 18th century. And now we come to a three year stretch known as the Azusa St Revival. A bit of background. It's 1906, exactly 100 years ago. We're in Los Angeles, in America. To be precise, we're in the industrial section of Los Angeles, at number 316 Azusa St. It's a disused Methodist church hall, which in recent years has been used as a warehouse.

And it's in 1906 that a quietly-spoken black minister called William Seymour moves into the disused church hall and sets up a Christian mission called the Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission. His pulpit is made of old shoe boxes, and he starts preaching that God wants to bring revival to his church.

And what follows over the next three years is just astonishing. Hundreds of thousands of people flock to hear Seymour preaching and thousands of people travel from all round the world to see what's going on in Azusa St. They have meetings seven days a week, three times a day. And every meeting's packed out. So what's going on? Firstly, hundreds of people are becoming Christians.

Also, people who're already Christians are having experiences a bit like John Wesley had. Last week we said that Wesley 'felt his heart strangely warmed' as he had a new experience of God at work in his life. Well, that's happening to thousands of people here in Azusa St. And some of them are reacting to this experience in quite dramatic ways. Some are falling over, some are speaking in tongues, and some people are being healed of illnesses when other people pray for them.

And the explanation that's given for all these strange goings-on is that God's Holy Spirit is being poured out again in power, just as he was on the original day of Pentecost, which we read about in the Book of Acts. The Spirit is being poured out on ordinary people, and they're being overwhelmed by the power and reality of God in their lives. So they call this new movement 'Pentecostalism'.

Other things are happening too: hundreds of new hymns and songs are being written. People are standing up and publicly testifying about what God's been doing in their lives. People are rediscovering prayer in an exciting new way. In other words, in Azusa St we see revival breaking out.

There's another aspect of the revival which is very important. You've got white and black people sitting together in church and you've got women up front leading. Now to us those things don't sound terribly exciting. For us, those things are quite normal. But not in Los Angeles in 1906. This is a country where one of the best selling books of the day is a book saying black people are not fully human. Every week in the South black people are being lynched by racist whites and left hanging from trees. Racial barriers, whites-only areas, are taken for granted.

So race is an explosive issue, decades before Martin Luther King and Malcolm X fought for black liberation. But William Seymour, this black minister, believed that the Spirit who was poured out at Pentecost is the same Spirit who can bring about reconciliation between blacks and whites. And in the revival meetings, that's exactly what happens.

Also, in a society where women had a lesser role than men (certainly in church leadership) to see women taking a leading role was also considered scandalous. So the Azusa St Revival very rapidly hit the local and national headlines. 'Shock horror' stories about how scandalous it all was. So many people got to hear about the revival, that thousands of people travelled to LA to experience it for themselves, and within 2 years the revival had spread to 50 countries around the world.

So the Azusa St Revival means lots of things. It means people becoming Christians, it means Christians being heated up in their faith and experiencing some extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit, but it also means a breaking down of the barriers which people had put up. Black and whites, women and men, are equal in God's eyes.

The Pentecostal Churches worldwide look to Azusa St as the origin of the modern-day Pentecostal movement. And nowadays, a quarter of all Christians around the world are Pentecostals, so that's a significant moment in church history. In fact, some of the areas of the world we normally think of as Roman Catholic are increasingly Pentecostal. There are now as many Pentecostals in Latin America as Roman Catholics!

So is all this Azusa St history only relevant to Pentecostals? No, Azusa St is something we can all learn from. Its lessons are universal. That God can move in power in people's lives, that God wants to break down man-made barriers and bring unity. It's as relevant to us today as it was back then, whether we're Pentecostal, Anglican, Catholic or whatever.

But also, Azusa St is important to the whole church because it forms part of the history of revivals down the ages. At different points in history there have been times when God seems to have worked in particularly dramatic ways. One's Azusa St. Another is the Wesleyan revival of the 18th century, which we looked at last week. There was the Great Welsh revival in the early years of the 20th century. In the 1920s and 30s there was a great East African Revival, where the main man God used to spark the revival was an English doctor called Joe Church. I know a bit about him, because he was actually my wife's great-uncle.

Revivals have happened at different times in history, and it can be awe-inspiring to read about what happens when God moves in power in peoples lives. But it's not just in the past. Revivals still happen today. One of the most dramatic has been in South Korea, where the churches have exploded in size in recent years. In China, despite persecution, the churches have seen massive revival and new growth. In many parts of Africa, huge revival is happening.

I was reading a book about revivals, looking especially at common factors between different revivals. What the author said was interesting. He said there are lots of variables in times of revival. But there are also some constants. The variables are the physical symptoms of people meeting God. Sometimes people fall over, sometimes people speak in tongues. But people might equally sit quietly and have a feeling of inner peace. Sometimes there are healings, sometimes there aren't.

But he also says there are some constants. The first one is that revival is always accompanied by people faithfully praying. Praying that God will do something new and special in the lives of people around them, to bring people to faith, to deepen people's faith, to right the wrongs in society. This writer also says revival is always accompanied by people talking to others about what God means to them, chatting to friends and neighbours about faith.

The other thing he says is that revival's always accompanied by a sense of your own inadequacy without God, that sense that left to your own devices you mess things up. In times of revival, people hand all that over to God and ask him to forgive them and to breathe his new life into them. It's called repentance, saying sorry to God and asking for forgiveness. So: prayer, faith-sharing and repentance. Those seem to be the three constants when God brings revival. You can experience spiritual revival even if 'Pentecostal' styles of worship aren't your cup of tea!

Now, in recent years, we've seen huge growth here at Holy Trinity. And most of that new growth has been people with little or no church background. So here's an interesting question: have we been seeing a revival here?

Well, revival certainly includes big numbers of people coming back to church. But it doesn't stop there. But what it's really about is people going deeper with God. To begin to experience God in their lives, to want to spend time with God during the week as well as on Sunday mornings. To begin to rethink life's priorities from the perspective of their faith. Real revival means not just a lively and growing church on Sunday. It means individuals having a new experience of God for themselves.

So we're certainly seeing exciting growth. But not yet revival. Still, it's my prayer that for many people here at HT, faith will begin to come alive in new ways in the month ahead.

I sometimes wonder if William Seymour knew what he was letting himself in for when he prayed to God for revival. I don't suppose he did. But God responded to his prayers in exciting ways – bringing both spiritual revival, and a revival of concern for justice and equality. I believe God wants to do the same sort of thing in our community, in our day.

But where it starts is for us to want it too. It begins as we say yes to God's priorities in our own lives.