

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Evening Service on Sunday 12th July 2015
by Revd Alan Haine**

Theme: Having Faith & Showing Love

using two of the day's Lectionary Readings for a Second Service, Romans 15: 14 to 29 and Luke 10: 25 to 37

What else was happening in 1865 apart from the building of this Church? This morning we noted that the composer Sibelius was born in that year (as also was the still rather neglected Danish composer Carl Nielsen) and we also remembered how Abraham Lincoln was assassinated that year too. But it was also 150 years ago this very month that the Salvation Army was founded by William Booth, or at least the organisation that eventually became known as the Salvation Army.

Booth was originally a member of the Wesleyan Methodist denomination, the same denomination which founded this Church. But in the first half of the 19th century Wesleyanism could sometimes be very narrow in its outlook and the ministers, especially Superintendent ministers, could be dictatorial. And William Booth was not someone who liked to be dictated to. He valued his freedom to do what he believed God was calling him to do.

Eventually he moved to another Methodist denomination called the New Connexion where the lay people had more say in the running of the Church. Booth became a minister of the New Connexion, but even this denomination expected too much of him when it refused to allow him to become a permanent evangelist instead of remaining a pastor in a Circuit. So in 1861 he resigned from the New Connexion and became an independent evangelist.

By 1865 Booth was in the East End of London, preaching to crowds of people in the streets. One day outside "The Blind Beggar" public house (a pub later frequented by the Kray twins), some missionaries heard him speaking and were so impressed by his preaching that they invited him to lead a series of meetings they were holding in a large tent in Whitechapel. The first of these meetings was held on 2nd July 1865, 150 years ago this month. And so to the poor and destitute of London's East End, Booth brought the good news of Jesus Christ and his love for all.

Booth soon realised that he was now doing just what God wanted him to do and later in 1865 he and his wife Catherine opened "The Christian Revival Society". Later this became "The Christian Mission" and in 1878 the "Salvation Army". The organisation of the Salvation Army copied that of Methodism in many ways including the idea that the ministers or, in the Salvation Army, the officers were itinerant and never remained in one place very long. Just as John Wesley had originally been in sole charge of the first Methodist preachers and placed them each year where he felt best, so now "the General" William Booth, did the same with the officers of the Salvation Army. Their theology was also very similar and, like John Wesley, William Booth believed that all men and women could be saved by God, and so all people, no

matter how poor they were, should have the chance to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Just as John Wesley began his nationwide preaching ministry by preaching to the poor of Bristol in 1739, so William Booth began his by preaching to the poor of London in 1865.

In our first Lesson this evening from the letter to the Romans, St. Paul speaks of his mission to the Gentiles, those who were not Jews, and how he had been proclaiming the good news of Jesus to Gentiles throughout the Mediterranean area. That letter to the Romans begins with a statement of Paul's basic theology, his fundamental belief about God, and of the fact that by God's grace all men and women can come to have a faith that justifies them in God's sight: i.e. that makes them right with God. This all stems from the righteousness of God that has been shown in many ways, but above all through Christ's death upon the cross for every human person.

Like John Wesley and all the best Methodist preachers since his day, William Booth and the Salvation Army officers ever since have continued to proclaim that same good news with the aim that men and women may come to a living faith in Christ: a faith that changes their lives and gives those lives meaning and purpose.

But, of course, if you go up to the average man or woman in the street tomorrow and ask them what the Salvation Army means to them, even the people who have no church connection will probably talk about the Army's charitable work: the way it helps the down and outs and others who are in need in London and our other big cities as well as in smaller places. This work also goes back to William Booth himself. In 1890 he published his book called "In Darkest England and the Way Out" which not only became a best-seller, but also set the foundation for the Army's modern social welfare approach.

In the book, Booth compared what was then considered to be "civilised" England with "Darkest Africa", a continent then thought to be poor and backward. Booth suggested that much of London and the rest of England after the Industrial Revolution was in fact no better off in its quality of life than those in the underdeveloped world. The book speaks of abolishing vice and poverty by establishing homes for the homeless, farm communities where the urban poor can be trained in agriculture, training centres for prospective emigrants, homes for fallen women and released prisoners, aid for the poor, and help for drunkards. It also lays down schemes for poor men's lawyers, banks, clinics, industrial schools and even a seaside resort. Booth says that if the state fails to meet its social obligations, then it will be the task of each Christian to step into the breach.

Again we can see many parallels to John Wesley and his ideals because Wesley also was concerned not just for people's spiritual welfare but for the whole of their lives. That is why he sent his preachers out with suggested cures for common illnesses, because he was aware that the poorer folk could never have afforded to go to a doctor. Wesley also created schools and opposed the slave trade because of his belief that God's righteousness means that God expects justice to be upheld (as we were remembering this morning).

But both Wesley and Booth never departed from their basic aim to share the Gospel of salvation. Yet Booth believed very strongly that you could not preach the love of Christ to someone who was starving or in other ways physically and mentally in need. In order to minister to a person's spirit, you need first to minister to their physical and mental welfare.

And Wesley would have accepted that too, I believe.

And in our first Lesson, Paul was implying something very similar when he talked about his Gentile converts contributing to a collection for their Jewish Christian fellows back in Jerusalem: "For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings". Spiritual and material should go hand in hand: if people are to be blessed spiritually, they may first need to have their material needs met.

The Gospel reading suggested for this evening, that familiar parable of Jesus about the Good Samaritan, also implies the importance of promoting people's material and physical welfare as well as their spiritual well-being. The two men who passed by on the other side when they saw the man in need of physical assistance were both people deeply involved in spiritual things. The Levites were the ones who served in the Temple, providing the music, but also looking after the buildings and generally insuring the worship was fitting for God, whilst the priests were obviously those who actually led the worship. But apparently for these two "spiritual" people, there was no connection between what they did for a living and the need to care for people's bodies and physical welfare. How different from the Good Samaritan who went out of his way to help the man who'd been attacked, even possibly risking his own life if the bandits were still hiding nearby. And not only did he give the man in need First Aid, he also took him to an inn and arranged for his after-care.

It is that same desire to care for the physical well-being of the poorest and neediest that we still see in the Salvation Army today and that has also been shown in Methodism when it has been at its best. In the old days some Evangelical Christians who were strong supporters of preaching the Gospel both here and overseas were also quite opposed to what they called "the social Gospel" where some Christians preferred to meet the physical needs of the poor and needy rather than preaching to them. In the last 50 years it has been good to see that many Evangelical Christians now see the sense in meeting people's physical needs and now regard that as a good thing in itself, a Christ-given goal. But they also see that doing this may also create a more fertile soil in which to sow the seed of the gospel.

Both Booth and Wesley saw very clearly that these two things should go together instead of being separated and the Salvation Army provides an on-going example to us all of the need both to proclaim the Gospel and evoke faith in men and women, but also to show the love of Christ by reaching out to those in need of any sort. And in his letter to the Romans, Paul is quite clear about the need to preach faith, but equally clear that real faith in a person results in a demonstration of God's love, what Wesley called "sanctification" i.e. becoming holier people whose lives reflect

the compassionate love of God as well as His truth and justice.

This morning I reminded those present that the Gospels in the New Testament are made up of sections which are each called “pericopae”. It’s interesting that the next pericope in Luke’s Gospel after the Parable of the Good Samaritan is the incident where Jesus visits the home of the sisters Martha and Mary (a passage set in the Lectionary for next Sunday evening).

You may remember how Martha wanted her sister Mary to help with the practical chores to get ready for Jesus’ visit, but Jesus praised Mary for simply sitting at his feet and implied Mary was doing the right thing in listening to his teaching. That does not mean that Mary should always have left Martha doing all the housework, but simply that, whilst Jesus was present, to listen to him was more important than the household chores. Overall we need to have a balance between the spiritual side and the rest of our lives.

I expect that whilst I was with you I told the following story, so please forgive me if I tell it again, but it seems to be something people remember. It is certainly not original to me because I have heard versions of it from several different origins. It concerns the graffiti on a wall in a University town. Amongst those graffiti was one that referred to some well-known philosophers (although I should say that this story is a light-hearted one, so don’t take it that these philosophers really did believe what the graffiti said). Anyway the writing on wall went something like this:

“To live is to do”—signed Plato.

“To live is to be”—signed Aristotle.

“Do-be-do-be-do”—signed Frank Sinatra.

That story may do complete injustice to what Plato and Aristotle actually said, but it reminds us that as Christians we need to be activists who do the right thing, who show love. But also that we should be people who are truly living, truly being, because we have put our faith in Jesus Christ. To be a real Christian is both about having faith and showing love, being and doing, “do-be-do-be-do” as Frank Sinatra used to sing.

Methodism at its best has tried to have that balance for nearly 300 years now and the Salvation Army has done the same for the last 150 years, the same 150 years that this Church has existed. As we give thanks for the anniversary that Marlborough Road shares with the Salvation Army and for all the good things that have been done through both these bodies, may we recommit ourselves to being those who both have faith and who love, who are concerned for people’s total welfare in body, mind and spirit and who seek always to do and to be the people that God intends.