



## **A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES : PAST PREACHERS, PRESENT INSPIRATION**

Whenever we lead worship in a Methodist church we are standing on the shoulders of giants. In past generations, the overwhelming majority of those who fed the Methodist people in preaching did so after a week working in the home, in a factory or office, school or hospital. These are part of the 'great a cloud of witnesses'<sup>1</sup> that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us we are surrounded by as we run our Christian race.

To draw inspiration from them is not to romanticise the past. In verse 4 of his hymn *For all the saints who from their labours rest* (StF 745), William Walsham How has these words: 'we feebly struggle, they in glory shine'. In comparing earthly tribulations with heavenly peace, he does not deny the reality that those who have gone before us. They had just as much need as we have for God's mercy and forgiveness, and the power of the Holy Spirit to sustain their ministry.

This session, prepared by Revd Dr Tim Woolley, draws upon some of their stories and is designed to last about an hour. It can be used in a Leaders of Worship and Preachers' Meeting as the CLPD<sup>2</sup> item, or as part of a study day or in a small study group. When we have looked at the lives of those who went before us, our hope is that we are inspired in the task to which God has called us – to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our generation, to the glory of God.

### **Outline**

1. **Introduction (10 mins)**
2. **Past Preachers, Present Inspiration (40 mins)** – what can we learn from three Methodist preachers from the past?
3. **Closing (10 mins)**

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 12:1 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Continuing Local Preacher Development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION (10min)

We have all been inspired in our preaching journeys by preachers who have inspired us 'from the front' or who have nurtured us during our period of training and since. At the beginning of this session it is important to name those people and to give God thanks for them

- Who are they?
- What is it about their ministry that has particularly inspired us?
- What have we learned about God and about the calling of preaching/worship leading from them?
- How are we similar /different from them?

Spend some time in prayer, naming these inspirational preachers and thanking God for them and their continual influence upon us.

For the remainder of this session we are going to reflect upon the ministry of some Methodist preachers of the past who we have not known in person, but whose lives and ministries can still challenge and encourage us in our own calling. Unashamedly, the focus of this session is on our own spiritual development as preachers and worship leaders.



10 mins



Flipchart or whiteboard & pens

## 2. PAST PREACHERS, PRESENT INSPIRATION (40min)

### Thomas Westell (c.1719-1794)

Thomas was a Bristol carpenter who was one of the original members of the society John Wesley formed there in April 1739. He was one of the first three lay preachers to assist John Wesley and was present at the 1746 Conference. Based in Bristol, he nevertheless undertook many extensive preaching tours.

Like many of the early Methodist preachers he faced violence from mobs and opposition from authorities; In 1744, on a preaching tour of Cornwall, he was arrested while preaching at Camborne and imprisoned at Bodmin. He also faced a hostile mob at Gwennap Pit. His tombstone at Portland Chapel, Bristol described him as 'a Pattern of Christian Simplicity and Humble Love'.<sup>3</sup>

- What words would you use to describe the desirable qualities of a preacher/worship leaders?
- Use a website like <https://monkeylearn.com/word-cloud/> to generate a word cloud of these qualities – or list them on a flipchart.
- How can these qualities be cultivated?
- How might we best support one another as preachers as we seek to grow in grace and holiness?



10 mins

Optional:



Internet Access



Computer

<sup>3</sup> <https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=2961>

- If you produced a word cloud, download it and print copies or email out for all in the group to receive later on as a reminder of the session.

### Elizabeth Ann Evans (1776-1848)

Elizabeth was a preacher for the Wesleyan, Arminian and Primitive Methodists and as the aunt of the writer George Eliot, is famously portrayed as 'Dinah Morris' in the novel *Adam Bede*. A staunch defender of revivalism and female preaching, she also exercised a powerful pastoral ministry.

In 1802, an impoverished young woman called Mary Voce was tried for the murder of her six-week-old child in Nottingham. At first the distraught Mary denied the charge, but after Elizabeth stayed with her in her cell, praying through the night, Mary broke down in tears and confessed her crime. Elizabeth accompanied Mary in the cart to the place of execution, where she faced her death bravely and with the conviction of God's love for her.

Elizabeth's ministry with Mary is a good example of Biblical inclusiveness in her affirmation, in an atmosphere of hostility, both that Mary was worthy of God's love and mercy and that receiving it could and should be transformative, even in the last hours of her earthly life.

Read through the following passages, perhaps printing out and giving a copy of each text to a different person in the group.

- John 8.1-11
- Matthew 19.16-22
- John 21-15-17
- John 4.1-30

Discuss, either in small groups, or altogether:

1. How does each passage portray the relationship between the comfort of welcome and forgiveness and the challenge of transformation in the power of the Holy Spirit?
2. In what other passages of Scriptures are the comfort and challenge of the Gospel entwined?
3. In our preaching how do we maintain a balance between comfort and challenge in the message we proclaim?

### Richard Cole (1836-1880)

On 8 September 1880 at Seaham Colliery, County Durham, 164 men and boys were trapped down the pit and suffered a slow death. When the rescuers finally got to the bottom of the pit they found a message chalked on a plank.



15 mins



Bibles



15 mins

It read 'The Lord is with us, we are all ready for heaven....We have a had a jolly prayer meeting, every man ready for glory. Praise the Lord, signed Ric Cole.'

Richard Cole, a father of five, was a 'packer' responsible for building up the loose stone to support the roof. He was also a Primitive Methodist local preacher who would have often ministered to his colleagues from the pulpit. Here in the tragic conclusion of his life he ministered to them for the last time as a dying man to dying men.<sup>4</sup>

The immense power of Richard's moving story is found in the relationship between his work and his faith and the fact that those who worked with him in his community knew and respected his faith.

- How does our work in our community inform our preaching? Note that work doesn't just refer to paid employment – being a home maker, a grandparent, the secretary of the bowls club, or an allotment holder are all examples of work!
- How does our preaching and leading of worship in our community inform our work?
- Who are those people we have contact with we work and how do they experience Christian faith in their interactions with us?
- In 19<sup>th</sup> century Primitive Methodism, part of the training of a preacher before they proceeded to 'full plan' status was to preach at an open-air camp meeting in their community. What might be the equivalent of that today?
- Thinking of the week ahead, in pairs pray for one another, holding our work before God.



Flipchart or  
whiteboard  
& pens

### 3. CLOSING (10 mins)

- Reflect together on the session – Share one thing you have helpfully gained from our time together.
- Going forward, are there more preachers (Methodist or from other Christian traditions) whose stories inspire you and who could be used for a similar session? Examples might include Francis of Assisi, John Bunyan, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Hugh Bourne, William Clowes, Billy Graham, William Sangster, Donald Soper or Rob Frost.
- Conclude with a prayer and the singing of a hymn such as 67 *This is the God We Adore*, 156 *From the Breaking of the Dawn*, 745 *For all the Saints who from their labours rest*, or 653 *A Charge to Keep I Have* (all from Singing the Faith).



10 mins



Flipchart or  
whiteboard  
& pens

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Milburn, Primitive Methodism. Epworth Press, 2002 p57.