

FEAST OF FAITH: BACKGROUND

Why 'Aldersgate' Sunday?

Methodists traditionally commemorate Aldersgate Sunday on **24 May** or the Sunday nearest to it, which was a day of significant change for John Wesley. Throughout his life, John Wesley captured his experiences in his journal:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."



"Faith is a work of God in us, which ... makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses, and all our powers..."

(Extract from Martin Luther's *Preface to the Letter of St Paul to the Romans* (1552), translated by Bro Andrew Thornton © 1983 St Anselm Abbey)

It was 24 May 1738. Wesley was almost 35 years old and had been ordained for nearly 10 years. The 'society' he attended was a Moravian meeting in London. Wesley had first encountered the Moravian Church during a difficult two-year mission to Georgia in North America, from which he had returned just six months earlier. During the journey, their ship had been struck by a severe storm, and shipwreck and death seemed inevitable to most aboard. What Wesley noticed was the calm assurance of the Moravians: confident in God's love and their salvation, they did not appear to fear death. Wesley did not have that assurance. He was struggling at this point in his life, when it was far from certain that the beginnings of a religious revival would take hold and flourish. John Wesley's experience at the Aldersgate meeting transformed his belief and preaching, ultimately leading to the formation of the Methodist Church. Without Aldersgate, Methodism as we know it today may not exist.

But Aldersgate is not just about the past, or just about John Wesley. His experience, so memorably and vividly expressed in his journal, demonstrates the difference it makes knowing God for ourselves. When one least expects it, even when things haven't turned out the way we hoped or when we feel we've heard it all before, there can be change. Change happens when we share the story. Wesley experienced this when someone else read to him Martin Luther's *Preface to the letter of St Paul to the Romans*. Just as John Wesley felt his heart 'strangely warmed', we too can be refreshed and inspired by sharing our faith stories with each other.