

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO HEAVEN?

## Worship, prayer and the Communion of Saints

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### Introduction

A religion which is not heavenly minded is no earthly use. A Christianity shorn of its hope of everlasting life has little to offer. A church whose standard hymnody and liturgical material does not encourage rich and full affirmation of belief in the communion of saints is an impoverished body.

The end of Christian worship (in the sense of its goal and purpose) is to be united with the vision of the Seer, who heard all the living things in creation crying out:

To the One who is sitting on the throne and the Lamb, be all praise,  
honour, glory and power for ever and ever.

*(Revelation 5.13)*

It is, admittedly, not always easy to be sensible of this. When we have just concluded a service of worship in which the scripture readings were delivered inaudibly by small children, the electronic organ turned into a radio receiver and transmitted Radio 1 for part of the sermon, the choir lost their way twice during an anthem, the sermon concerned itself mainly with the undoubted iniquities of government defence policies and the notices took a full ten minutes of the available time, we may indeed find it difficult to recollect that we are the saints on earth who, as Charles Wesley puts it,

...sing

With those to glory gone;  
For all the servants of our King,  
In earth and heaven, are one.

*(Hymns and Psalms 812.1)*

And yet, of course, this is precisely the kind of occasion on which we most need to remember that our worship, our prayer and, indeed, our entire Christian lives, have a wider frame of reference than the occasion may have provided. As the Report of the Worship Commission to the 1988 Methodist Conference helpfully observed:

... each congregation, large or very small, is also part of the 'great congregation,' the communion of saints, that great company of heaven and earth which is perpetually worshipping God. In worship, we are all caught up in something far greater than we can imagine. Such understanding

sustains the faith and worship of many small congregations, and could fire the imagination of all.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed it could; but only if those who lead the worship activities of local congregations share the vision, and only if appropriate liturgical material is available through which such an understanding may be expressed. Whether either of these conditions are sufficiently present in contemporary Methodism remains to be seen.

We shall first examine Methodist hymnody, as represented by *Hymns and Psalms* (1983) and make some comparisons with the *Methodist Hymn Book* (1933). Then we shall explore current Methodist liturgical material as found in the *Methodist Service Book* (1975) and make some comparisons with the *Book of Offices* (1936). In each case this will provide us with a perspective on the changes of emphasis which have taken place over a period of some forty to fifty years. With that background in mind, we shall reflect on what has happened to heaven in the worshipping consciousness of the Methodist people, and offer some suggestions about what might be done.

### **Marching to Zion?**

Nothing gets a preacher into trouble more quickly than choosing two hymns which the congregation do not know in the same service of worship, unless it be depriving them of a familiar tune to well-loved words. Which is to make the very obvious point that hymns are important to Methodists (though not to Methodists alone), and that for reasons which have been often expressed. As it has been put: 'Hymns may well be amongst the most influential and potent ways in which faith is transmitted to people, albeit often unconsciously; hence the importance of their religious content.'<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that, as Richard Jones advises us: 'You do not want the Christian subconscious to be awash with religious trivia, nor to be offering banalities to God in song. So you bother about the words of hymns.'<sup>3</sup> These judgments assume, correctly as I think, that a large part of the purpose of hymnody is to teach people to feel religiously and to enter into the experience about which they sing. Of the many and varied views concerning the purpose for which the Wesley brothers both wrote and encouraged hymnody, the most satisfactory is that of two American literary scholars, Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd (though they are not overtly sympathetic). When they write: 'Wesley's purpose was not the expressive *venting* of feeling but rather the evangelical *directing* of feeling'<sup>4</sup> they go straight to the heart of the matter. It may fairly be argued that if contemporary hymnody displays a reduced emphasis upon the life everlasting and the communion of saints (or indeed any other aspect of the catholic faith), we should reasonably expect the long-term effect to be that those who use such material find their Christian discipleship lacking that dimension. To put it very simply: because that area of Christian faith is not much sung about in public worship it may be assumed to be marginal. Preaching would have to work hard to make good that deficiency! We must not though, confuse cause and effect. Material which is not provided cannot be used; but it may also be that material which *was* provided was still not used. The reasons for that may be quite complex.

In the *Methodist Hymn Book*, hymns which specifically concern heaven (and hell!) and the communion of saints were, broadly speaking, to be found under three headings: (i) 'Death, Judgment, The Future Life' which contained nineteen hymns; (ii) 'The Church, Militant and Triumphant' which included thirteen hymns more aptly described as 'triumphant' than 'militant' and (iii) 'Funerals and Memorial Services' which contained six hymns. Out of this total of thirty-eight hymns, only seven

survived the intervening years to rate inclusion in *Hymns and Psalms*. I suspect this represents (though 'twould be tedious indeed to undertake the counting necessary to prove it) a smaller proportion of 'survivals' than for any other major area of Christian belief. Cold statistics do not, of course, tell the whole tale; indeed, may tell a quite misleading tale. The Victorian hymns have fared especially badly, largely, we may suspect, because the kind of imagery most congenial to our immediate foremothers and forefathers in the faith has, for all sorts of reasons, become extremely uncongenial in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Nobody, or so one imagines, greatly misses 'While ebbing nature grieves' (*MHB* 641), or John Mason Neale's free rendering of Joseph the Hymnographer as 'Safe home, safe home in port!' (*MHB* 977) with its curious mixture of the nautical, athletic and military images. Some, perhaps, could be found to lament the passing of F W Faber's 'Hark! hark, my soul! Angelic songs are swelling' (*MHB* 651), though in that case one suspects its popularity to be due in large measure to Smart's saccharine tune 'Pilgrims.' Lionel Adey is surely correct when he says that Faber's hymn expresses a 'cluster of wishes' and 'fulfils every wish save that for coherence.'<sup>5</sup> We need not defend faded Victorianism just because we wish to encourage hymns about heaven. But in just a few cases what we have lost is not faded Victorianism but powerful and irreplaceable biblical imagery. Take, for instance, 'Jerusalem the golden' (*MHB* 652.5-8), the omission of which is quite incomprehensible. Even the Words Committee of the awful *Hymns for Today's Church* – dedicated bowdlerisers – managed to find a place for a more or less intact version of it.<sup>6</sup> If it be said that a contemporary congregation would experience some difficulty with such obscure biblical imagery as 'With milk and honey blessed,' we need only reply that the same consideration did not apply to

For Judah's lion burst his chains,  
And crushed the serpent's head,

which has newly appeared to delight and enlighten Methodist congregations (*HP* 823.2). It is a great loss that we can no longer sing

There is the throne of David,  
And there, from care released,  
The shout of them that triumph,  
The song of them that feast,

and an even greater loss that the splendid expression of Christian confidence which ends the hymn is no longer part of our regular diet:

Exult, O dust and ashes;  
The Lord shall be thy part:  
His only, His for ever  
Thou shalt be, and thou art.

In those lines, as surely as in anything by Charles Wesley, can be found the Christian conviction that all is of grace, that eternal life is pure gift and that what we are even now in the process of becoming is what we shall one day fully be.

The 'lost' hymns, as we may call them, also contained a good many more references to angels (and archangels) than we seem to find palatable today. They also mentioned the martyrs a good deal. 'Jerusalem the golden' tells us that the halls of Zion '... are bright with many an angel / And all the martyr throng' (*MHB* 652.6); Joseph Bromehead's 'Jerusalem my happy home' echoes the *Te Deum* in saying that

‘Apostles, martyrs, prophets there / Around my Saviour stand’ (*MHB* 650.5); Samuel Grossman, from an earlier generation, refers to the faithful martyrs and tells us they have ‘scars with glory crowned’ (*MHB* 653.5), a slightly mixed metaphor whose passing we need not lament. From the Victorian period Christopher Wordsworth reflected the imagery of Hebrews 11.36-37 when he bade us sing,

Tried they were, and firm they stood;  
Mocked, imprisoned, stoned, tormented,  
Sawn asunder, slain with sword’ (*MHB* 830.2).

Charles Wesley tells us that those nearest the eternal throne can be described as ‘Sufferers in his righteous cause; / Followers of the dying God’ (*MHB* 833.1). Questions of literary merit are secondary here. What concerns us is subject matter. It does not appear that contemporary hymnody has a great deal to say on the subject of the blessedness of the martyrs. This is odd, considering that in our century and in some parts of the world, martyrdom has been a greater feature of Christian life than at any time since the early church. Is it possible that whereas previous Christian generations were able to look beyond the tragedy of physical death, we are weighed down merely coping with it? So we see the tragedy, rather than the glory, even of the martyrs.

The first word of Wesley’s ‘Rejoice for a brother deceased’ (*MHB* 973.1) strikes us as odd, or funny, or psychologically suspect. Yet we have included the half-apologetic ‘... and even for joy’ when describing possible Christian responses to death in our official funeral liturgy.<sup>7</sup> The hymn *could* of course have been italicized after the manner of some of the baptismal hymns, to enable us to rejoice for a sister deceased. But we did not wish it, and perhaps understandably so.

On the whole, hymns of adoration which give full place to the eschatological dimension of faith and worship, have fared rather better. Adoration, after all, begins at the point where praise sits silent on our tongues. Thus, for many of us, both silence and music (paradoxically?) bring us closer to the elusive objective of adoration than words can ever do. It is here above all that the heavenly dimension of worship becomes crucial. It is here above all that a religion which is not heavenly minded is no earthly use. For without the worship in heaven adoration is not only a frustrating thing to attempt, it becomes virtually meaningless. It is at precisely the point where human speech – yes, and silence and music too – become wholly inadequate vehicles for what is to be expressed, that we are bidden to remember that the adoration of God is the perpetual business of heaven, and that in our poor attempts we are assisted and strengthened by those who see him face to face, and, so seeing, adore:

Holy, Holy, Holy  
is the Lord God, the Almighty. (*Isaiah* 6.3 / *Revelation* 4.8)

Nobody knew this better than Charles Wesley, who often, as it were, popped in a reference to this union of praise and adoration between earth and heaven when he was, ostensibly, writing about something quite different:

They sing the Lamb in hymns above,  
And we in hymns below. (*HP* 816.2)

The Wesley hymn which enables us to sound this note most positively is, of course, ‘Meet and right it is to sing’ with its assurance that

Lower if our voices sound

Our subject is the same,  
the bold thought that in our earthly hymnody we might be

Vying with that happy choir  
Who chant thy praise above,

which constitutes something of a challenge to even the well-rehearsed chapel choir, and finally the entirely characteristic looking forward to the time when the foretaste will be swallowed up in the feast:

Till we in full chorus join  
And earth is turned to heaven. (HP 501.3 and 4)

This looking forward, so that the worship of heaven is seen as the (by grace) logical end of what we do in worship here is the major contribution that Charles Wesley's hymns make to the Methodist way of thinking about heaven. It is nowhere better expressed than in what is, for some of us at least, the finest of all Wesley's hymns. After praising God for the gift of the Holy Spirit whose work is to 'make us share the life divine,' he both asks for more of the Spirit's gifts and sees prayer, confession of faith, adoration, worship and service as the outcome of having received them. Then the proleptic element, the looking forward, the magnificent end to all that we both pray for, and do, here:

Till, added to that heavenly choir,  
We raise our songs of triumph higher,  
And praise thee in a bolder strain,  
Out-soar the first-born seraph's flight,  
And sing, with all our friends in light,  
Thy everlasting love to man. (HP 300.4)

The section in *Hymns and Psalms* devoted to 'The Church Triumphant' is curiously revealing. It consists of sixteen hymns, thirteen of which were in the *Methodist Hymn Book*, though eight of these were located in illogical places. The three hymns which appear for the first time are: 'Sing we the song of those who stand' by James Montgomery which was written in 1824, 'Ye choirs of new Jerusalem' by Fulbert of Chartres, to which allusion has already been made and which comes from the eleventh century, and Thomas Kelly's 'Behold the temple of the Lord' which saw the light of day in 1809. It would appear that no contemporary hymn on this subject worthy of inclusion was available. That simple fact speaks most eloquently of the neglect of this aspect of Christian truth in today's church.

By and large, it is from the eucharistic hymns that we may take most comfort. Hymns for the Lord's Supper have, in *Hymns and Psalms*, been increased in number and in quality. In this respect the new book is pure gain, even if just a few of the desirable Wesley texts are still missing!<sup>8</sup> One of the major scholarly re-discoveries amongst students of liturgy in this century has been the eschatological dimension of the eucharist.<sup>9</sup> In the *Sunday Service* this receives expression when the congregation thanks God for the 'foretaste of the heavenly banquet.'<sup>10</sup> At least six of the 'new' eucharistic hymns may be said to have significant references to a beyond-this-worldly dimension, and this is appropriate at the eucharist where the presence of the Risen Lord, now enthroned in heavenly splendour, is most fully celebrated and where, correspondingly, the church militant and the church triumphant mingle and adore.

The great eucharistic hymn of W C Dix, 'Alleluia! Sing to Jesus' (HP 592)

presupposes the union of heaven and earth in the Lord who has earth for his footstool and heaven for his throne. Johann Franck's 'Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness' (HP 606) refers not only to 'food from heaven' but to being received as a 'guest in heaven,' in a manner not wholly unlike George Herbert's 'Love' with which it is roughly contemporary (Herbert 1633, Franck 1649). If Dix and Franck, along with Wesley's 'How happy are thy servants, Lord' (HP 609), with its reference in the final stanza to the ties of Christian fellowship being even closer when we reach heaven, belong to former generations, three other hymns encourage us to take heart and show that some contemporary writers have not entirely forgotten heaven, even if they remember it in this, rather than other, contexts. Fred Pratt Green's 'An Upper Room did our Lord prepare' (HP 594) picks up the reference in John 14.2 which tells us that there are many rooms in our Father's house. 'Reap me the earth' (HP 623) by 'Peter Icarus' and dating from 1970, celebrates God's lordship in this present world, but encouragingly reminds us that at the end we shall bring our offerings to God as the one 'to whom all shall go home.' Finally, that fine hymn by G W Briggs, 'Come, risen Lord, and deign to be our guest' (HP 605), whilst firmly rooted in the communion of the faithful with each other on earth, and celebrating the presence of Christ the host, does not forget that we also have communion 'With all thy saints on earth and saints at rest.'

This brief – and far from exhaustive – survey of hymnody might suggest both gains and losses. On the whole, the loss appears to outweigh the gain. What has gone, largely, is the cluster of imagery which sees heaven as our 'home.' The imagery of hymnody, as of liturgy in general, understandably takes much of its colouring and direction from the social background of the age in which it is written. What is appropriate in one generation may become wholly unusable in another. Thus, the Victorian hymns of heaven show our ancestors, for all their creative activism, as deeply preoccupied with their weariness and need for rest.<sup>11</sup> Even the biblical imagery of thrones, princes and kings becomes difficult in a supposedly democratic and classless age. It is true too, that the 'home' imagery was sometimes associated with the idea that *this* world is not properly our home, but rather a vale of tears from which we should be glad to escape, preferably sooner rather than later. The contemporary rejection of the negative aspect of all this is wholesome and welcome. We have learned now to celebrate God's world for the joys it brings. We have even rescued some lines of Isaac Watts which tell us, to our great and endless comfort:

Religion never was designed  
To make our pleasures less. (HP 487.2)

All of this is good. Nevertheless, there remains the persistent and ineradicable biblical witness that 'our homeland is in heaven' (Philippians 3.20). Far from inculcating a world-denying attitude in Christians, this ought to provide perspective, indeed point, to our world-affirming assertions. It is precisely *because* the human story does not end with what we call death, that what we are and do and believe here and now has enduring and eternal significance.

What is in danger of disappearing is the sense that

We are travelling home to God  
In the way the fathers trod. (HP 696.2)

We seem to have revived the journeying or pilgrimage image for the Christian life with great enthusiasm, but regrettably often it seems to be a journey without an end

and a pilgrimage without a goal. We have, with great enthusiasm, taken Moses and the ancient Israelites as our role-model, and sing with vigour about being a ‘travelling, wandering race’ who have to ‘keep up the moving and travelling on’ (*HP* 450) rather in the manner of an ecclesiastical removals firm. Far preferable, surely, is Philip Doddridge from the eighteenth century:

If thou wilt spread thy shield around  
Till these our wanderings cease,  
And at our Father’s loved abode  
Our souls arrive in peace.<sup>12</sup>

Moses was, after all, given the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey as well as a commission to wander! Another contemporary hymn on the subject of the pilgrim people is Sydney Carter’s ‘One more step along the world I go’ (*HP* 746), with its refrain ‘Keep me travelling along with you.’ One assumes that God is the intended recipient of this request, although the text is somewhat shy of addressing him by name. At any rate, the hymn does not even so much as hint at where the journey might be taking us. It is enough, it seems, to be undertaking it for its own sake. We are surely entitled to say that this will not do. It represents a wholly inadequate, even emasculated version of the Christian hope.

It was that highly intelligent Anglican evangelical of the last century, Dora Greenwell, who wrote: ‘Methodism is eminently social; its idea is that of journeying Zionwards in companies, gathering as they go.’<sup>13</sup> I think that is still the case, but the opportunities for singing about it with full-orbed biblical imagery are, regrettably, somewhat less than they were.

Because Methodists sing their faith and learn their faith from what they sing, it has been necessary to devote a good deal of space to changes in hymnody. But, of course, the official liturgies of a church bear a great deal of the responsibility for ensuring that the fullness of the catholic faith is proclaimed and celebrated. Methodists, being of sturdily independent mind and heart, do not always welcome the official liturgies of the church with full-hearted enthusiasm. Indeed, I am reliably informed that there are some places where the 1936 *Book of Offices* has yet to win complete acceptance. One can only presume that such places rely upon the knowledge and skills of their local ministers and preachers to ensure that worship does not become a thing of every passing whim and fashion, or subject to partial theological interpretation. No doubt they have been fortunate in those who have been stationed amongst them. But it seems fair enough on the whole to take the official liturgies as representing the mind of the church at the time of publication. Some attention needs to be paid therefore to the *Methodist Service Book* (1975) and comparisons made with the *Book of Offices* (1936).

### **One Family in Earth and Heaven**

This familiar phrase from the Intercessions in the *Sunday Service* (B9) defines the context of present concern. The variety and quantity of liturgical texts makes some selectivity inevitable and the discussion will be concentrated on the Lord’s Supper and the Funeral Service, paying particular attention to those additional and alternative texts which are supplied in each case. This will involve teasing out some of the possible stances towards the relationship between the church militant and the church triumphant. We shall try to distinguish between prayer in the context of the communion of saints, and prayer for the faithful departed, both of which are permitted

and encouraged by the liturgical texts.

However, before turning to these two services, we might cast a sidelong glance or two at some of the other services.

Neither the 1936 Baptismal Services, nor those of 1975<sup>14</sup> include a significant eschatological dimension. In 1936 the exhortation which the Minister delivered to the congregation closed with the phrase that the candidate ‘... may be a partaker of his heavenly Kingdom’ and the prayer which followed the parental and congregational promises picked that up by asking that the child ‘... may at last attain to the eternal Kingdom which Thou hast promised by Christ our Lord.’ The much shorter exhortation in the 1975 order likewise concludes with the statement that Christ will give the candidate ‘the blessing of eternal life.’ The prayer immediately prior to the promises contrasts darkness and light, death and eternal life in a fashion familiar to us from the oldest baptismal liturgies, and asks that the candidate may be led from the one state to the other. Eschatological interests are implicit rather than explicit in most baptismal liturgies, and both these Methodist orders are in line with that. Sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection along the lines indicated in Romans 6.3ff is the beginning of a work of grace whose ultimate intent is a sharing in the life of heaven. But since in baptism we are concerned with, as it were, beginnings rather than endings, it is perhaps appropriate to leave the eschatological dimension implicit.

Confirmation is, many would say, a rite in search of a theology. However, whatever particular meaning we are disposed to give it the element of pilgrimage seems inescapable. Here is a milestone in the candidate’s spiritual journey. Candidates are addressed, in the 1975 order, in terms which speak both of Christian growth ‘... in the knowledge and love of our Lord’ (A21) and of having heard the call to follow Christ. But apart from the phrase ‘for ever’ (twice, at 12 and 13 on A23) – which presumably intends to include eternity as well as time – and two fleeting references in hymns, there is nothing whatever about the conclusion of the journey. In this respect the 1936 *Public Reception of New Members* was very much better. That contained two specific and helpful passages on this theme. In the first of them, part of the prayer of thanksgiving, the minister said these words:

We praise Thee for the saints and martyrs of every age; for all who have kept the faith; for our fathers in the Gospel, into whose labours we have entered, and for Thy Church on earth in which we have our place and privilege.<sup>15</sup>

That splendidly defined the nature of the church into whose membership the candidate was entering. The lack of anything corresponding to it in the new rite suggests not only a diminution of our awareness of the communion of saints, but also a lack of concern for church history all too characteristic of the contemporary church. Perhaps the two are related! The second specific reference in the older rite came in the words addressed to the candidate by the minister at the conclusion of the promises; words which expressed the church’s prayer and hope for its new members:

... May He who knoweth the thoughts and desires of every heart ... so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace that you may daily rejoice in His salvation, and be ready to do and suffer His perfect will, that finally you may become partakers of His eternal Kingdom and Glory.<sup>16</sup>

It would seem, to put it mildly, that future revisions of the *Methodist Service Book* should again permit us to hope for such good things for those who publicly profess the

faith of Christ, crucified and crowned.

Unless you are Don Cupitt and believe (Oh dear, no, not 'believe' – 'think' perhaps?) that 'The idioms in which Christians speak of God's action, life after death, grace ... become daily more slack, sorry and shapeless,'<sup>17</sup> and that Christianity must become wholly this-worldly, you will have some difficulty in envisaging a funeral service which does not contain some reference to heaven and the communion of saints. It would be taxing for even the most assiduous of reductionists to find scripture readings both appropriate and entirely this worldly. And, of course, the funeral services both old and new, make no attempt whatsoever at such a feat. Both are splendidly suffused with the Christian hope.

To adopt the distinction made earlier, between prayer in the context of the communion of saints and prayer for the faithful departed, we do find some differences between the liturgical material in the two services. Both 1936 and 1975 provide adequate material for prayer in the context of the communion of saints; that in 1936 was perhaps marginally better. In the older order this came mainly in the two prayers which followed the scripture readings and preceded the Lord's Prayer.

Only one of them was intended to be used. The first gave thanks for all God's saints and prayed that we might be given grace to follow their examples and with them share in the heavenly kingdom. The second prayer began with the curious, though not unattractive phrase 'Father of spirits' and continued:

... we have joy at this time in all who have faithfully lived, and in all who have peacefully died. We thank thee for all fair memories and all lively hopes; for the sacred ties that bind us to the unseen world; for the dear and holy dead who compass us as a cloud of witnesses, and make the distant heaven a home to our hearts...<sup>18</sup>

In not dissimilar fashion, the third of the prayers provided for the conclusion of the service asked: '... we pray Thee to keep us in fellowship with all who wait for Thee on earth and with all the company of heaven...' <sup>19</sup> If the language is a little flowery, the sentiments are wholly admirable. Once again, we may note the inclusion of the Pauline notion that heaven is our home! In the 1975 order, the first of the opening prayers asks that we may have 'sure hope of eternal life' (F4) and repeats the phrase in the Declaration of Purpose which follows. The Thanksgiving praises God for the '... great company of the faithful ... who join with us in worship, prayer and service' (F13). These and other references are cooler in tone than 1936 offers, yet still, we may judge, adequate. Both funeral rites encourage us to express our hope of heaven and our belief that, in some sense or another, we have 'fellowship' with those who have died. In *what* sense we have that fellowship, how it is perceived, received and responded to, is quite another matter. This brings us into our second area, that of prayer *for* the departed.

There is not the slightest trace of prayer for the departed in the 1936 'Burial of the Dead.' Matters are very different with the *Methodist Service Book*. In the absence of marking symbols, such as we have in the *Sunday Service* to indicate which parts are to be regarded as normative or basic and therefore never omitted, we must assume that the basic shape of the Funeral Service consists of all the texts not preceded by some such phrase as 'may be said.' On that basis, all except one of the texts involving prayer for the departed can be seen as optional: that one exception is significant. In 1936 there was no Commendation, only the committal of the body. But in 1975 a

Commendation was introduced to precede the Committal (which then becomes a disposal of what we quite properly call the ‘earthly remains’). The wording is significant:

We commend our *brother* (\*.....) to your perfect mercy and wisdom...<sup>20</sup>

To commend someone into God’s love and care is, without a doubt, to pray for them. The committal of the body is performed not to God, but to the earth or the flames. The commendation of the person who has died is an act of prayer to God, maker and redeemer.

Some of the texts for ‘optional’ use spell out the implications of this in much greater detail. The first two of the Additional Prayers provided for use after the Committal contain unequivocal prayer for the departed, and the point is made even more strongly if they are used in church immediately before the Commendation, as the rubric suggests they may be.<sup>21</sup> It is in the first of the optional prayers following the Committal that we see most clearly what is involved:

Father of all, we pray for those whom we love, but see no longer. Grant them your peace; let light perpetual shine upon them; and in your loving purpose and almighty power work in them the good purpose of your perfect will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>22</sup>

The prayer is, perhaps properly, couched in general terms, and in the traditional language of the church when praying for the dead. By and large, of course, these prayers are not new inventions of Methodist liturgists; they have been borrowed from other sources.<sup>23</sup> But we may note in passing that this particular prayer strongly suggests that there is still something which God can and will do for the departed, that is, to work in them the good purpose of his perfect will.

Now the notion of prayer for the departed is not entirely uncontroversial, and so a few remarks in defence of what the Methodist rites now offer might be in order. Firstly, such prayer seems to be an entirely natural and normal instinct of the human heart. Most pastors will, perhaps with some frequency, have heard the question along the lines of ‘I have been praying for my late husband. Is there anything wrong with that?’ This approach has been beautifully expressed as follows:

Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter men. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to Him?<sup>24</sup>

Those lines are, of course, from someone currently being championed as a pillar of orthodoxy by the evangelical world<sup>25</sup>, C S Lewis. It is, in theory, possible, no doubt, that the persistence of such a deep-seated instinct represents no more than the survival of paganism and superstition in the Christian psyche. If that be the case it is strange that so many fine Christians of all generations have not spotted the fact.

Secondly, to refuse to pray for the departed is to give far too much importance to death. A central boast of the New Testament is that Christ has ‘abolished death, and brought life and immortality through the gospel’ (2 Timothy 1.10). But if death effectively cuts the church militant off from all communication and concern for the church triumphant, its power has surely *not* been broken? We ought not to allow the

‘last enemy’ so much power as refusal to pray for the departed implies.

Thirdly, there is the possibility – we can hardly rate it much higher than that – that refusing to pray for the dead is unscriptural. The problems surrounding the authorship and composition of the Pastoral Letters are as intractable as any in the New Testament, but many biblical scholars would agree in finding the references in 2 Timothy 1.16-18 and 4.19 to Onesiphorus as coming from a genuine fragment of Pauline material. It is, to say the least, interesting that in both passages the writer separates Onesiphorus from his ‘household.’ He sends greetings to the household and prays that the Lord’s mercy may rest upon it. But of Onesiphorus himself he writes, separately, ‘I pray that the Lord may grant him to find mercy from the Lord on the great Day.’ It seems likely that Onesiphorus visited Rome subsequent to Paul’s arrival in chains, became a frequent visitor but then died.<sup>26</sup> If it be objected that it is strange not to find clearer and more positive New Testament references to such a practice, it may be simply that it would never have occurred to the early Christians that such a practice needed any defence.

The objections to praying for the departed are, properly understood, to the abuse of such prayer rather than to its existence. It might be said that the dead need no praying for, since they are with God and he knows all their needs without our telling him. The problem with that argument is that, if true, it is an argument against praying for the living as well as the dead. The fact that God knows the needs of those for whom we pray does not normally prevent us from continuing to pray for them. This does raise the very large question of what we believe we are doing when we pray for others. In the face of some fairly formidable philosophical difficulties, some have exchanged the practice of Christian prayer for a kind of therapeutic meditation. This is no doubt exceedingly beneficial for those who engage in it, but contains the danger of turning prayer into a thoroughly self-regarding activity. It is adoration and intercession, among the traditional elements of Christian prayer, which counteract the tendency to selfishness. The difficulties of petitionary and intercessory prayer, though real, are not insuperable, so long as we manage to see prayer in relational terms.<sup>27</sup> It is also an error, and a very frequent one, to make intercessory prayer particularly specific, treating God as what Theodore Jennings calls ‘the candy machine in the sky.’<sup>28</sup> We should no more do that on behalf of others than we should on our own account. And, of course, so far as the departed are concerned, we cannot! The difficulty with praying for the departed is not that God already knows their needs, it is that we do not know their needs. Here it is noteworthy that the public prayer of the church has always voiced petition for the dead in general terms, and used the biblical imagery of ‘light’ and ‘peace.’ Essentially what we do when we engage in this kind of prayer is an extension of the commendation in the funeral service. Into God’s gracious mercy and wisdom we commend our beloved dead. In our prayers that light perpetual might shine upon them we, as it were, hold God to his promise.

The objections to prayer for the departed arise largely from the fear that we should be somehow introducing a notion of purgatory, with an apparatus of prayer as a means of securing release. That, of course, is quite untenable. The salvation of believers depends upon the finished work of Christ and the graciousness of God, not upon whether they have sufficient friends on earth to intercede for them at the throne of grace. But the notion that there is still some work for God’s grace to perform in us after death is anything but untenable. The insight of J H Newman is precious. When, after death, Gerontius receives his momentary glimpse of the Divine Glory, he cannot bear it: ‘Take me away.’ So Gordon Wakefield is right when he says, ‘The grace of

God will make us fit for his presence, partakers of the divine nature, to be one with him in the company of heaven. And he will not do this by magic... He will do it through a process of education, which enlists the co-operation of my own so feeble will, intelligence and love. There will be pain in it, even frustration at times, but all is of grace and on the morrow there is joy unspeakable and full of glory.<sup>29</sup>

If we may pray for the departed, there is also the question of whether they pray for us and, if so, whether we may call upon their aid. On the first point there need be no doubt. Prayer is central in heaven. The New Testament makes it clear that Christ is now the great High Priest who lives precisely to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7.25). We cannot, at this or any other point, separate the body of Christ which is doing the praying from the head who, as Augustine put it, ‘prays for us, prays in us, and is prayed to by us.’<sup>30</sup> As a distinguished evangelical of a previous generation expressed the matter: ‘... in the fellowship of the saints there is prayer in Heaven, and there is no logic by which the redeemed can be excluded from the ministry of intercession.’<sup>31</sup> The prayer which takes place in the context of the communion of saints rejoices to know that such prayer is also the work of heaven itself. Whether, or in what way, we may consciously invoke that work is another subject, perhaps for another occasion.

With all that in mind we turn, finally, to the eucharist. Here, most of all, we are conscious that we worship in the context of the communion of saints. At the central point of the eucharistic action, the great Prayer of Thanksgiving, the congregation bursts into the recital of God’s mighty acts in the *Sanctus*, words taken from the New Testament’s portrayal of the worship of heaven:

Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.<sup>32</sup>

Even if angels and archangels no longer figure in our thinking, as they did in the 1936 service, it is still clear that we worship ‘with all the company of heaven.’ And, of course, the final collect, to be said corporately, gives expression to the view that the eucharist is a ‘foretaste of the heavenly banquet.’<sup>33</sup>

In the *Sunday Service* ‘General Directions’ it is suggested that ‘special thanksgivings’ can be inserted at this point, but no suggested forms are provided, which is a distinct loss that requires attention when the Service Book is revised. The *Book of Offices* provided six Proper Prefaces, three of which (Easter, Ascension and All Saints) helped to strengthen the references to heaven at this point.

However, the real focus for consciousness of the communion of saints comes with the intercessions. It is interesting that intercession within the eucharistic canon does not figure in the earliest liturgical forms known to us, but develops somewhat later, through the Eastern liturgies. It has been suggested that the epiclesis in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus provides an evident starting point for that later development, functioning as it does more as a prayer for the unity of the church than as a consecratory epiclesis.<sup>34</sup> Be that as it may, the intercessions have become firmly established in eucharistic liturgies of all traditions (though in varying positions) and the Methodist rite is no exception.

The *Book of Offices* main order for Holy Communion (now included in the *Methodist Service Book* of course), uses the intercessory form which is almost identical to that found in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. In the course of this the following words are found:

And we also bless Thy holy Name for all Thy servants departed this life in Thy faith and fear, beseeching Thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of Thy heavenly kingdom...<sup>35</sup>

This text gives thanks for the departed, but does not pray for them, and it also encourages us to regard them as examples. Interestingly, the *alternative* order from the *Book of Offices* (usually regarded as having been provided for those who were suspicious of ‘the book’), makes just as much provision, if not more. The rubric which commends an extempore prayer of thanksgiving prior to the Prayer of Humble Access, includes amongst the topics which should be included in any such prayer, thanks for ‘... our fellowship with the blessed company of all faithful people, in heaven and earth.’<sup>36</sup> Those who, whilst using the alternative order, still preferred to use a set form of thanksgiving, were directed to use two short ones. The second runs thus for its first sentence (after which it continues with the words from 1662 just referred to):

We thank Thee, O merciful Father, for our fellowship in the blessed company of Thy faithful people, militant on earth, triumphant in heaven.<sup>37</sup>

We probably ought not to read too much into it, but it is interesting to say the least, that the alternative order twice refers to our ‘fellowship’ with the saints, contrasting with the failure of the main order to employ this concept at all. Considering the rather strong meaning which Methodists usually give to the word ‘fellowship’ it can at least be said that this order does not discourage a high view of the place of the communion of saints at the eucharist.

The standard set of intercessions in the *Sunday Service* (B7-9) concludes with remembrance of the departed in the words:

In you, Father, we are one family in earth and heaven.  
We remember in your presence those who have died...

and invites us to give thanks for them and to follow their good examples. In general terms this is very much along the lines of the 1936 order, except that a space is provided for the insertion of names (which is pastorally helpful). The word ‘remember’ is used. This is a tricky word, and its ambiguity may have helped to commend it to the liturgical writers in this instance. It may, of course, mean no more than ‘recollect.’ However, when used at a eucharist where we repeat the words of Jesus, ‘Do this ... in remembrance of me,’ and when specifically said to be remembrance in God’s presence, it may mean something very much more. However, for something more specific and less ambiguous, we must turn to the Alternative Intercessions (B24-31) which, culled from various sources, offer us the following possibilities:

- A: Let us remember all who have died, giving thanks expressly for all who have died in the faith of Christ.
- B: We give you thanks and praise for all your saints. Help us, strengthened by their fellowship, to follow their examples...
- C: Let us praise God for those in every generation in whom Christ has been honoured, and pray that we also, inspired by their example, may have grace ...

D: We remember those who have died:  
**Father, into your hands we commend them.**

We praise you for all your saints who have entered your eternal glory:  
**Bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.**

Here again, the leading themes are the following of those who have followed Christ, the sense of fellowship with the faithful departed (which in the case of Intercessions B we affirm to be a strengthening fellowship), and the simple commendation into God's care, which I have already suggested may be seen as an extension of what has been done in the Commendation at the funeral service.

### **Yet onward I haste?**

Our survey of the liturgical material, as with the hymnody, has shown both gains and losses. In some respects it seems that Methodism is not as heavenly minded as once it was. The sense that the worship in which we engage week by week and the worship of heaven are one action in praise of the Redeemer is certainly weaker in the Membership/Confirmation service and not noticeably stronger in the standard eucharistic rite. In only one respect – though an important one – is the *Methodist Service Book* an improvement over its predecessor. It enables us, simply and unfussily, to pray for the departed in a proper manner and to do so with, as it were, official sanction!

So what is to be done? Neither *Hymns and Psalms* nor the *Methodist Service Book* will last for ever, and we may hope for some improvements when revisions take place. So far as the hymnody is concerned, we can keep up a strong pressure for the reinstatement of some of the material which is presently missing. We can also encourage contemporary hymn writers to write good modern hymns about heaven and the communion of saints, so that when the successor to the present book is compiled there will be no excuse for it failing to include a good number of such texts. In a similar fashion, we can try to ensure that when the present liturgies are revised they are pervaded by a greater sense of the church triumphant than the present ones. Specifically, we can ask for some Proper Prefaces for use at the eucharist.

However, those things belong to an indeterminate future! What can we do now? Well, awareness counts for a great deal, and once we have become aware that an important part of the catholic faith has been somewhat diluted, we can take steps to redress the balance. Those churches which no longer use the *Methodist Hymn Book* (very wisely, on the whole) probably have access to duplicators, photocopiers and word-processors. Much, if not all, of the 'lost' hymnody is out of copyright, and it would be perfectly possible to produce a judicious selection to be kept in the vestry cupboard. One hesitates to suggest that such hymn-sheets might actually be pasted over texts in *Hymns and Psalms* such as ... Well, the task of filling up the blanks I'd rather leave to you! But at least they could be made available. We could also resolve to use the Alternative Intercessions of the *Sunday Service* with greater frequency, thus encouraging the congregations to acquire the habit of prayer for the departed and enabling them to discover that it is a perfectly normal and natural thing to do. Those of us who lead public worship might resolve that in our praying we will ourselves be more conscious of the great cloud of witnesses, and we could ensure that all prayers of intercession in public worship, whether extempore or otherwise, end with appropriate commemoration of the departed.

A religion which is not heavenly minded is no earthly use. May Methodism never lose its sense that we are pilgrims, on our way to a destination which will be home and which we call heaven. And may we never cease to sing with Charles Wesley:

Yet onward I haste  
To the heavenly feast:  
That, that is the fullness, but this is the taste;  
And this I shall prove,  
Till with joy I remove  
To the heaven of heavens in Jesus's love. (HP 563.3)

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