

The Methodist Legend of South Leigh

An Article in Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Ordination of John Wesley, Sunday, September 19, 1725

by E. Ralph Bates

Guide books specially written for the benefit of Methodist pilgrims in England point to the parish church of the small village of South Leigh (sometimes written and more usually pronounced Lye), some two miles to the southeast of Witney and nine miles to the west of Oxford, as the scene of John Wesley's first preaching.¹ A brass plate affixed to the pulpit supports them. They follow a long line of Wesley historians. Over a century ago Tyerman wrote, "Wesley's first sermon was preached at South Leigh."² In fixing the date as September 26, 1725, which was the Sunday immediately following his ordination, it is clear that Tyerman intended his sentence to mean, "At South Leigh Wesley conducted his first preaching service." Curnock followed Tyerman and added that the text was Matthew 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness."³ Telford accepted Tyerman's word as to place, but was content to give the date as "soon after his ordination."⁴ Doughty accepted both place and date.⁵ More recently, Dr. Green of Oxford has accepted Tyerman's word.⁶ Baker wrote more cautiously, "Wesley's first sermon was *apparently* preached on Sunday, 26th September 1725, exactly a week after his ordination."⁷ While not discarding Tyerman's conjecture—for conjecture it was—the problem of accepting it was hinted at. The approaching 250th anniversary of Wesley's ordination as deacon, and of the opening of his preaching ministry, would seem to be a particularly appropriate time to point out the problems involved in Tyerman's conjecture as to the time and place of Wesley's first preaching, and to present an alternative. Similarly, Curnock's statement as to text needs to be challenged.

The first of at least three difficulties in the way of accepting Tyerman is that Wesley's diary for Sunday, September 26, 1725, is completely blank. His ordination on the previous Sunday was recorded; his preaching appointments at Fleet Marston and Winchendon in

¹ F. C. Gill, *In the Steps of John Wesley* (1962), p. 34; Frank Baker, *The Methodist Pilgrim in England* (1961), p. 33.

² L. Tyerman, *Life and Times of John Wesley* (1876), I, p. 44.

³ *Journal of John Wesley*. Standard Edition. I, p. 60.

⁴ J. Telford, *Life of John Wesley*. Rev. Edn. (1924), p. 40.

⁵ W. L. Doughty, *John Wesley, Preacher* (1955), p. 5.

⁶ V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (1961), p. 69.

⁷ Baker, *Methodist Pilgrim in England*, p. 33.

Buckinghamshire for Sunday, October 3, were noted; but that intermediate Sunday, which Tyerman fixed on as Wesley's first preaching date, makes no reference to the momentous occasion.⁸

This, at a mere glance, is extremely strange. During the preceding week Wesley noted apparently trivial details, such as "treated by Ditcher at the Coffee House and Tennis Court; walked round the meadow; sat in the Coffee House; played two hours at tennis; sat at the King's Head."⁹ Could it really be that he recorded such trivialities and yet was completely silent about one of the most momentous events of his life if it happened on the Sunday following this week? Tyerman was aware of the difficulty,¹⁰ but was satisfied to make the conjecture. Curnock followed Tyerman. He wrote, "Strange to say, no record of the sermon or of its preaching appears in the Diary."¹¹ He added his own detail and named the text. This also would appear to be a conjecture. The silence is more than strange: it is almost inconceivable.

The second difficulty in the mind of the writer is that the Diary makes no direct reference during the week preceding the conjectured preaching at South Leigh to any special preparation for a service on that day. Admittedly, on the day after his ordination as deacon, he wrote, "Resolved to Review always twice a day." Also, the trivialities he noted are interspersed with letters, partly English and partly Greek, which indicate, in Curnock's view, that "Wesley strove at this time after literal obedience to the apostle's injunction, 'In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'" ¹² It was a seriousness of purpose which would treat preparation for a first preaching service seriously. But there is no reference to such preparation.

The following week tells a very different story. At the end of it the services at Fleet Marston and Winchendon were his responsibility. The seriousness of his preparation is indicated in the Diary. Curnock summarises it as follows: "He spent the . . . week in reading Watts, the Greek Testament and the Book of Common Prayer, in communion with the best of his friends, in prayer and self-examination, and in writing and revising a new sermon. 'Hide nothing' is the principal Saturday-night record."¹³ This is what we would expect before his first service, but it is absent from the week before September 26, the Sunday Tyerman conjectures for the opening of Wesley's preaching ministry. Its absence supports

⁸ *Journal of John Wesley*, I, p. 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Tyerman, *Life and Times of John Wesley*, I, p. 44.

¹¹ *Journal of John Wesley*, I, p. 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the view that the Diary does not record preaching for that day simply because Wesley did not then preach.

A question mark may also be placed against Tyerman's interpretation of the passage from Wesley's *Journal* on which he based his South Leigh conjecture. For October 16, 1771, Wesley wrote, "I preached at South Lye. Here it was that I preached my first sermon, six-and-forty years ago."¹⁴ One may ask if the words mean precisely what they say, or what Tyerman thought they meant? Tyerman interpreted "I preached my first sermon" as meaning, "I first preached a sermon." Notes on the manuscript of Wesley's first sermon show that he preached it on numerous occasions. Of any one of the places concerned he could have written, "Here I preached my first sermon." But of only one could he have said, "Here I first preached." Tyerman has interpreted the sentence in that limited sense and conjectured that South Leigh was the first of the numerous places where that first sermon was heard. Richard P. Heitzenrater, of Centre College, Danville, Kentucky, by a painstaking study of the varied contents of the first Oxford Diary and of other relevant material, has noted no less than fifteen occasions when it is likely Wesley preached the first sermon he wrote. Notes on the manuscript indicate that South Leigh was one of those places. But Dr. Heitzenrater's researches into the Diary lead to the conclusion that the date was likely to be February 12, 1727.¹⁵

It is easy to see how Tyerman could have gone wrong. Having interpreted Wesley's 1771 entry as meaning "it was at South Leigh I first preached a sermon," he turned to the Diary to discover the date. It was not recorded. But there was Diary-recorded preaching only two weeks after his ordination, and only one earlier Sunday when preaching could have taken place. That Sunday was blank in the Diary. It was an opportunity to put South Leigh in before the Buckinghamshire villages. He did it!

When the problems involved in Tyerman's conjecture are honestly faced, it would seem that priority must be given to Fleet Marston and Winchendon, and South Leigh must be deprived of its traditional distinction. In this way the Diary record is honored, the phrasing of the *Journal* is interpreted as meaning what it says, and the problems posed by Tyerman's conjecture are resolved.

The reasons for challenging Curnock's statement that Wesley's first sermon was based on Matthew 6:33 are no less compelling. It would be interesting to discover how he reached this conclusion. Was it that he had written evidence that Wesley was preaching from that text in the latter part of 1725, and not having knowledge of an earlier sermon, but "sensing" Matthew 6:33 as eminently

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, V, p. 432.

¹⁵ Wesley Historical Society *Proceedings*, XXXVII, p. 115.

suiting to a young man's first message, made a conjecture, as Tyerman had done? Whatever the means by which he reached his belief, his confidence in its accuracy was such that in the *Journal*, two pages before the picture of South Leigh Church, he gave a reduced facsimile of the first page of Wesley's manuscript sermon on Matthew 6:33.¹⁶ But Curnock had not learned that another early manuscript sermon written by Wesley had survived the years, and on the outside of the first sheet, added at a later date, were the words, "The first sermon I ever wrote. 1725." The text was Job 3:17, "There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest."¹⁷ Thus it would appear that what Curnock thought was Wesley's first sermon was in reality his second.

Important confirmation of this comes from another source. Again Dr. Heitzenrater's studies of the first Oxford Diary are illuminating. On a miscellaneous page is a list of texts and subjects.¹⁸ By the side of some of them is a number which would appear to be the order in which he used the texts in making his sermons. The figure "1" is before an abbreviated form of "There the weary," and the figure "2" is before "Seek ye first."¹⁹ Thus it would appear that there is two-fold evidence, in Wesley's own writing, that his first text was Job 3:17.

In transferring the scene of Wesley's first preaching from Oxfordshire into the neighbouring county of Bucks, it should be noticed that Wesley refers to Fleet Marston and Winchendon. There are two parishes named Winchendon and both have their historic churches. The one is named Upper or Over Winchendon, and the other is Lower or Nether Winchendon. There is no doubt that Wesley's afternoon service on October 3 was at Upper Winchendon. In 1725 the church was without a resident vicar.²⁰ It would not be considered fitting to bring a clergyman on a 35-mile journey to Fleet Marston alone, or to Upper Winchendon, but a young Oxford deacon, like Wesley, could officiate at the two small places in the one day.

Much that has been written by way of imaginative reconstruction of Wesley's conjectured first service at South Leigh could well be transferred to Fleet Marston. The "Oxfordshire lanes" Curnock imagined meandered through an agricultural country very similar to that served by the bridle tracks of Bucks. The Diary indicates

¹⁶ *Journal*, I, p. 58.

¹⁷ This manuscript is one of the treasured possessions at Wesley College, Bristol, England.

¹⁸ Wesley Historical Society Proceedings, XXXVII. Facsimile of page, opposite p. 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Oscar Moreton, *History of Waddesdon and Over Winchendon* (S.P.C.K., 1929), p. 127.

that Wesley made his outward journey on the Sunday morning. Like South Leigh, the parish church at Fleet Marston was a mute witness to a forgotten past in the varied styles of architecture incorporated in its ancient structure and in its furnishings. In all cases the congregations would consist chiefly of farm labourers and their wives and families. But Fleet Marston had less to offer than either South Leigh or Over Winchendon. On a generous estimate, the population of the 1,000 acres which comprised the parish might be towards fifty. The church was small and lacked the dignity which a tower gave to South Leigh and Over Winchendon. Parish registers show that even a century later many of the rustics could not write their own names. The character of the people was stolid rather than responsive. The fertile vale of Aylesbury, critics maintained, offered so much in response to so little that enterprise was discouraged. The low-lying lands of Fleet Marston, unsuited to corn-growing, called for a minimum of labourers, but in stock-raising offered good reward to the small number who were in possession. There was one large house dominating the scene. For the rest, Wesley would look on a somewhat forlorn scene and an impoverished people. It was an inauspicious setting for the opening of the most influential pulpit ministry that England was to see in the 18th century. A spiritually alert individual in the congregation might exercise a transfiguring influence on a remarkably dull scene: otherwise Fleet Marston offered the minimum to the young preacher.

Winchendon, in the afternoon, might have more to offer. The population of the parish was probably three times that of Fleet Marston and the church building was more impressive. Three fine bells hung in its splendid tower; the imposing structure was favourably situated on a hillside, facing a wide expanse of attractive country; and the furnishings were redolent of a prosperous past which stretched almost to the present. The carved pulpit, contrived on three sides out of one solid block of oak, was of pre-Reformation date; a traceried screen which somehow had escaped the spoliations of the Reformers stood between nave and chancel; pews from the 16th century offered seating for almost all the parishioners likely to be present together; the communion table and its railings embodied skilled craftsmanship; and on the chancel wall hung a silk banner, pennon, crested helmet and gauntlets which had belonged to the son of Lord Wharton of the Civil War, army commander, staunch puritan and member of Cromwell's House of Lords. That son had died only ten years before Wesley's visit. Fleet Marston church was beggarly beside Upper Winchendon. Yet the two congregations would consist of the same type of countryman, though the farm-workers of the higher lands of Win-

chendon would be more accustomed to the varied life offered by a more mixed agriculture. In addition, there were signs of spiritual neglect characteristic of the times. The parsonage at Winchendon had fallen into decay, and the owner of the large house near the church, himself of sturdy puritan stock, was absent on the continent, dissipating his substance on dissolute living. There was no other house near the church, and it may well be that Wesley received a more generous hospitality in the manor house at Fleet Marston than was offered at Upper Winchendon, where the lord of the manor was absent.²¹ But both places had already taken steps along the road which led to the present position, in which Fleet Marston Church has been closed and vandalised, and stands derelict in its overgrown churchyard, a solitary ruin surrounded by pasture land, and Upper Winchendon has become part of the larger parish of Waddesdon, with a service of worship on two Sundays of each month.

Such was the parochial context of Wesley's first preaching. His sermon had been prepared with meticulous care. Every word was written, from the announcement of the text, "In the third chapter of Job, at ye 17th verse are these words, 'There ye wicked cease from troubling, there ye weary are at rest,'" to the ascription of glory to God at the end, in the words, "Now to the adorable and blessed Trinity, the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost be ascribed, as is most due, all Honour, Majesty and Dominion, both now and for ever! Amen." Not one word was left to the hazards of the moment when he was facing the congregations.

The description Doughty gives of Wesley's sermon on Matthew 6:33 might have been written of that on Job 3:17. He wrote, "It was a pleasant, neat, compact and ingenuous little discourse . . . calculated to make such of (his) hearers as understood him feel happy and comfortable; a sermon couched in scriptural language, containing many Scripture quotations and adaptations, and full of good advice, but lacking that pungent exposition of the Christian faith that was presently to characterise his preaching and, metaphorically, to 'shake the gates of hell.'" ²² Two comments on Doughty's assessment may be made: first, there was more good advice in the sermon on Matthew 6:33; second, it was the exposition of the evangelical doctrines of the Christian faith which was lacking.

His congregations doubtless included those who had bitter experience of what he called, in his opening words, "the Miseries of Life." He emphasised "the misery of man's lot" and stressed that part of it which was inflicted on the Just by the wicked. He called

²¹ See Victoria County History of Bucks, and earlier county histories produced by Sheahan and Lipscomb.

²² Doughty, *John Wesley, Preacher*, p. 5.

on his hearers to see the blessed of the Just after death, as an incentive to meet the "burden of life" on earth, and a challenge to live "in holy conversation and goodness." His theme was unfolded in clear, orderly fashion, but not in language likely to be generally understood by his rustic congregations.

His theology was what the most enlightened of his congregation would expect, and expressed in terms they had heard before. It may be observed, however, that in describing the blessedness of the state where "the weary are at rest," he made no attempt to heighten that bliss by contrasting it with the terrors of hell.

Two brief passages from the sermon may be quoted to illustrate his theological viewpoint, his language and style, and his practical application. After an exposition of the "rest" which awaits the Just, he wrote, "if the reward of the Just even before the day of final Retribution will be so inexpressibly, so inconceivably great and glorious . . . what shall we say of the state of Just men made perfect?" His final application was, "Let us comfort ourselves with the firm persuasion that we shall soon rest, where the wicked cease from troubling, when oppressed with the sense of our infirmities or discouraged with the mortifying reflection that this body, however now set off with outward advantage or adorned with the bloom of youth and beauty must shortly be resolved into its Principles of Dust and Ashes; let us reflect at the same time, that God will not leave our Soul in Hell, but in His own good time reunite it to its ancient companion, and that then this Corruptible shall put on Incorruption, and this mortal shall be clothed with Immortality; Finally, that tho' after our Skin, Worms destroy this Body (Job 19:26) yet even in our Flesh shall we see God."

It was an odd text for a young man of twenty-two years, whose preaching career would extend to a full sixty-five years. It would have been more apt for his harassed father at Epworth, whose scholarly researches already had concentrated on the Book of Job for upwards of fifteen years, and whose life could have been quoted by the son, had he allowed himself to give personal illustrations, as a commentary on the first half of his theme.