What might John Wesley say to the contemporary church?

Outline of the address given by Revd Richard Atkinson, Superintendent, Vale of Aylesbury Methodist Circuit at Evensong 5th October 2025 St Mary Magdalene Church, Upper Winchendon on the 300th anniversary of John Wesley preaching here 3rd October 1725

Many would argue that John Wesley is the most important figure in 18th century British history as he turned the people's attention toward religion and, some would argue, we therefore avoided the revolutions that were taking place on the continent.

Reflecting on Wesley's legacy would need considerably longer to give it justice, but there are perhaps **three main points** we can draw. We also need to recollect that his coming to Fleet Marston and Upper Winchendon occurred 13 years before his "warmed Heart" experience of 1738 and the beginnings of his contribution to the Evangelical Revival.

One of Mr Wesley's primary points was to the importance of scriptural holiness. His studies persuaded him of the need to replicate something of the New Testament Church as the period up until the middle of the first century saw the church grow at a most rapid rate. Mr Wesley suggests that in the pages and wisdom of the New Testament the Church could find ways of improving its ability to relate to people and to offer the good news of salvation. Part of which would require the Church to look at what it did and to ask whether it was commensurate with what we learned from the New Testament. So, for example, the Anglican practice of people being ordained deacon and then priested later is not consistent with the New Testament and therefore Methodism adopted a pattern of two types of ministers of the presbyteral, ministers of word and sacrament and the diaconate, a ministry of service. The challenge was to go back to the wisdom of the early church and ensure that we were following in their footsteps. Most of all Mr Wesley was concerned that Christians should be avid scripture readers as this would enable them to live more effective Christian lives.

The **second** point we need to make is that John Wesley was passionate about the importance of preaching. To give us an insight into 18th century church life we can draw from Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice when the six Bennett girls were not allowed to inherit the family estate, and it would go to her father's nearest male relative. Enter Mr Collins a most odious clergyman who was more intent on flattering his patron than advancing the gospel covers.

The wisdom of Two Timothy where Scripture is depicted as being God breathed resonated with the early revivalists and in particular the call to preach the word. The Methodist movement built preaching palaces focused on the pulpit, they indulged in open air preaching going into some of the roughest places in the country to seek to persuade sin be left behind.

If we were to read aloud one of Wesley's sermons it would take about an hour and we need to remember that these feel more like preaching as there are no illustrations, so in reality his sermons might have taken longer. To the modern church Mr Wesley would invite us to open the scriptures, to have its wisdom proclaimed and not be like Mr Collins who was more intent on delivering a message his patron would approve of, the preaching should not be a matter of how many minutes but of taking time to explore what needs to be shared.

My **final** thought is about the importance of reasonable enthusiasm. Methodists love to sing; it is a way we express our theology. The hope is that we can take some of this excitement out into the world and show the way in which faith is exciting, dynamic and very much alive. The saying goes that Methodism was born in song, it was one of the ways in which the Wesley brothers sought to encourage people to hear the wisdom of God.

The heart of the Methodist movement was about drawing on the wisdom of Scripture to allow us to more effectively share our faith, to become reasonable enthusiasts and seek to share the excitement of what we have discovered.