

Where has all the passion gone?

*"Those who worship today still do so with faith,
though often without the fervour
... of their predecessors."*

A week ago, Elma and I paid a visit to Beamish, the famous North of England Open-Air Museum, situated only three or four miles from where we live (the tickets we had were valid for a year, and so we decided to pay one last visit to the museum the day before they expired!)

The words quoted above were written by Peter Lewis, the museum's director, in an introductory article to a new booklet on the old Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, situated within the museum's grounds. The director admits to being 'a lapsed Baptist', which makes his words all the more poignant. It is clear that he senses something is lacking in many chapels (and churches) today.

We read that, on the first Easter afternoon, Clopas and his companion felt their "*hearts burning within us*" as the risen Lord Jesus Christ "*opened the Scriptures to us*" [Luke 24.32]. Their hearts were set on fire to such an extent that, once Jesus had departed from their home, they *got up and returned at once to Jerusalem* to tell the rest of the disciples about their encounter with him.

When they arrived, they found the disciples exclaiming excitedly to one another, "*It's true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon*" [Luke 24.33-34].

John tells us that several days later, after the disciples had spent a hard and unproductive night fishing on the Sea of Galilee, he recognised Jesus standing on the shoreline. "*It is the Lord!*" he exclaimed, excitedly; and *as soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him and jumped into the water* to swim for the shoreline, about 100 metres away, such was Peter's enthusiasm to be with his risen Lord and Saviour [John 21.7].

These stories remind us that, if real fervour is to return to our faith and worship, it must begin with **a renewed passion for Jesus himself**, such as the first disciples had after our Lord's resurrection.

We sometimes sing Graham Kendrick's moving song of true adoration and devotion:

*We are here to praise you, lift our hearts, and sing.
We are here to give you the best that we can bring.
And it is our love, rising from our hearts –
everything within us cries: "Abba, Father!"
Help us now to give you pleasure and delight
- heart and mind and will that say,
"I love you, Lord!"*

A real sense of fervour will return to our church life and worship when we are determined to give Jesus *the best that we can bring* in our worship of him, which includes our attentiveness to his Word and our enthusiasm to pray for the needs of others, as well as singing our favourite songs with gusto!

A real sense of fervour will return to our church life and worship when a deep sense of *love* for Jesus *rises from our hearts*, when *everything within us cries out* in appreciation of God our Father. We will give him *pleasure and delight* when we *love* his Son, whom he has made *Lord* of all, with all our *heart, and mind, and will*.

Some more perceptive insights

Peter Lewis provides his readers with a number of other perceptive insights into religious life today in his introduction to the booklet on Beamish's Chapel.

- He points out that *more people attend church services in the UK over a typical weekend than attend football matches* – though you would never know that by reading a Monday morning newspaper or watching the Sunday evening news on television. Is it because there is nothing noteworthy happening in British churches for the media to report? If not, why not! Jesus spoke of us *receiving power when the Holy Spirit comes on you* [Acts 1.8]. So, **what's happening to all that power that he promised us?** What are we doing with it? Why isn't it attracting the attention of the media, in the same way that football matches do?
- Peter Lewis also points out that *in the 20th century, traditional nonconformity* (as practised by Methodists and Baptists, and the like) *declined in both numbers and influence*. There are now

more practicing Moslems in Britain than there are Methodists. So, have today's nonconformists, the inheritors of the Chapel tradition, noticed yet that the 'enthusiasm' and energy that marked their own origins, is now being exercised by others? (Thomas Arnold, the famous author of *Tom Brown's School Days* and the headmaster of the prestigious Rugby School, dismissed Methodist worship as mere 'enthusiasm' - oh, that we might have more of it today!). Church attendance in Britain is in decline for all the major denominations; but **there is growth in many of the newer church streams. Why is this so, and what can we learn from them?**

- And here is another perceptive comment from Peter Lewis. *For nonconformists, 'our' chapel is a close, sometimes even a closed, community. This tight congregational unity was, and still is, both the strength and weakness of dissenters. It can, like the best of family life, create a deep fellowship; but it can also, like the worst of family life, descend into bitter faction. Sadly, Peter Lewis writes, "I would myself admit to being a lapsed Baptist, who latterly wrestled with membership of the United Reformed Church. Finding it far from reformed and rarely united, I drifted away."* Whenever I read words like that, it makes me pray the more fervently, "**Lord, bring us nearer to what a church should be,**" to borrow a phrase from Timothy Dudley Smith's powerful hymn.

*Lord of the church, we pray for our renewing;
Christ over all, our undivided aim;
Fire of the Spirit, burn for our enduing,
Wind of the Spirit, fan the living flame!
We turn to Christ amid our fear and failing,
The will that lacks the courage to be free,
The weary labours, all but unavailing,
To bring us nearer what a church should be.*

*Lord of the Church, we seek a Father's blessing,
A true repentance and a faith restored,
A swift obedience and a new possessing,
Filled with the Holy Spirit of the Lord!
We turn to Christ from all our restless striving,
Unnumbered voices with a single prayer -
The living water for our souls' reviving,*

*In Christ to live, and love, and serve, and care.
Lord of the Church, we long for our uniting,
True to one calling, by one vision stirred;
One cross proclaiming and one creed reciting,
One in the truth of Jesus and His Word!
So lead us on, 'til toil and trouble ended,
One Church triumphant one new song shall sing,
To praise His glory, risen and ascended,
Christ over all, the everlasting King!*

The Wesleyan Chapel built in Beamish in 1854 was designed to seat 160 people; it was enlarged in 1876 to accommodate even more people. But in 1903, the foundation stone was laid for a building designed to hold 350 people, such was the demand for seats in Methodist Chapels around the end of the 19th century and at the start of the 20th century. Yet within 80 years of the new Chapel's opening (a period covering barely three generations), it had become redundant. Its dwindling congregation made it no longer viable. The grandchildren of those who had so proudly provided funds for the new building no long attended services themselves; and so, the chapel closed its doors to the public and became a museum piece instead. What a sombre lesson there is in that! Whenever spiritual fervour is lost, a building intended for dynamic mission may become a museum piece instead - or a carpet warehouse or café; or worse still, it may end up as a pile of rubble for a builder's hardcore base.

Jesus warned the great church in Ephesus,
"You have forsaken your first love.
*Remember the height from which you have fallen!
Repent and do the things you did at first.
If you do not repent, I will come to you
and remove your lampstand from its place."*
[Revelation 2.4-5]

No wonder Paul urges us, in Romans 12.11, *never be lacking in zeal, but **keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.*** This verse reminds us that our service for the Lord is never enough. *There must also be a real fervour for Jesus himself!*

A Date for the Diary

Monday 30th May, 12 noon - 2.00pm. Bank Holiday Barbecue @ the Hunts, in aid of IREF(UK); all welcome.

David Hunt