

## WEY VALLEY – WEEKLY CIRCUIT LETTER – 29 November 2023

Barrie Tabraham

### *‘A Happy Grizzle!’*

The title of this short reflection might seem to be an oxymoron – a self-contradiction, if you will. My computer dictionary tells me that ‘Oxymorons may seem illogical at first, but in context they usually make sense.’ I will do my best not to disappoint you!

At my age, I am supposed to have actually passed the ‘grumpy old man’ stage in life, and reached the age of ‘acquiescence’, when I am expected to exercise limitless patience and accept things uncritically. Well, it’s tempting to take on the role of a cuddly old teddy-bear, but that doesn’t mean that we should divest ourselves of our critical faculties. A great Methodist once said that “*a person has no right to lurk in the bosom of God, simply because his thinking gives him a headache*” – a wonderfully colourful picture of what I mean!

So – a recent example!

It’s a hymn I sang the other Sunday (*Singing the Faith* 58), which has a beautiful tune written by the authors of the lyrics, Robert and Dawn Critchley. You’d probably categorise it as modern, but not contemporary, and I’ve sung it a number of times . . . until on this occasion I started really thinking about the last line of each verse:

#### ***Singing what a faithful God have I.***

I know I may be in danger of splitting hairs, but while I want to praise God for being so faithful, I’m not sure I’m so comfortable with the phrase ‘**have I**’. The trouble with it is that it puts the relationship which we have with God ‘the wrong way round’, as it were, and makes me, rather than God, the active subject. I hope you can follow me here, as it’s difficult to put into words, but another way of looking at it is the way the late **Dr Donald English** put it.

He always used to speak of God being ‘**transcendent and immanent**’. That is to say, the God who is the Lord of the universe, who ‘gave all worlds that are, and are to be’, whose hands ‘flung stars into space’, is also closer to us than mind, or memory, or breath itself, and is the one who counts the very hairs on our heads. Both visions or understandings of God must be held together – perhaps in tension – but we should never over-emphasise either aspect. To think of God only as transcendent can make him remote and unapproachable, our faith becoming a matter of following a system of rules in obedience to a distant (and unapproachable) deity.

However, over-emphasising his immanence can lead to inappropriate familiarity and a tendency to ‘domesticate’ God. **Colin Morris**, in his wonderful little gem, *A Week in the Life of God*, warns about this, and writes with delightful wit:

*Let my children beware when they begin to treat me like their old pal upstairs. It’s not much fun being turned into a pillar of salt. (p. 60)*

One of my ministerial friends used to call the same treatment of our Saviour Jesus Christ as the ‘Jesus, be my boyfriend’ approach!

And so, to sing ‘*What a faithful God have I*’ (my underlining), in my humble opinion, suggests that we can in some way ‘possess’ God. Now I know what some of you may be thinking: ‘What

about some of the intimate words that Charles Wesley put into his hymns?’ My honest answer would be (even allowing for my bias towards ‘CW’) is that the younger Wesley’s theology stands up to the sharpest scrutiny! So, take for example, one of his best-known hymns – and one that his brother John altered because he felt it was too ‘emotional’ in places – *Jesu, lover of my soul* (*Singing the Faith* 355). There is, of course, great intimacy in this, but the emphasis is upon God’s love for us, and our response to his.

I’m not suggesting for one moment that Robert and Dawn Critchley are asking us to ‘privatise’ God, as it were. It’s just that I prefer hymnwriters to help me express in worship the adoration and love that I offer in response to all that God in Christ has done for us all.

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**A Prayer:** Loving God, forgive us if, when we try to put into words our devotion to you, we ever lapse into over-familiarity and lose the sense of awe and mystery that is part of our worship. Help us to reach out our hands to you as our heavenly Father, trembling with wonder at your power and majesty, yet daring to draw near to you, to rest our weary souls in your loving arms. Amen.

Every blessing to you all,

*Barrie Tabraham*

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## **Resources/Good News**

### **Out of the Ordinary Christmas film 2023**

The Methodist Church has launched its 2023 Christmas film, *Out of the Ordinary*.

The film features the emotional, relatable story of a young mother facing financial struggles at Christmas, who, during a visit to a Methodist church, is transported to an animated, angelic world where she discovers that she is worthy to both love and to be loved.

Watch the film here: [Out of the Ordinary Christmas Film](#)

### **Upcoming Events**

- ❖ Christingle Service at 5.30pm at Trinity, Woking on Friday 1 December
- ❖ Carols For All at 7.00pm at West Horsley on Saturday 2 December
- ❖ Christingle Party at 6.30pm at Godalming on Saturday 2 December
- ❖ Advent Carol Service at 6.30pm at Mellow on Sunday 3 December
- ❖ Circuit Prayer Vigil taking place on 2/3 December.

## **Advent Reflections**

Throughout Advent we are sharing daily email reflections that explore our theme Out of the Ordinary. Sign up to receive these each day and discover a rhythm of reflection during Advent, from now through to Christmas Eve.

Sign up for the Advent reflection emails here:

[An Out of the Ordinary Christmas \(methodist.org.uk\)](https://methodist.org.uk)