

A Chapel, a Novel, and the Word of God.

Virginia Brookes

Abstract: This essay attempts to portray two artefacts, the Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Oxford, and the novel *Adam Bede* by George Eliot. These two very different objects will be considered in the light of one another and connections will be sought to bring the two together where possible. The connecting link may only be in Methodism itself, but other connections will be sought where possible.

The Wesley Memorial Methodist Church stands in New Inn Hall Street, Oxford. Looking Westward down St. Michael Street from Cornmarket its imposing spire, the largest in Oxford, is framed between the ends of this street, making the building stand out as one of some importance. The church was opened on Friday 11th October 1878 by Dr J. H. Rigg, President of Conference, almost a hundred years after the death of the charismatic preacher and founder of Methodism, John Wesley. It was designed by the architect Charles Bell, and the builder was Joshua Sym, the total cost of the building being £13,000. 8s.2d. Although the building followed the conventional Gothic style, there is originality in some of its features, for example the capitals of the arcade pillars, carved by Henry Frith of Gloucester, depict twelve different English plants and a window at the back of the gallery shows flowers of the English countryside. The two other stained glass windows in the gallery depict the risen Christ and Faith, Hope and Charity and the rose window at the west end shows roses and lilies.¹ There is a striking modern font, communion table, lectern and reading desk. Today the church is a bright and vibrant place, very much the thriving place it has always been throughout its several relocations. The old cramped pews have gone, to be replaced by a semi-circular array of comfortable chairs suitable for services, lectures and concerts. The old massive pulpit has gone and the organ, first built in 1878, was completely rebuilt in 1993 and is now a very fine one indeed. Worship there feels remote from Wesley's open-air meetings to which he had to ride many, many miles on horseback to deliver his message which is still the one which is preached today, that salvation may be found by faith, and that faith is a gift of God which he freely gives and will bestow on every soul who truly seeks it.

George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede* was first published in February 1859 in three volumes by John Blackwood. Initially sales were very slow, but the chorus of praise in the weekly reviews, followed by that of the monthly and quarterlies showed that the book was considered a work of genius. In its leader *The Athenæum* claimed that the novel had not a weak point in it and *Bentley's Quarterly Review* welcomed it as the voice of its own experience like no other book. Both *The Westminster Review* and *The Times* pronounced it first rate, and Charles Dickens' praise was equally generous. By June that year three impressions were exhausted and a second, cheaper edition was printed which sold 10,000 copies in 1859 alone, and the book was also reprinted in Europe and America.² Just as the Wesleyan Church underwent various changes in order to satisfy growing demand for what it had to offer so did *Adam Bede*, and both book and church are very much thriving and still alive today.

George Eliot was born Mary Ann Evans in 1819 and at roughly the same date as the first Wesleyan Church, the one preceding the present one, was established in Oxford. She was no stranger to Methodism and as a schoolgirl had attended Cow Lane Chapel, Coventry,

¹ Oxfordshire History Centre. Pamphlet, OXF O287 WESL.

² George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (London: Penguin English Library, 1984) p.21.

where the preacher was Francis Franklin, whose theology interested the young Eliot. It was, however, her Methodist aunt, Mrs Samuel Evans on whom Dinah Morris, a principal character in *Adam Bede* was based. Eliot saw her aunt as a truly religious soul in whom the love of God and love of man were fused together.³

*Adam Bede*⁴ is a novel which, above all, challenges assumptions, and Dinah Morris, the attractive young Methodist preacher reveals in her sermon on the Green at Hayslope that things are not quite as they might seem in this tranquil village. Eliot portrays a commonly accepted view of a rural community inhabited by stereotypical English country figures, the buxom farmer's wife with her pretty dairymaid and spotless, cosy kitchen, a jolly publican, a handsome and wealthy young squire and an easy going vicar all living together in tolerable forelock-pulling harmony, each knowing his or her own place in the scheme of things and each accepting it as right and ordained by God. It is only when Dinah comes to Hayslope to preach that we begin to see beneath the surface of their seemingly idyllic world and realise that the many undercurrents she reveals could be the portent of something troubling, and the more the reader is shown beneath the surface the more possible other interpretations become. Dinah's text for her sermon on the Green was taken from Luke 4:18:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath sent me... to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.

This was also the text for Wesley's first sermon.⁵ Dinah speaks of what she knows, the conditions of poverty around her, and returns to the theme again and again. She speaks in concrete terms, and includes her story of seeing Wesley. This opening affirmation grows out of actuality, but then she sows the seeds of doubt into the minds of her listeners, asking how we know God cares for us any more than we care for the worms in our gardens, 'for our life is full of trouble, and if God sends us good, he seems to send bad too.'⁶ Then she moves on to the penetrating question of what we should do if we lose his friendship, for there is no other to befriend the poor, and can we, poor mortals, depend on God's friendship? She has so far created expectancy in her listeners, but withdraws from her own question, and exchanges actuality for narrative, exchanging the present for the past when she says Jesus *once* helped the poor and how we would love such a man should we see him. She then moves back to the present and the most dramatic moment of her sermon, when she addresses her listeners as lost sinners, in a state of wilful darkness and disobedience to God. This was designed to frighten them, as she spoke of the sufferings of the saviour and how he had opened the way to salvation for all of us if only we would listen. Dinah's voice became rapid and agitated as she appealed to first one and then another to turn to God, but her only convert on this occasion was Chad's Bess who had been intently studying the preacher throughout wondering what it would be like to live a life like Dinah's, giving up earthly pleasures for the simplicity of a preacher's life. Poor Bess suddenly felt that God was judging her and was very near, as Dinah said 'See...' fixing her eyes on a point above the heads of the people 'see where our blessed Lord stands and weeps and stretches out his arms towards you... see the print of the nails on his dear hands and feet.' She then turned to Bess and addressed her personally as a lost sinner who thought only of earrings and fine gowns and to whom God would eventually say 'Depart from me into everlasting fire.'⁷ when poor terrified Bess threw down her earrings and burst

³ Frederick Karl, *George Eliot: a Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1995) p.321.

⁴ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (First published 1859) (London: Penguin Classics, 2008) from which all further references will be quoted).

⁵ *Ibid.* pp.610-11 (note 15)

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 30

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 34

into a fit of hysterical weeping. Dinah then finished her sermon with the personal appeal that she might share her own joy at conversion with others.

The early Methodists, especially the women, employed this rhetoric in their preaching as their usual pattern, mixing Biblical allusions, personal testimonies, direct appeal and a call to an active spiritual life, a message which ran in a circle from reality, through doubt to certainty, then through fear and hallucination and back to reality, a cycle in which the desires of the socially alienated were conflated with their fears. In this sermon Eliot was trying to show what an insignificant and ineffectual force Methodism was in areas of relative rural prosperity.

Dinah Morris, of all the major characters in *Adam Bede* is probably the only one who remains stable. She is just what she seems, reliable and dependable and with absolute faith in Wesley himself and his teaching. She recalls at the beginning of her sermon how she was taken by her aunt Samuel to hear Wesley preach out of doors. She remembers his face well:

he was a very old man, and had very long white hair; his voice was very soft and beautiful, not like any voice I had ever heard before [...] this old man seemed to me such a different sort of man from anybody I had ever seen before that I thought he had perhaps come down from the sky to preach to us...⁸

The year of Dinah's memory must have been about 1783, and she might have added that he wore a white stock, simple black clothes and no buckles at the knee. Dinah models her life on Welsey, and, like him has an absolute belief in the necessity of conversion. Of the two conversions in *Adam Bede*, that of Chad's Bess was probably temporary. But that of Hetty Sorrel was, for both Dinah and Hetty, one of intense importance.

Wesley was expecting instant conversion in order to heighten his own spirituality and on the 24th May 1738 it was given to him:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistles to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the laws of sin and death.⁹

It is this concept of instant and recognisable conversion which is at the heart of Dinah's ministry. Just as Dinah believed she had a duty to save souls and to change lives for the better both spiritually and physically where possible, so did the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes, sent in 1881 to be the Superintendent Minister of the Wesley Memorial Church. He found the country round Oxford was sunk in agricultural depression, and Non-conformity was unwelcome in both the University and the City as the Cowley Fathers and Anglo Catholicism predominated. But Hughes worked hard and with sixty young men and women anxious to serve the church, formed them into a Mission Band to carry out evangelical work, going out to villages to conduct prayer meetings, preach an open-air sermon, perhaps a tea meeting, much in the way Dinah did almost a hundred years before. His aim, of course, was conversion, the same as Dinah's. These meetings of Hughes' proved so popular that when Hughes preached at the Wesleyan Church it overflowed, and newcomers could not be admitted.¹⁰

⁸ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Margaret Reynolds.

⁹ John M. Haley and Leslie J. Francis, *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006) p. 9

¹⁰ J.E. Oxley, *A History of Wesley Memorial Church Oxford* (Oxford: Oxonian Press, 1967) see pp. 9-11.

The changes which were effected by Methodist sermons were evident. They could not be disputed and were dependent on a belief in doctrines which left no room for manoeuvre. This was in complete contrast to the changes which Eliot wrought in her characters, and which the reader might interpret in the light of what might have been.

When Eliot portrays the Vicar of Hayslope as a rosy and handsome man who prefers to play chess with his mother and ride out round his acres with only minimal inconvenience to himself from parish duties, she does not blame him, but tells the reader that this is how the world is. He is neither bad nor wealthy, but knows how to make the best of what he has, and is benign and well-liked by his parishioners. Eliot tells her readers that it is her duty to tell the truth, and that these mortals must be accepted as they are, accepted with love and tolerance. But the vicar, in his desire to be liked, has not the courage to confront his godson, Arthur Donnithorn. Arthur longs for guidance as he attempts to make what he knows is his despicable behaviour known to his godfather, who suspects something but has not the courage to speak out, fearing a rift in their comfortable relationship, and as a result Hetty's life is ruined. What the reader at first perceives to be the most likeable of men is actually weak and cowardly, and the once handsome charming and benevolent young squire is a thoughtless, irresponsible, blaggard, prepared to use a pretty, vain country girl then desert her when he tires of her.

Eliot's first use of shifting perspectives is in her three short stories which form *Scenes of Clerical Life*. This, her first work of fiction immediately precedes *Adam Bede*, each story telling of the small town gossips' views of its central characters, three successive clergymen, then slowly revealing that what we believed at first to be the truth about them is in fact far otherwise. This she does also, but in a far less concentrated form in *Adam Bede*, revealing half hidden truths in a series of parallels which reflect the duality of her plot. Stonyshire is contrasted with the beauties of Hayslope, and Arthur's crooked character with Adam's upright one, Dinah with Hetty and the pastoral idyll which contains tragedy amongst the beauties of nature. This duality is nowhere better expressed than in the scene where Dinah's singleness of purpose is compared with Hetty's as they sit in their adjoining bedchambers, each pursuing her own particular form of worship, Hetty's that of her beautiful body with its luxuriant hair, lustrous eyes and white arms and shoulders, and Dinah's that of her saviour. Their lives run parallel, not really touching each other at any significant points in spite of Dinah's best efforts, until the encounter in the prison cell. Unlike the Vicar, Dinah can always rely on the right guidance from her Lord, and knowing that Hetty is in some sort of trouble opens her Bible for guidance and immediately reads 'And they all wept sore and fell upon Paul's neck and kissed him.'¹¹ It is on these two pairs of encounters that the plot hangs, Arthur and the vicar, one with a confession and the other not willing to hear it, and Hetty and Dinah, one with a guilty secret and determined not to reveal it, and the other wanting to help to avoid the disastrous consequences of pursuing that secret.

Dinah's sermon in the cell, delivered in the belief that God's forgiveness depends on the willingness of the sinner to repent, hinges on Hetty's willingness to confess her crime, and this confession Dinah manages to extract. But she knows also that she must not hurry God's work, and it is only after she has won the confidence of the terrified and trembling Hetty that she begins her sermon, based on the words Jesus spoke from the cross and ending with the confession. 'Father I have sinned'. This sermon is a direct intervention between herself and God and is delivered face to face with great intimacy and urgency whilst Dinah clasps Hetty to her in a loving embrace, telling her of Christ's suffering and crucifixion to save sinners. Eliot uses this scene to illustrate Dinah's true humanitarianism. She has based the scene on an

¹¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Margaret Reynolds p. 173.

account given to her by her Methodist aunt Samuel of one of her own experiences as a prison visitor.

Eliot's knowledge of both Methodism and the Anglican church is drawn not only from her own extensive scholarship but also, on a more personal level, from her own childhood experiences of Methodism and that of her later Anglicanism, and it is from these sources that she makes her comparison between Methodist fervour and the rather more easy-going, indulgent Anglicanism she portrays in *Adam Bede*.

Until after Wesley's death Methodists were an uneasy part of the Anglican Church. They had always ignored parish boundaries and believed their mission was to the whole country rather than the parish. They had not been afraid to risk unpopularity by their support of the working man, and their belief was that he had an equal right to the education which would lift him out of ignorance, and towards the salvation which was his by right. After his death it was decided to separate from the Anglicans and become a Dissenting Church. The Wesley Memorial Church in Oxford has therefore been a church in its own right for many years and is rather different from the one which Dinah Morris knew, yet still at the heart of both is the teaching of Wesley himself. Women preachers were forbidden during Dinah's lifetime, but she would no doubt be delighted to know that Methodists now have women Ministers preaching in their pulpits.

These two artefacts, the church and the book, are brought together in pairs of contrasts: the solid permanence of stone with the flimsy impermanence of paper: the certainty of the doctrines and activities of the church and the shifting perspectives and possibilities of other interpretations of the novel: the spirituality of the religion and the imagination of the author, but within these opposites is the truth which is believed to be at the heart of both. At the opening of the Methodist Church, Dr Rigg spoke of the mysteries of nature which we have difficulty in believing but yet are true and that much in Christianity is also difficult to believe but true.¹² Eliot also believes that as a novelist she should tell of how things really are, that she *might* refashion life and character but 'my strongest effort is...to give a faithful account of men and things... as if I were in the witness box narrating my experiences on oath.'¹³

¹² J.E.Oxley, *A History of Wesley Memorial Church Oxford*. p. 28.

¹³ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Margaret Reynolds. p. 193.

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