



29th October 2017

Psalm 46

John 8.31-36

Continuing Reformation

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

During the spring of this year we visited Venice and staying at one end of the lagoon we made a walk every morning through the streets and across the canals to St Mark's Square. Venice is littered with wonderful churches, nearly all belonging to the Roman Catholic tradition. Yet every morning and evening we passed a plainer looking church, one that belonged to the Lutheran tradition. Even though it was still months away it had banners and posters outside highlighting the fact that October 2017 is the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. It felt rather like an act of defiance, in some ways echoing that moment when Martin Luther pinned his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, a moment that has since been viewed as the starting pistol of The Reformation.

Well that moment took place 500 years ago this coming Tuesday, 31st October 1517 and traditionally the last Sunday in October has been designated as Reformation Sunday, although I have to admit that in the 30 years since my ordination this is the first time I've observed it!

Here at AFC we're marking this Anniversary by showing the Luther film after today's morning service and by a couple of articles in Family News written by Erna giving us pen portraits of the lives of John Huss and Martin Luther.

I find it significant, actually very significant, that Luther began his reformation journey as he studied the Bible. The years 1513 to 1519 were critical to him because it was during this six year period that, as Professor of Biblical Studies at The University of Wittenberg, he lectured on four books of the bible: Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. And it was as he studied the bible, lingering over these texts, grappling with their message that he radically changed his theological views. It was part of that transformation process that took him from Augustinian Monk to Radical Reformer.

That process was famously accelerated as he watched Johann Tetzel, on behalf of The Pope, sell Indulgences to the people of Wittenberg. Buy one of these certificates and your loved one could get out of Purgatory quicker, and the proceeds go to the building of St Peter's in Rome.

To Luther this felt like a duplicitous circus. It was less about pastoral care based on authentic theology and more about ecclesiastical opportunism based on people's irrational fears.

So along with posting those 95 theses in 1517, Luther wrote three books in 1720 which spared no punches in attacking the institutionalised Church, citing it as being corrupt, cut adrift from the New Testament and wrapped up in a complex system of priests and sacraments.

It was, in a way, like signing your own death warrant and on June 15th 1720 Luther was ordered by the Pope to retract his words. He burned that Papal Bull and was subsequently excommunicated and ordered to appear before the Diet of Worms, a Church Court, in 1521.

When I read his life story I cannot help but come to the conclusion that here was a servant of God filled with extraordinary courage, willing to re-asses all that he had grown up with, willing to explore and live by the outcomes of that exploration no matter how tough that might be, willing to put his head above the parapet and with no regard to his personal safety, speak truth unto power.

Like all of us Luther had his faults. History doesn't give him full marks when he sided with the landowners during the Peasants Revolt and as he got older and his health failed with Meniere's disease, his speech and writing could be crude or contain the prejudices of his day.

Yet for all that he found love and support in his marriage to a former nun, Katharina von Bora with whom he had six children and together they adopted a further four.

He died aged 63 in 1546.

Now maybe we'd all like to think Luther, if he'd lived today, would be 'one of us'. I doubt that! And I suspect if he had been around in the contemporary Church who knows what issues he would be addressing 500 years on from those days in Wittenberg?

Karl Barth, one of history's leading theologians, says that if we are to live today as people who stand in the Reformation Tradition, it's not so much a case that we simply 'repeat' the doctrines of people like Luther and Calvin, rather we should be those who 'reflect' upon their lives and work.

Why did Luther nail the 95 theses to the church door? Why did he write those three controversial books? Why did he burn the Papal Bull? And why did he refuse to recant at the Diet of Worms?

I suspect it was because he couldn't live with the disconnect he had discovered.

As he read the bible he encountered God. As he read the New Testament he discovers God as revealed to us in the life of Jesus. Here is one who stands alongside the poor. Here is one who says rules of the Sabbath can be broken if people are hungry. Here is one who seems so unimpressed by ritual when it is unaccompanied by a care for the downtrodden. Here is one who is so appalled by the Temple moneychangers exploiting the least in society that he takes action and, on their behalf, overturns the tables.

For Luther there was a disconnect. He didn't see this Christ-like God in a Church that sold Indulgencies to pay for a new HQ. He didn't see this Christ-like God in the lives of landed, princely Cardinals who knew more about wine than scripture. He didn't see this Christ-like God in a religious system that kept both the Bible and the liturgy in Latin, thus making both a mystery beyond the reach of the majority of worshippers – and thus keeping control, power and interpretation in the priestly hands of just a few.

So he protested – and the Protestant Church was born.

I've always had a secret disappointment about myself – that I'm not much of a rebel! Try as I might I could never quite get myself into detention at school!

However, there was one episode at Theological College of which I'm rather proud.

It was the days when Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robyn Island – a time when many were being inspired by the preaching of the dancing Bishop of Johannesburg, Desmond Tutu.

So at my college a friend and I set up a lunchtime prayer group for South Africa. We held it in our flat and lots of students came. We used liturgy from the World Council of Churches and took our cue of what to pray for from Christian Aid.

You know our prayer group was shut down by the College authorities for being too political. These were daring days for me! My friend and I were hauled before the Principal (I'm rather over egging this – you understand!) to explain what we thought we were doing as this was not a timetabled prayer group. That, ironically was the real issue, our prayer group hadn't been timetabled by the relevant authorities. We found ourselves 'outside' the well-ordered and regulated system of college life. So, those who held 'power' disapproved of both our spontaneity and enthusiasm.

I wrote a letter of protest to the College Council but it all fell on deaf ears and we were not allowed to meet again.

My, it felt good to be a rebel – at least for five minutes!

There are times when the established position, the orthodox view is simply wrong. Luther knew this, Tutu preached this and Martin Luther King, following the tradition of his name sake, lived this.

The folk commemorated at the Amersham Martyrs Memorial were rebels too. They were burnt at the stake because the bishops of their day decreed it was dangerous for the ordinary worshippers of our town to read the bible for themselves in English rather than be told what the Latin Bible said by the Priests.

Speaking truth to power is a prophetic calling that has never gone away.

And neither has the need to ask difficult questions. Luther was that difficult student in class who always asks 'why'? He's not content just to receive 'hand me down' tradition.

In our own age there is much valid questioning going on both inside and outside the Church.

Contemporary theologians are currently asking questions like: Are we born in original sin or original grace? Is the cross primarily about God the Father demanding the blood sacrifice of God the Son or of Jesus showing us that the costliest way to love is self-sacrifice offered up alongside forgiveness? Or how about that long standing debate of how a God of love could really send a person to hell for eternity?

These, and other questions like them, are currently being seriously discussed by many writers, thinkers, theologians and minister practioners who try to take the bible seriously.

Jesus shows us the way as he teaches his disciples. He values the Jewish Law and the traditions into which he was born, yet time and again he says things like: You have heard it said, but I say to you...

That was an accepted rabbinic way of taking a religious tradition, concept or insight and posting it to a new address or putting it in a new context. In a sense it says that our understanding of God and our place in the world is constantly evolving.

Jesus pushed the boundaries and gave people a bigger vision. That's not a safe thing to do. Questioning the status quo and challenging the rigid thinking of the institutions of his day cost Jesus his life.

Martin Luther had a similar experience at The Diet of Worms. He was repeatedly asked to retract what he had written. Not to do so was to put his life in danger yet he says to that Church Court that he would not recant. His statement on that occasion has probably become the most famous sound bite of his life: Here I stand, I can do no other.

Exploring truth and going where it takes you is not a weak and wishy washy option for the fainthearted. If you don't want to be challenged, then all we have to do is hang on to Sunday School certainties – the problem with that is the way life becomes more complex and challenging as we get older and so a mature life demands a mature faith.

Today's bible readings are the ones traditionally set for Reformation Sunday. Psalm 46 was one of Luther's favourites and we have just sung what is probably his most famous hymn based upon it.

The reading from John is all about truth, letting the words of Jesus dwell in our hearts, and the sense of freedom such truth brings.

It's from texts like these, and further on in chapter 15 when Jesus talks of us being like a branch abiding in the vine tree, calling us to abide in him so that he can abide in us, that we get hymns like: May the mind of Christ my Saviour dwell in me from day to day.

All seekers after truth have questions. Exploring issues and addressing these questions is surely what 'Continuous Reformation' is all about.

Faith doesn't come pre-packaged.

A few years ago young Christians attending conferences like Spring Harvest came back with bracelets bearing the initials WWJD – standing for 'What would Jesus do?' There are probably no easy answers but I still think it's a really important question.

How do we know the mind of Christ? How can 'Continuous Reformation' become a feature of our own faith pilgrimage and the regular pathway of The Church?

Well it's often said that to help us we have at least three things. The Bible, tradition and experience.

We cherish the scriptures and believe God still speaks through them today. Bible readings are at the centre of our worship here week by week. Our Life and Faith Groups discuss the bible and from an early age members of our Junior Church learn these stories which are the bedrock of our community.

And the traditions handed onto us, the wisdom from the past, will also help us, for we are not the first to tread this road. We'll cherish the role models of our youth as pastors and youth leaders taught us the value of prayer and worship, or the inspiration we found reading Pilgrim's Progress, the sense of belonging we encountered as we were confirmed or attended a Church Conference.

These traditions handed on to us have helped mould our faith and have often been the context of its growth.

And then there is life itself – and we never face this alone. The Holy Spirit – God at work in us today – lives each moment with us. So that every challenge and every joy is shared with us by God. And somehow, as time passes, as we patiently wait and let the Holy Spirit do her work among us – we are in the process of Continuous Reformation, we are being moulded and guided and slowly, even without noticing, as we abide in God, we grow in faith and trust as a disciple of Jesus.

What do we make of Reformation on this its 500th anniversary?

Well, historically, it changed the course of history – so be careful what you pin to church doors in future!

Yet it's surely also a reminder to us, five centuries on, of the value of asking questions and seeking after truth.

Martin Luther did that and maybe that's his greatest legacy to us. Be a questioner.

Spend time with the bible. Ask questions. Seek to dwell with the stories of Jesus. Listen out for the voice of the Spirit. Feel the companionship of fellow seekers after truth walking alongside you. And in doing that, pray God, 'Continuous Reformation' will be a feature of our life, both personal and corporate.

May it be so, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ian Green, St Cuthman's Retreat Centre, Horsham 21st October 2017