

Morningside

19/10/2017

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

As your dream unfolds the great day is almost over. You have dreamy pictures in your mind of a small town in Germany. You vaguely remember big things going on. You've been hearing many different languages: church people and politicians keep popping up in your reverie. Wasn't Mrs Merkel there? And the Dr Derek Browning, Moderator of the General Assembly. Of course! Your dream is set in Wittenberg on October 31st: all of these people are there for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

After the service most people will drift away. In your dream you see Dr Browning staying later than most, enjoying the company, engaging in ecumenical dialogue. At the end of the day there are only a few left, and as they make their way off into the dusk of evening, the Moderator remains musing near the famous Cathedral door. He thinks he glimpses the ancient door slowly opening, and a dark figure emerges. Might he be a monk? Or maybe a professor? Dr Browning begins.

Dr. Luther, it is a great pleasure and privilege to meet you. I bring you the greetings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Let me express to you my admiration and respect. Few people have done more to shape the modern world than you have. And few people have had such an enormous impact of the life and work of the church of Jesus Christ.

That is very kind of you to say so, Dr Browning. Please take my best wishes back to the General Assembly. Has the Reformation taken root in your country?

There was a day when Scotland may have been the only country in Europe with a majority of Reformed Christians. We trace our history not directly to you and your work. It has been the influence of your contemporary, John Calvin, and his admirer, John Knox, which has most shaped the teaching and the worship and the government of our church. Some people – probably

including you, Martin (if I may call you that), find, our worship austere and colourless; but with its high value on the sermon, with its solemnity in the sacraments, and with its tradition of singing the psalms robustly, it seems to have fitted well with the Scottish character. These days, I am sorry to say, Christianity is struggling in Scotland, and our national church, the Church of Scotland, which is a church of the Reformation, is finding it very difficult to engage with many sections of our society.

But this is your day, Martin, not mine. All these great events here in your Wittenberg, all because of you. Looking back on everything, could you pick out one moment you would like to be remembered by?

It would be the trial. They called it The Diet of Worms, but it really was a trial. I was summoned to appear before the Holy Roman Emperor. I had written three books in one year, all of them based on what was actually in the Bible. One was to declare that the Pope was the enemy of all Christendom. The second was to attack the way the church of my day conducted the sacraments. The third was about the freedom of all Christian people. The Pope and the church asked me to recant. So I asked for a day's grace to answer. And overnight the world seemed to be waiting. "Would I return to being the best monk in Germany or would I go forward to an unformed future, guided only by what I found in the Bible?"

The next day I gave my answer. I defied them. I told the Emperor that unless I was proved wrong from scripture or plain reason I could recant nothing. Everyone there called it a thrilling and terrifying moment. Not long after I died my publisher constructed two little sentences which have become the most memorable thing I never said. "Here I stand; I can do no other".

When Luther paused, Dr Browning replied: You might be pleased to know, Martin, that that sentence, "Here I stand, I can do no other" was described by Diarmid MacCulloch, perhaps the most distinguished church historian in the world in my day, thus: This sentence "can stand for the motto of all Protestants: ultimately, perhaps, of all modern Western civilisation". A very dramatic moment certainly: but as you stood there against the church and

the world, what was at the heart of it all? What was your absolutely central idea?

I'm so pleased you asked that, Moderator. The central idea of the whole Reformation wasn't mine at all. The central idea of the Reformation was my discovery, but it was the discovery of an idea which had been there from the very start. What I was doing was letting people discover for themselves what the Bible had always taught, what the early Christians had believed, but which had been lost in the ramblings of the church. I was not trying to revolutionise the church. I was trying to re-form it, as it used to be at the beginning.

It was while I was lecturing to my students on Paul's letter to the Romans that the whole thing exploded inside me. If the people in your own parish, Derek (if I may call you that) have understood me at all they will have been using a passage from Romans chapter 3 as a reading last Sunday, and they will have come across a teaching which is often called "justification by faith". It is the absolute foundation of Reformation teaching, and I believe it is the absolute foundation of the Christian faith.

Because I'm a professor I'll try to explain it in a couple of academic sentences, and then I'll put it into simple language. God declares someone to be righteous even when that person has not been righteous, because God through his grace "imputes" (that is the technical term I used) the merits of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, to that person. That's what I would say in my classroom; and here is what it means. And when I explain it I hope you will see how it might be liberating, transforming good news.

The whole movement of churches and of church people, of parents and teachers and religions, is to say to people "God loves you if...." So in my day the church taught God loves you if you come to mass. St Paul believed that his religion was sinking into teaching that God loves you if you circumcise your sons and avoid unclean foods. In your day, Dr Browning, the message is often God loves you if you are successful. None of that is true. None of that is what the Bible teaches. None of that is the good news

of God. The gospel is not God loves you if. The good news of God is God loves you. You don't work for it. You don't deserve it. You don't earn it. It is not because of who you are at all. It is because of who God is. God loves you because God is love. Is that what the Church of Scotland believes, Derek?

As its Moderator it is certainly what I believe, Martin. As I listen to you I am reminded of a poem. A poem which seems to sum up exactly what you have been saying, and what the Reformation at its best should always stand for. It is by a strange Welsh priest called R S Thomas. Let me read it to you and then I must be on my way back to Edinburgh. Thank you for your time, Martin Luther. As I said at the beginning, it has been a privilege.

The poem is called "The Kingdom"

*It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf*