SERMON FOR REFORMATION SUNDAY 2016

There is a story told of a Jewish man who was at a party in Belfast. Someone asked him what religion he was and he told them. But are you a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Jew? came the reply.

It is as if, somehow, the world is divided between Catholics and non-Catholics – that, somehow there is an invisible dividing line which is there for all time in our society. And so it can look to those of us inside the churches, familiar with identities which are similar but different within the Christian world. We have grown up with these labels and ‘Reformation Sunday’, celebrated exclusively within the Protestant half of the divide, is a way of reminding ourselves – as Anglicans – that there is something to celebrate in the work of some of the great reformers of the sixteenth century – of whom Martin Luther has to be the founding father. But we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that, for the vast majority of the secular world, this is no issue at all. Christians are Christians – and a pretty weird bunch of people to boot!

So what can we take from the amazing vortex that was the Protestant Reformation? And does it have any relevance today? For us?

Next year will mark the 500th anniversary of the day in which the young, hugely intelligent but somewhat stroppy Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, bought himself a hammer and pinned up 95 statements (or theses) on the door of his local Cathedral in Wittenburg.

This were no trivial action. First, in the early days of the 16th century, monks were obliged to obey the rules of their order and one of those was that they were not to challenge the authority of the Pope. Nor were they free to use passages of the Bible to condemn the way the Church was being run – or to suggest that men and women ought to be free to read the Scriptures, free of instruction from the clergy.

Five hundred years on, it is hard to imagine just how revolutionary this all was.
Of course there had been critics of the mis-use of Church authority - and money! - for the better part of two hundred years before this (and people often had to face martyrdom for so doing), but no one had been able to crystalise in one document the heart of the debate: were people to seek salvation for their souls through their willingness to obey the leadership of the Church – whether they understood it or not – defined by St Paul as the way of the law; or were they free individuals who were at liberty to read the Scriptures for themselves and to find their salvation through faith, the life given by God as a sign of his grace? Did their hope of heaven come simply from being a member of the body of Christ, (as known in the Catholic Church) or through a direct relationship with their resurrected Lord?

In simple terms, was the Church a divine body into which we were admitted (top down), or the conglomeration of the all those who had given their lives to Jesus (bottom up)? In other words, how much right did the individual have to make up their own mind?

Which is not just a religious question, it is a political one too. For the rule of thumb for most ordinary citizens came in the famous Latin phrase: Cuius regio, eius religio. That is, whatever the king/queen believed, the people were to believe too. In England, as we know, people who wanted to believe something different from Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth (some of whom were Catholic and some of whom were Protestant) were hunted down and executed. And the charge was not just heresy but treason.

So when Martin Luther spent all those years hiding from the Catholic snatch squads translating the Bible into German, it wasn’t just a nice academic exercise but a challenge to the heart of authority of the Church. If everyone could read the Bible – made possible of course by the very first printing presses which were the height of new technology at just the same time – then who was to control what people believed? The grip of the magisterium (the right of the Church to declare what was true and what was not) would simply evaporate.

And what Luther did for the Bible, Thomas Cranmer did for our liturgy, the words of our services. In 1549 he wrote the first Prayer Book - in English. For the first time the squire and the ploughboy in the fields could hear prayers in their own language.
No longer would they struggle to understand the muttered prayers delivered at a distance in Latin. Moreover, from now on, and hard on the heels of the English Prayer Book, was a new requirement for the clergy to preach - a fairly rare activity in the medieval Church, one which was largely confined to the cathedrals, monasteries and universities.

And what did the new generation of clergy preach about? A great deal of St Paul! For the first time, they got to grips with the Epistle to the Romans which we heard earlier. Again, in short-hand, we can say that what they then discovered was (in parallel with so much of the teaching of the Old Testament prophets which had largely been ignored by the medieval Scholastics) that God was not interested in what people did – how much money they gave to the Church or even to the poor - but in what they believed: the quality of their faith and their prayer life.

To summarise: the priority of the Bible, plain prayers in their own language and an emphasis on faith and on morals would be a reasonable summary of the Protestant Reformation. Each believer is their own person and no-one has the right to insist on anything that cannot be found in the pages of Scripture.

You can see where this was all leading. Beautiful churches, a whole swathe of clergy privileges, liturgical music and 1500 years of religious culture and tradition was, in no time at all, cut to shreds. Oliver Cromwell’s troops stationed their horses in the Lady Chapel of Ely Cathedral but not before they had decapitated every single medieval statue in the building. Iconoclasm, the willful destruction of all that smacks of imagery and artistic endeavour, reduced most parish churches to mere preaching boxes, totally devoid of colour or any appeal to the senses. Luther and his followers were ‘head’ men, intellectuals, people of books and words. It is words that touch the heart in the Protestant tradition. And their preachers are often gifted orators, both in Church and in politics.

So was the Reformation necessary? I am not sure, but it was almost certainly inevitable. The strangle-hold on power exercised by the Church and the royal families of Europe was bound to give way to the kind of radical political democracy that the Protestant reading of the Bible spawned. But the 16th century Reformation also left a legacy of entrenched division that we still know today.
Where, then, do we go from here? For it is undoubtedly true that the Roman Catholic Church of today is slowly learning the lessons of the Reformation. Biblical teaching is well resourced in many parishes; the liturgy is in English (or whatever) and steps are being made to open up the hold on power by the clergy. They may still have some way to go but the Spirit is certainly moving. The experience of being in Compostella for the Pilgrims Mass at 12noon on Friday was extraordinary: the place was packed and you could feel the commitment by most there that they were looking for ways to become better disciples of Jesus.

But we, as Anglicans: what does Reformation Sunday mean to us? Because I have to admit I found myself more at home in Compostella this week than I did among the Evangelical clergy at the Stepney Area Conference a couple of weeks ago, with all the guitars and hand-waving that went with it. So why was that so?

On the front of your Weekly News today is a picture of the statue of St James in the Cathedral in Compostella. Sadly you can’t see the queue of people behind who are embracing/hugging this ancient wooden figure as part of their experience of faith in that place. Now I am sure that Oliver Cromwell and Protestants like him would deplore such nonsense: no doubt he would have chopped the statue down if he had had the chance!

Far better, it seems to me though, is to regard such activities not as idol worship but as helpful ‘focuses for the divine’. Actually we are more than words – indeed, sometimes, words get in the way. Standing among that great throng of believers, several thousand strong, I seriously felt engaged with the communion of angels and saints in a way that was hugely moving – and almost beyond words. Of course I need St Paul to remind me that my life is held in Jesus Christ who died and rose again for me. But I also need the physical, creative, artistic, spacial - and the relational too.

And so with all its contradictions and our tendency to be a bit too closely subordinate to the State in which we are set, I hold on to the Anglican model, the middle way, as being a vital ingredient in today’s ever changing world. We are, first and foremost, part of the Catholic family. But from the Protestant Reformation we have also inherited a care for every person whatever their background – and an edgy and enquiring quest for truth in all its forms.