

**12<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

**Reformation 500: Here I Stand!**

**Isaiah 7.1-9; Acts 5.27-32**

We continue our celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation and our theme today is that of the importance of personal conviction and conscience: Here I Stand!

Martin Luther famously stood up against the Pope and the Catholic Church of his day. Having pinned his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517 denouncing the sale of indulgences, and restating the central claim of the Gospel of Grace:, Martin Luther in 1521 was called before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms ("diet" meaning a formal meeting, not a weight-loss plan, and Worms being a city south of Frankfurt). Luther thought he would have a chance to defend his ideas. Charles would only accept an ironclad recantation. What Charles got was Luther's defiant "Here I Stand" speech:

*'Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason-for', said Luther, 'I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves-I*

*consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus, I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.'*

Luther asserted that his conscience was captive to the Word of God and that he could not go against conscience. This was not, however, a modern plea for the supremacy of the individual conscience or for religious freedom. Though already excommunicated by Rome, Luther saw himself as a sworn teacher of Scripture who must advocate the right of all Christians to hear and live by the gospel.<sup>i</sup>

However, the Protestant movement put strong emphasis on the freedom of belief, conviction and conscience: to be 'Non-conformists'! To dissent.

We admire people who have the courage of their convictions. Those who make a stand. Today, Remembrance Sunday, our thoughts are inevitably drawn to those who have the courage to stand and protect their country. 'Here I stand' has echoes of Churchillian language. Rather than a Neville Chamberlain and his appeasement of Hitler – let do a bargain with the Fuhrer – give him Czechoslovakia and hope that appeases him – it didn't of course, Churchill stood up to the fascist dictator

promising to fight him on the beaches and never surrender. Here I stand. Without that determination and opposition to tyranny, that sense of moral outrage and conviction, arguably we would not enjoy our present freedoms today. It was a rallying call to defend freedom and humanity: our finest hour.

Freedom of conscience, courage of one's own's convictions could also apply to those who were 'conscientious objectors' – those who had pacifist convictions – who believed War was not the answer. You could also argue our enemies too had convictions and courage to fight for their cause. When you start down this track you realise that freedom of conscience and courage of one's convictions is complex and often in conflict.

Take for example the outworking of the Reformation. The Reformation destroyed the idea of a single, unified Church. True, this was already a bit of an illusion, given that the Western and Eastern churches had undergone the 'Great Schism' in 1054. And there had been that unfortunate business when there were two Popes. Then three Popes for a bit. But, nevertheless, in Western Europe there was the idea of one catholic or 'whole' Church to which everyone could claim some sort of allegiance. But the Reformation shattered any semblance of unity. And it didn't just split Western Christendom into 'Catholic' and

'Protestant', but into 'Catholic' and 'Protestants' – the latter encompassing many different flavours of evangelical and reformed belief.

The Reformation began an endless, fractal splintering of the Church. Because, as anyone who has ever tried to do the splits can tell you, once you start it's very difficult to stop, and if there's one thing we know about theology, it's that other people always get it wrong. Even among the reformers themselves there was disunity. Luther and Zwingli hated each other.<sup>ii</sup>

One of the great ideas of the Reformation was that everyone should be able to read the Bible for themselves. The problem is – what happens when everyone interprets the scriptures differently? Answer: Thousands of different denominations. Breaking away and storming off in a self-righteous huff remains one of the most characteristic activities of the Protestant Church.

It was Bonfire Night at the weekend. I have a friend who lives in Lewes in Sussex. They have arguably the country's most impressive Bonfire Night with up to 6,000 people taking part in various bonfire societies. One society parades with burning crosses to commemorate the protestant martyrs executed in Lewes in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

An effigy of the Pope is burnt. Other effigies of topical figures are also put on bonfires. All the while torches and barrels burn and bangers go off and beer is drunk. 80 people alone were injured last year. It is a raucous affair. This year one of the societies that dresses up as Zulu warriors were told not to black up as this was racist and offensive. Someone wrote into the papers and said that whilst this was offensive, I and other Catholics find it offensive that an effigy of the Pope is burnt each year.

In our past 500 years there has been tensions between Catholics and Protestants in these islands.

Around the world religion often causes violence. Christian nations institutionalised imperialism, violence and oppression through things like the slave trade and the Inquisition. Islam is the soil for much of today's terrorism, whilst some Israelis use their Jewish faith to claim exclusive rights to land and resources. Hindu nationalists in the name of their religion carry out bloody strikes on Christian churches and Muslim mosques. In Myanmar we have a Buddhist majority population expelling violently a Muslim minority. All of this indicates that religion can aggravate human differences until they boil over into war, violence and oppression of minorities.

There are darker sides to the characters of the reformation. Luther was famously abusive to his enemies and was responsible for some vile anti-Semitic writings. Zwingli had his theological opponents drowned in the river. Leaving aside his role in the arrest and execution of the Unitarian Michael Servetus, Calvin was so unpopular within Geneva that people tried to empty their chamber pots on him as he walked beneath their windows. All three of these Premier League reformers – and many others in the lower divisions – had a propensity to banish anyone who spoke out against them.

No wonder we are suspicious of religious fanatics. Like the Pharisees they assume they are right with God because of their moral behavior and right doctrine. This leads naturally to feelings of superiority and then abuse, exclusion and oppression.

In this week of Remembrance, we should however also recall that you don't need religion to cause wars. The communist Russian, Chinese, Cambodian and now North Korean regimes all rejected organised religion and belief in God yet produced massive violence against their own people without the influence of religion. Hitler believed in the supremacy of the Aryan race as a rationale to go and conquer other nations.

When the idea of God is gone, a society will make something else, some other concept, the key identity marker, in order to appear morally and spiritually superior to others. The Marxists made the State into such an absolute, while the Nazis did it to race and blood.

Violence done in the name of religion is a terrible reality and must be addressed and redressed. There is no excusing it. But as we remember war and the victims of war this weekend it is plainly obvious that you don't need religion as an excuse for war and that there must be some violent impulse so deeply rooted in the human heart that it expresses itself regardless of what the beliefs of that particular society might have.

We fear the other, the stranger, those who do not have the values or traits on which we base our own significance. We define ourselves by pointing to those whom we are not. We bolster our sense of worth by devaluing those of other beliefs and races and traits.

I cannot speak on behalf of other religions, but I can speak about Christianity. Those who wage war in the name of Christ just don't understand the Christian message. Those who use Christianity to exclude others and denigrate others do not understand the Christian message.

Last week we talked about Grace. The core message of the Gospel. Failing, broken people "are attractive because they are loved," said Martin Luther, "they are not loved because they are attractive."

The Christian message is that God loves us without us doing anything to deserve that love. That love is shown through the death of Jesus on the cross. The cross tells us that God loves us, loves you – so much he was prepared to die for you. That's grace.

Grace says we can't save ourselves: we need a Saviour – and the gospel proclaims that we do have a Saviour in Jesus.

A Christian's worth and value are not created by excluding anyone, but through Jesus Christ. His grace was for all. God loves all people – that in a nutshell is the Christian message or gospel/good news.

The people who are fanatics then, are so not because they are too committed to the gospel but because they are not committed enough. Those who are fanatics can be overbearing, self-righteous, opinionated, insensitive, harsh. They are not Christian enough. They are not fanatically humble, sensitive, empathetic, forgiving, understanding – as Christ was. Because they think Christianity is a self-

improvement plan they emulate the moral zealot Jesus who turns over tables in the temple and not the compassionate Jesus who said 'let him who is without sin cast the first stone' (John 8.7)

It is dangerous when people and nations believe they are God's special people or more superior than others – It is dangerous when people believe that God is just on their side. Our Bible Readings have the charge to Isaiah the prophet 'if you do not stand firm in your faith you will not stand at all'. In Acts chapter 5, Peter and some of the apostles are dragged before the Sanhedrin, the council of the ruling Jewish religious authorities accused of preaching heresy. Peter's famous reply is 'We must obey God rather than human beings! It all depends what type of faith you are standing firm on, and obeying.

Jesus revealed a God who has no favourites, who causes the sun to shine on the good and the bad. Christians believe Jesus died for all people to show God loves all people.

It was Jesus who said love your enemies. The love of our enemies is the litmus test of being a Christian.

Commitment to justice, liberation or the overthrow of oppression is not enough, for all too often the means used have brought in their wake new injustices and oppressions.

Love of our enemies is the recognition that the enemy, too, is a child of God. The enemy too believes he or she is in the right, and fears us because we represent a threat against his or her values, lifestyle or affluence. When we demonize our enemies, calling them names and identifying them with absolute evil, we deny that they have that of God within them that makes transformation possible. Instead we play God. We write them out of the Book of Life. We conclude that our enemy has drifted beyond the love of God.

Either we find the God who causes the sun to rise on the good and the evil, or we may have no more sunrises.

There was a true story about a French Minister in his parish in Hunspach in Alsace, during the final weeks of the Second World War. As the German Army was being driven back into Germany, the soldiers had dug trenches in which they had placed mines under the village so that when they were retreating, they could detonate them by remote control. Another nearby village called Inglesheim had been destroyed in this way. But Hunspach had a different story to tell.

One Sunday at this terrible time Pastor Fidel asked his congregation to pray for him. Everyone knew why. He

was going to slip out of the village. No one could help him, as he had to do it himself.

One evening at dusk he set out and met the German Commander and spent a long time pleading with him to spare the village. Then as they sat deeply involved in their discussion, suddenly they heard the voices of children singing. The children of Hunsbach had followed their pastor, and they stood singing the folk songs of Alsace and also some of the psalms they had learned in church.

For over half an hour, the two men stood in silence, as children sang and sang. Then at length the commander turned to the pastor and said, 'I have learned tonight that I have a greater duty than my duty to my country, I have a duty to humanity. Your village will be spared.' So, the landmines were removed and the village and the people left in peace.

A few years back, a group of us visited the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland. We have supported their work for reconciliation in that country for over 40 years. We discovered that when they try to get enemies to speak to each other, for example those who have come from Catholic and Protestants sectarian groups, they insist that they use each other's first names. So instead of calling someone derogatory names like Fenian or Prod, they had

to call them by their first names: Gerry, Ian. By doing this they reminded each other of their humanity. They were people, with families, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns. They weren't to be demonised or dismissed but understood and treated with dignity and respect

The Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>iii</sup> was pastoring two German speaking churches in London when Hitler came to power. He refused to stay at a safe distance and returned to his country to head an illegal seminary for the Confessing Church, the Christian congregations that refused to sign an oath of allegiance to the Nazis. Loving your enemies doesn't mean you agree with them, or do not oppose them. Love must be tough sometimes.

Bonhoeffer wrote the classic 'The Cost of Discipleship' in which he critiqued religion and the church of his day. In echoes of Jesus and the prophets, Bonhoeffer revealed the spiritual deadness and self-satisfied complacency that made it possible to co-operate with Hitler and turn a blind eye to those being systematically marginalised and destroyed by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer was eventually arrested and hanged for his role in the plot to kill Hitler.

In his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer reveals how his Christian faith gave him the resources to give up everything for the sake of others. Karl Marx had argued

that if you believe in a life after this one you won't be concerned about making this world a better place. You can argue the opposite. If this world is all there is and if the goods of this world are the only love, comfort and wealth I will ever have, why should I sacrifice them for others? Bonhoeffer, however, had a joy and hope in God that made it possible for him to stand firm in his faith and do what he did:

*'It is not a religious act that makes a Christian, but participation in the suffering of God in the secular life. That is metanoia (repentance): not in the first-place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ.... Pain is a holy angel.... Through him men have become greater than through all the joys of the world.... The pain of longing, which often can be felt physically, must be there, and we shall not and need not talk it away. But it needs to be overcome every time, and thus there is an even holier angel than the one of pain, that is the one of joy in God.'*<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/what-luther-said.html>

<sup>ii</sup> See Nick Page <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2017/October-2017/And-now-for-the-bad-news-what-we-lost-because-of-the-Reformation>

When people give their lives to liberate others, as Jesus did, they are realising the true Christianity that Bonhoeffer called for.

Loving one's enemies for Christians is remembering what God is like and living up to the status of being sons and daughters of God. Remembrance Sunday – is remembering not only those who have lost their lives in war, those who have served their countries, the conflicts and hatreds that have consumed our world. It is also for Christians remembering that God is love and loves all people and calls us to do that as well and to work for peace, understanding and reconciliation. Otherwise we will continue to remember, remember, things like the fifth of November and acts of religiously inspired violence.

May we remember and make the future different. Here I stand - in the love of Christ.

<sup>iii</sup> See T Keller, *The Reason for God*, Hodder 2008, ch 4,

<sup>iv</sup> D Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Macmillan, 1971, p 418