

Always Being Reformed

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 26 October 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Deuteronomy 34:1-12, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 and St Matthew 22:34-40.

Today is being observed, in some churches, as Reformation Sunday. The reason? History.

On 31st October 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther wrote to the bishop of Mainz, in Germany. His letter protested the sale of “indulgences” to raise money for the rebuilding of St Peter’s basilica in Rome. Later to be called Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*, the letter became widely known. One story, probably false, is that the author defiantly nailed a copy to a church door in Wittenberg, where he was teaching.

Ecclesiastical authorities are not always very clever at coping with those who challenge them. Pope Leo X would have been well advised to weigh carefully what the troublesome priest was saying, maybe even make him a cardinal and put him in charge of church reform. Imagine how different Christianity might look today!

Instead, Rome threw the book at him. Relations between the hierarchy and the dissenter became increasingly polarised, their exchanges more and more acrimonious. Initially, Luther worried that by selling indulgences the Church was sending the wrong message. Soon he was levelling a more serious charge: that the Church itself had become captive to a false gospel.

We are not “justified” – that is, reconciled to God -- by our efforts, he said, but by God’s grace through faith. In 1521, the trouble-maker was excommunicated. What had begun as a move to reform the Church became, tragically, schism.

That is a gross oversimplification of what was actually a complex process, involving political, economic and even psychological ingredients as well as theology. But it explains why the date of Luther’s initial letter -- 31st October 1517 – has been seized upon as marking the birth of Protestantism. And why today, the Sunday before the 31st, is designated Reformation Sunday.

So much for history. What are we, now, to do with this day?

A few generations ago the answer was pretty clear. This was a day to remember the founding figures of Protestantism, to acknowledge the truth we had received and to celebrate our Reformed identity. It was a day, let’s be honest,

when the children of the Reformation sometimes carried on a bit like that self-righteous Pharisee in the temple: we thank thee, Lord, that we've got it right and we're not like those benighted sinners down the road in St Mary's Cathedral.

That was a few generations ago. But things have changed. Radically.

Specifically, *we* – the churches -- have changed. It has taken a long time – far too long a time, nearly five hundred years -- but Christians from both sides of that 16th century conflict have been talking together, praying together, reading their bibles together, coming to terms with their separate histories together. And they have reached an astonishing conclusion.

Fifteen years ago, on 31st October (that date again!) in 1999, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation issued a **“Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”**. It said that, on the matter of how we are reconciled to God, the two churches have arrived at a common mind. The condemnations Catholics and Protestants heaped on one another five centuries ago no longer apply. In other words, the concern that was at the centre of Luther's protest is no longer a church-dividing issue.

Wow!

So back to the question. What are we to make of Reformation Sunday now?

Should we forget it? No, you can't just obliterate the past. It happened. For good or ill -- in the case of the Reformation, a mixture of both -- it happened. The impact of that past lingers on, shaping the present and influencing the future. We cannot forget it.

But we can change the way we mark it. Catholic and Lutheran authorities are giving wise leadership on this. Last year they issued another joint statement, significantly entitled **“From Conflict to Communion,”** which addresses how their people should deal with a five hundredth anniversary that's now only three years away.

In this ecumenical age, they advise, the last thing we need is another outburst of old-fashioned Protestant or Catholic chest-thumping. We must avoid a facile celebration that's blind to the faults that were on both sides and fails to see the tragedy of our long years of division. What we should aim at, rather, is a common commemoration, a joint Catholic/Protestant attempt to remember

what happened and why, a shared moment of grace when both sides not only look back but also, and more importantly, look forward.

Look forward! You see, it is not enough to claim that we're a "Reformed" church, as though we are stuck forever in the 16th century, as though we can rest content with an identity defined forever by the events of five centuries ago.

Every impetus to religious reform seems, sooner or later, to run out of steam. Every move for churchly renewal seems, sooner or later, to congeal into a new orthodoxy. Luther turns into Lutheranism. Calvin degenerates into Calvinism. The day you hear someone refer to Uniting Churchism, start worrying! We cannot, must not, live on the strength of something that happened long ago.

A *Reformed* church? Who cares? What matters is whether, today, we are a church that is *always being reformed*. A church that seeks continually to open itself to reform in the light of the gospel, by the renewing power of the Spirit.

A church *always being reformed* will take its cues not only from dead white males of its own denomination. Beyond Luther, Calvin and Wesley it will find itself heeding other inspired reformers – people with names like Tutu and Francis, for example; names like Mary McKillop and Dorothy McMahan.

A church *always being reformed* will not only challenge our conservative instincts. It will question our progressive instincts too. Reform under the gospel is never simply a matter of preserving or innovating. It's a matter of responding afresh to Christ. And that always disturbs, both Protestants and Catholics alike.

Half a century ago, the Second Vatican Council was in full swing. It was, spectacularly, a reforming council, which stirred Karl Barth, the 20th century's most influential Protestant theologian, to a major rethink. That eminent child of the Reformation aired his soul-searching in print:

"How would things look," he wrote, "if Rome (without ceasing to be Rome) were one day simply to overtake us and place us in the shadows, so far as the renewing of the Church through the Word and Spirit of the Gospel is concerned? What if we should discover that the last are first and the first last, that the voice of the Good Shepherd should find a clearer echo over there than among us?... We others might find more to learn from the Roman Church than Rome for its part would have to learn from us.... The threat of an exchange of positions and roles is becoming visible today all along the horizon, an exchange in whose light our criticisms, justified as they are, of Mary and the infallible

teaching office, would necessarily become uninteresting.” (“Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council,” The Ecumenical Review July 1963 pp 364-65)

A good question. Looking back on Vatican II, and considering the dramatic developments since, I believe that what Barth contemplated is in fact happening. Rome *is* overtaking Protestantism in the quest for renewal.

Which begs a further question. Is there today any compelling reason for children of Luther, Calvin and Wesley to maintain their separation from the Roman Catholic Church? Specifically, **is the Uniting Church in Australia prepared to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, in three years’ time, by saying clearly and unequivocally that it seeks unity in communion with the Bishop of Rome?** Nobody imagines that the way forward would be fast. Reconciling five centuries of separate memories isn’t easy. But a sharpening of our church’s intention – to prepare itself to receive again the ministry of universal pastor – would help everyone.

Jump to St Stephen’s. By happy coincidence, you will be moving at the end of this service into your annual general meeting. It’s a good thing to do, on a Sunday that has us focussed on reform! An AGM, of course, has a pretty tight agenda which doesn’t provide much scope for a careful review of the congregation’s life. But it does set us thinking about who we are, what we are doing – and what we aren’t doing but probably ought to be.

As you go into this AGM, think reforming and not just maintaining. Yes St Stephen’s is in good heart. Yes what we are trying to be in this place is significant for Christian worship, witness and service in the city of Sydney. Yes full marks for the way everyone is soldiering on in this period without a pastor. We have so much for which to be thankful.

But!

Do not be afraid to ask yourselves the difficult question posed by Reformation Sunday: **what might gospel-shaped, Spirit-directed reform require of us, now, here, in this congregation?**

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