

REFORMED AND ALWAYS REFORMING

MARTIN CAMROUX

Sometimes preachers have a lot to say. A preacher one day was in full flood. Driving home his points with eloquence and passion, throwing his whole heart and soul into the sermon. Suddenly one of the congregation began to walk out. Preachers always find it difficult when people walk out and this time the preacher lost his cool. “Brother, why are you leaving”. The man turned round “I’m going to get my hair cut”. “Why couldn’t you have got it cut before the service started”. “It didn’t need it then”.

Today I shall try not to be so long but I do have a lot to cover. In the next 4 weeks we’ve going to look at the great movements which have helped to mould us as a Church. Today it’s the Reformation. Then Evangelical Revival, liberal theology and the ecumenical movement. My hope is this can help as we seek to live the faith today.

Firstly through the United Reformed Church we are rooted in the Reformation. Its battle cry was *Semper Reformanda* – the Church Reformed and Always Reforming. To try to give you the flavour of what it means to be a Reformed Church I want to take 3 people and 3 moments.

The first moment is 1517 and the man Martin Luther. The Papacy is nearly bankrupt. It will do anything to raise money. The Pope comes up a money making scheme. Buy your way into heaven. He offers to sell an indulgence which will cancel out all your sins or those of anyone else you buy it for. In Germany a Friar called Tetzel is sent to sell them. “As soon as the coin drops in the box the soul flies out of purgatory”.

Luther is outraged. He storms to the Castle Church at Wittenberg and nails his protest to the Church door. You cannot buy God’s forgiveness that is a free gift of his grace. The Pope is corrupt. The Bible not the Church is the source of authority. The Church must be Reformed. Tumult follows. Luther is summoned by the Emperor Charles 5 to account for his views before the Imperial Diet at Worms. Facing the whole power of Church and state he will not give an inch.

“Unless I am proved wrong by Scripture or by evident reason, then I am a prisoner in conscience to the word of God. I cannot retract and I will not retract. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here stand I. I can do no other”

This is the beginning of Reformed faith. One man in obedience to Scripture and reason willing for what he believes to be the truth if necessary alone. This is a faith which is deeply personal. Luther translates the Bible into German and puts a copy in every pew so that everyone may read it. He writes hymns in German so everyone may sing. He preaches the heart of saving faith is the individual experience of the saving grace of God. You cannot hand your conscience over to anyone else, and you cannot live on anyone else’s experience of God. It must be personal. Nothing else really works.

The truth is life isn’t easy. Sometimes it comes crashing on us. And then there all the difference in the world between that which comes out of your own experience and what does not. Let me tell you a story. Some years ago, the noted concert violinist, Itzhak Perlman, was

cornered in his dressing room by a mother. She insisted that Perlman listen to a tape of her talented son, the violinist. Perlman was tired and didn't really want to listen to the tape, but the mother was so insistent, he relented. The mother switched on the portable tape player and it began. Immediately, Perlman was impressed. Such music. A difficult piece, but played with such insight and genius that it moved him to tears. He listened spellbound to the entire recording and then composed himself before he spoke.

Madam, that was magnificent. How old is your son? "Eight years old", she said. "Your son is eight years old and he made that tape?" "No", said the mother, "That wasn't him. That was Jascha Heifitz, but all the neighbours say my son sounds just like him".

We can't play somebody else's tape. We can't live on someone else's belief. We need to own our own personal faith. They said to Martin Luther once. "Where will you be brother Martin, if Church and state all turn against you, where will you be then?". "Why then as now" said Luther. "In the hands of Almighty God". No second hand faith gives you that answer..

Now we must move on. The year is 1645. England has a King whose desire is to be absolute ruler. A great struggle is raging between King and Parliament. From East Anglia comes an obscure country gentleman called Oliver Cromwell. He raises an army drawn largely from the Reformed churches. "I would rather" he said "have a plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for and loves what he knows than what you all a gentleman and is nothing else". He reshapes English life. More than anyone else he sets England on a path to representative government.

Here is something else about a Reformed. Faith. It is about a quest for righteousness and justice. It has a moral urgency about it. It rejects any distinction between religion and politics. It says the sovereignty of God is over all. Don't we pray "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven". You can't shut faith there away behind Church door its goes out in the world.

Today what kind of religious faith need today? Just before Christmas James Forbes of Riverside Church was preaching in the National Cathedral in Washington. And looking out at the experience of September 11th he quoted the words of an Afro-American spiritual I didn't know. "My Lord, what a morning when the stars began to fall." He said:

My Lord, what a morning, when the World Trade Center Towers and a wall of the Pentagon began to fall. My Lord, what a morning, when symbols of our economic strength and military might were mocked, maligned and massacred by the madness of human beings enslaved in flight and used for missiles of mass destruction.

How true. "My lord what a morning when the stars began to fall". I think I'm going to remember that phrase. Well how do we react today to a world full of such frightening possibilities. What does religious faith do? Curl up into a ball. Shut ourselves from it. Chirp away in denial? Try and save a few souls while the world goes to hell?

My Reformed faith tells me: upstage death and destruction by amazing grace. Go on. Calculate, if you will, the magnitude of the horror. And then, set to work, with God, and do not rest until unnumbered blessings break out in a title wave of righteous deeds. Reformed faith is about the sovereignty of God, lift up justice, peace, equality, and compassion, as the foundation stones of a viable society.

And then thirdly the year is 1620 and the man John Robinson. In England dissenters are facing persecution and some flee to Holland where they form a Church with John Robinson as their minister. Eventually deciding they wanted a complete fresh start they sail on the Mayflower to America. John Robinson chooses to stay in Holland and preaches a last sermon to a weeping congregation. He says "We are now ere long to part asunder; and the Lord knoweth whether ever we should live to see our faces again. But whether the Lord had appointed it or not; I charge you, before God and his blessed angels, to follow me no further than I follow Christ, and if God should reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, to be as ready to receive it, as ever you were to receive any truth from my ministry. For I am very confident that the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy word".

Maybe here's the very heart of it. Being part of a Reformed Church is about a willing to change what you think and move on after new truth. For us faith is not set in stone - it involves a willingness to follow the Spirit in new directions. The motto is Semper Reformanda. The Church Reformed - and always reforming.

A 20th century theologian Paul Tillich put this well when he said there is such a thing as the Protestant principle – the recognition that faith needs constantly to be corrected and reformed. What we believe we believe with conviction. But God is a living not a dead God. and when he calls into new ways we hope and pray we will have the faith to follow.

In the 19th it meant opening out to new understandings of faith in the light of science and biblical scholarship. In the 20th opening out to new visions of Christian unity and the equality, in this century who knows. But we can be certain that there are those things which need reforming. Yes the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.

So Martin Luther, Oliver Cromwell, John Robinson. Personal religion, social religion, the willingness to seek new truth. Semper Reformanda – The Church reformed and always. I hope you can find all this here at Trinity.

*Rev'd. Martin Camroux MA
Trinity Church, Sutton
(United Reformed/Methodist)
Cheam Road, Sutton, SM1 1DZ*