

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PROTESTANT

MARTIN CAMROUX

Every now and then people get confused about what kind of Church Trinity is. “Excuse me ‘Father’ is this the Catholic Church?” “No” I said. “Oh, you’re Church of England!” “No”. At that point I put them out of their misery and tried to explain. But it’s a good question what kind of Church is this?

At Trinity we have a mission statement. It says we are an open-minded, inclusive, ecumenical, Christ-centred church, and part of the United Reformed and Methodist Churches. I could give you a sermon on each of those. But today let me take the last part – we are part of the United Reformed and Methodist churches. We are a protestant church. So what does it mean to be a Protestant?

There are three names you need to know. They are Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley. It began with Martin Luther. In 1517 a Dominican Friar John Tetzel is going round Germany selling indulgences to finance the Pope’s building projects. He is telling people that if you buy one your dead relatives will go straight to heaven. “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs”. Luther explodes with rage. They tell him it has the Pope’s authority. In that case he says the Pope’s wrong. He is taken to be tried before the Emperor Charles 5 at Worms. He is ordered to give up his views. And he flings down a response which set a fire right through Europe. He was open, he said, to argument but unless it could be proved to him that what said was wrong he could not recant. "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. God help me. Amen”.

At that moment the Protestant Reformation began. The next name is John Calvin – Calvin the scholar, the thinker, the one who wants to reason out what the faith means. And then John Wesley who 150 years later sees an England in whose industrial slums the gospel is rarely heard declares the “World is my parish” and travelled on horseback an 225,000 miles and preached 40,000 sermons, and starting what we call Evangelical Revival.

So what does it mean to be a Protestant? Firstly to be a Protestant is to seek the Renewal and Reform of the Church. 450 years ago when Protestant Churches began they had a slogan. It was ***Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: The church reformed and always to be reformed.*** There is nothing fixed and final about the Church. It is always likely to fail in one way or another and it always therefore in need of renewal and reform. In Luther’s day you had Popes so corrupt they hoped their own children would succeed to the Papacy. You had salvation for sale. In Wesley’s day it was different. This was the time of Industrial Revolution. New great industrial cities were springing up, mills, pits, factories, chimneys belching smoke. The established Church with its alliance of squire and parson had little place in this new world. Often in the new industrial city there were hardly any churches at all, and if there were those living among these dark satanic mills could find little in common with the old class-ridden church. For the first time the Churches lost contact with a large section of the population. John Wesley determined that his task was to reach out to those of the edges of society with the redeeming love of Christ and out of that came the Methodist movement.

In each case setting right something that was wrong. Renewing- reforming. To be a Protestant is to take up that self-critical task in every time and situation. Today that is still vital. Martin Luther was outraged by those who used religion a cover for their greed. You can still find that today. There is a kind of theology known as “Prosperity theology”. It says one of the benefits of being a Christian is that God will make you rich. It certainly has made quite a few pastors rich. You can find in Korea. You can find it in Africa. You can find in the land of the free and home of the brave. Over in America on one occasion I was watching Oral Roberts. He is supposed to be a Protestant evangelical preacher. He held up a roll of cloth. “This he said”, “this is no ordinary cloth. This is prayer saturated cloth. This is cloth prayed over by Korean women until it is saturated with prayer. And if you just send me a donation you can have a piece and when you pray with it your prayer will suddenly have power. And you will get whatever you ask for”. Or as Tetzels might have put it “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs”. Oral Roberts you know had a 200 foot prayer tower built. And if you sent him money he would say a prayer for you at the very top of his prayer tower – closer to God. Some say he was a great evangelical Protestant – I think the words that come to mind are rascal and fraud.

Everything human is limited, faulty-sinful, if you will. Everything human is open to critique, questioning, and reformation, particularly human religious institutions, their structures, even their pronouncements and creeds. *Semper Reformanda*. The Church reformed but always needing to be reformed. Firstly to be a Protestant is to be committed to reform and renewal of the Church.

Secondly at the heart of what it meant to be a Protestant is a love of the Bible. Martin Luther set out to challenge the authority of the Pope and the Church. If he was going to challenge the Church – what authority could he put in its place? The answer was above all else he would turn to the Bible. “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and by plain reason – my conscience is captive to the word of God – I cannot and I will not recant anything”.

Did you know that in England before the Reformation it was actually illegal to own an English Bible? Latin bibles were there for the upper class and the Church but for ordinary people it was best they didn't read it. At the time of Henry VIII Sir Thomas Moore, who we always think of as a great man of conscience, said it was not necessary for the scriptures to be in the English tongue or in the hands of the common people. Do you know the real moment when the Reformation began? It was when Martin Luther discovered a copy of the Bible. He grew up the son of a peasant when you never saw a Bible. Then as a young man in the university library he found a copy and began to read. That was the beginning of the Reformation. Later he produced a great translation of the Bible into German. From John Calvin in Geneva came the Geneva bible. And in English William Tyndale said he wanted to see the Bible in the hands of every ploughboy and produced the first Bible in English. Knowing his life was in danger he fled to Flanders but Thomas Moore had him hunted down, garrotted and burnt.

The most important thing that Protestantism did was to put the Bible into the hands of ordinary people. This was something revolutionary. Thousands of ordinary people could read the Bible. Many set out to learn to read just so that they could do so. And when they couldn't read they were met in small so that someone could read the Scriptures to them.

Once you had done that you did something earth shattering. You had opened a new way into personal religion. And once you gave people this right to sit with their own Bible to read, and

to think and to question, there was no stopping them. Once you gave the right to say the Pope was wrong then what else couldn't you question? Martin Luther thought everyone would agree with him – he found having challenged the Pope they didn't hesitate to question him. Luther is a great man, said John Calvin but “not the only one in the Church of God to be looked up to”. Church democracy began. In his new Church in Geneva Calvin gave the congregation the right to elect the minister. And once you had democracy in the Church then why not in the state? They began also to elect the magistrates. King James 1 snorted in horror at the way his authority was challenged. “If you aim at a Scots presbytery it agreeth as well with monarchy as God and the Devil.” The Protestant Reformation is the right to have a personal religion, the right to think; once you set that in motion you started something you can't stop.

And then one last thing and the greatest thing of all. Martin Luther was a desperately troubled young man, full of fears and doubts. But when he opened his Bible he found there something that changed his life. It was the doctrine of grace. We are saved by God's grace, not by our own efforts, not by the church. It set Luther free from his attempt to save his own soul and to live in joyful gratitude for the gift already given to him. It captivated his soul and transformed him into a strong, fearless advocate and teacher and prophet and leader.

It captivates my soul, too, every time I ponder it: the great mystery that God loves me and you, not because we are particularly lovable, but sometimes in spite of who we are; that God loves you and me not because our moral perfection has made us deserving of God's love, but in spite of our moral failings.

We are loved by God just as we are! That's the core of the gospel. It changed Martin Luther's life. It changed John Wesley that day his heart was strangely warmed. “Tis love, tis love, thou died for me, I hear the whisper in my heart, the morning breaks, the shadows flee”. Or the old slave-trader John Newton: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost. But now am found, was blind but now I see”.

It was out of this experience that Luther wrote “A safe stronghold our God is still, a trusty shield and weapon”. Before he went to face his accusers at Worms, with his life in danger, they asked “where will you be Brother Martin when Church and state all turn against you?” “Why then as now”, said Luther “in the hands of God”. And to the one who has redeemed by his grace be all honour and glory, now and forever. Amen.

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