



Sermon preached by Revd Allen R. Morton on 27th October 2024

Readings: *Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3: 19-28; John 8: 31-36*

Reformation Sunday

The faith of Jesus Christ

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans chapter three, verses twenty one to twenty five: "The righteousness of God has been disclosed and attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."

What better exercise on Reformation Sunday than to bathe in this fountain of life which is the wisdom of God, in order to let the truth that makes us free more truly free us for our calling. Our calling is to continue in Christ's word. To do that is way more than an intellectual or dogmatic exercise, it is about where we let our feet take us.

The term Reformation or its cognates has nothing to do with that specious brand of democracy called Reform UK. Yet the very use of the word Reformation reminds us to not disregard the really dark things that immediately resulted from the political as well as ecclesial earthquake touched off by Martin Luther's publication of his famous points of contention with his church and some of its practices. The Reformation shook Europe.

The Thirty Years' War was fought in Central Europe between 1618 and 1648 as part of the Counter-Reformation strife between Protestants and Roman Catholics. In the midst of that war Lutheran pastor Martin Rinkart wrote 'Now Thank We All Our God' a hymn often called "The Te Deum of Germany," On one day alone during that conflict Rinkart conducted as many as fifty funerals including that of his own wife. There is peril in claiming God as ours!

Through the misreading of scripture as portraying Jesus versus Jews, the very race from which Jesus came and out of which sprang the first people to become his disciples is misrepresented. John's Gospel appears saturated with antagonism between 'the Jews' and Jesus. The problem is the term 'the Jews'. Such a loaded word, and the Reformation Church created a dangerous legacy in how that conflict of the time of the Fourth Gospel has been perpetuated, without justification, and with evil results. Better than saying 'the Jews' in reference to the Fourth Gospel, the term 'Judeans' is becoming current in Biblical reading and interpretation, recognising that the conversation between Jesus and his fellow Jews takes place in Judaea, 'where *many* Judeans came to believe in him', joining the band of disciples that largely hailed from Galilee in the north. The antagonism was largely to do with Jesus coming up against the religious authorities, who were anxious to keep the uneasy appeasement with Rome. Jesus was utterly minded to be faithful to the will of the Father. His faithfulness put to the test the degree to which every one of his followers would remain with him as he pursued the will of God. So with us. Can we stand the truth that sets us free to set us free to go with Jesus in the degree to which he was faithful? How fearful might we be of what others say? This might touch us even in what we dare to sing or preach or stand up for.

I share with you a personal reflection on the process by which I prepared this service and my choice of hymns. I did not select Martin Luther's cry of defiance in 'a mighty stronghold is our God'. The fourth verse is deeply troubling, declaring Luther's preparedness to let his opponents take goods, children, spouse and all if that is the price of fidelity to the Gospel and his reformed understanding of religious living. How can I ask you to sing it if I can't bring myself to do so, such are the implications these lines carry. The danger in those lines is of legitimising sacrificing others on the altar of our faithfulness; it seems to be the stuff of religious zeal and of a patriotism that descends into virulent nationalism whose message is hate of the other.

While I was preparing to train for ordination in the Baptist ministry, my Saturday evenings were spent in the church coffee bar in a small industrial and market town in the East Midlands. The coffee bar was an avowedly evangelistic project, using loud music, culturally identifying, befriending, Christian testimony and a little green booklet entitled *The Way To Life*. In this booklet for enquirers the way to become a follower of Christ was simply explained. A key theme of it was to say how all of us needed to see what sinners we are, that Jesus has saved us by his death from our sins, and that the offer of forgiveness is there if we pray to God. A key line in the booklet was the text from Romans 3 v 21, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

All of us indeed have missed the mark. This is the hinge on which turns the evangelical message that all the world needs the salvation effected through Christ's death for our sins. Yet, the first place for the truth of this text spoken by Mother Phoebe as she performed the apostle's magnum opus was the church of God. The several congregations in Rome were seriously divided between self-styled Strong believers and so-called Weak believers. I commend to you the wonderfully titled exposition on Paul's Epistle by Scott McKnight 'Reading Romans Backwards' to get the feel of this approach to Paul's letter. I used to think this letter was sent primarily to give himself an introduction before going off to evangelise elsewhere. A closer look shows that it was more about the

project of the Gospel of Peace with God working its holy leaven in the existing congregations. That all have sinned and have missed the mark of God's glorious intention for human beings is in the first instance a levelling of egos among believers, not unbelievers. It is the praxis of how to continue in the word of Christ in relation to one another if the church is to live out the faithfulness of Christ to the world.

Believers in those congregations who strongly adhered to the Jewish Law and practices were in a crisis of identity in the face of fellow believers who no longer or never followed Moses in the first place and saw themselves free in the truth of Christ from all that, and each side believed in their own rightness! The necessary levelling of egos comes with Paul reminding each and all in that divided and divisive community that the story of their salvation is not about them but about 'God's just mercy and merciful justice' against which all other claims to being in the right are seen for what they are. Faith is the gift of God, while yet there has to be a turning of the feet and a renewing of the mindset in the light of the grace of God.

'God put Jesus forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood'. In the Greek text is a rare word, *hilarion*, *Hilarion* is the word for mercy seat, a word only found in one other place in the New Testament, the Letter to Hebrews. There the rites of the Temple are employed as an image to explain the nature and efficacy of the death of Christ. Central to the Jewish sacrificial worship was the Ark of the Covenant, a kind of box-come-altar, above which were the wings of the guardian angels, protecting sanctified space beneath them, known as *the mercy seat*. Priests would sprinkle the blood of the ritually sacrificed animals upon this seat, as a prayer for cleansing the nation of its sins, a plea to God. But the seat itself is not where that sacrifice was made. The wonder is that translators and interpreters continue to cover the mercy seat in blood as the place of sacrifice rather than as the sanctified place, seemingly turning the sacrifice of God in Christ into a transaction between God and Christ rather than the ultimate expression of God's covenant with humankind and the creation.

The prophet Jeremiah preached to his rebellious generation that there would come a time when God's own people would actually remain true to God, that this wondrous state of affairs would come about by a deep heart operation. I will write my law in their hearts. My ways will be their ways. They will know me, all of them, from highest to lowest in society. When and how this vision would be realised is not actually made clear, but the glorious vision is there. The most wonderful aspect of this passage of hope is what the prophet says about the patience of God. The people broke the first covenant, and it brought them to such a terrible place through their disobedience. Yet the God of Abraham and Sarah has not given up on God's plan which still involves the people whose forebears were brought up out of Egypt. This is the beginning to which to return, to recover faith in who God's people are and so move on through and past failure. Continue in my word.

The preacher and liturgist in me is conscious of how the context of this service as a celebration of the Protestant Reformation has included prayers and confessions of faith from the early leaders of that seismic movement. What is missing are the voices of the many women who also took a lead. To end this sermon, and to go some way to redress that lack, is the story of at least one brave woman who spoke up for someone being persecuted for their Reformation convictions during that upheaval.

Argula von Grumbach (1492-c.1554) wrote forcefully in defence of the Reformation, becoming the first published author among Protestant women. In 1523, Frau von Grumbach penned an open letter challenging the arrest of a former student at the University of Ingolstadt, Arsacius Seehofer, for teaching Lutheran views. She addressed her published letter, "To the honourable, worthy, highborn, erudite, noble, stalwart Rector and all the Faculty of the University of Ingolstadt: When I heard what you had done to Arsacius Seehofer under terror of imprisonment and the stake, my heart trembled and my bones quaked. What have Luther and Melancthon taught save the Word of God? You have condemned them. You have not refuted them". She went on to cite over 80 scripture passages in defence of her Reformation views, and she directly challenged the University theologians to a public debate with her in German on the legitimacy of their conduct in persecuting Seehofer.

Her published letter, To the University of Ingolstadt, provoked a huge reaction. To have a woman call out eminent theologians and challenge them to a debate was unheard of. In the new age of the printing press, Frau von Grumbach's views spread quickly, and the letter went through 14 printed editions in two months. Critics and opponents slandered von Grumbach, calling her a "shameless whore" and a neglectful wife and mother. The Ingolstadt theologians wanted the "silly bag" punished, and von Grumbach's husband, who remained a Catholic, lost his administrative post for not properly controlling his wife. In the end, University authorities ignored her challenge, and no public debate occurred. Von Grumbach's voice lives on through her writings. As she concluded toward the end of the letter, "What I have written to you is no woman's chit-chat, but the word of God."

May what I have said be the word of God to us today. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Allen Morton

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