

*'I have set before you life and death'* – a sermon preached by 'John Knox'  
Sunday 23 November 2014, given by Professor Peter Matheson

Long have we thirsted, dear friends, to speak of the doctrine we profess, for which we have encountered infamy and danger. It is God's doing that I speak to you over the centuries, across the continents. How strange, how humbling that you have named your church after me, like 14 other New Zealand churches I am told. My struggles of so long ago are not forgotten by you, then. Perhaps because you too are up against it. You too have your struggles against the hawkers of smooth words though God be thanked, you have never had to watch as I have, as honest preachers of the Gospel have been dragged away, to be incarcerated, beheaded, burnt alive. Our mentors, our dear friends. You do not get over that. Yet we who have watched our loved ones suffer, know how precious life is. We survivors bear their scars on our own bodies, engraved on our hearts. I myself was enslaved in the French galleys for eighteen long months. I nearly died.

Like the apostles and martyrs of the Early church we suffer for the Gospel, and it brings one close to our Lord, does it not? His life so cruelly cut short. So what does this tell us? About ourselves, About this world of ours? About innocence? About radical evil.

I grew up in East Lothian, not far from Edinburgh. There was nothing special about me. Still isn't. I'm a plain man, and I speak plain. I am no great scholar like Martin Luther. But I have been called to preach and when I preach people know they face choices. Life or death. Life or death. They face their God.

The Bible is not words. Not even holy words. It is the story of God's people, of Israel, and then the New Israel. God's beloved but disobedient people. Locked up in the dungeon of Egypt and then released. Locked up in their sins, and then redeemed. Their story is ours.

And there's no limit to God's people, as Paul taught us. Jew or Gentile, slave or free. There's hope even for the English. In Geneva I met Poles, Italians Hungarians, Dutch, Frenchmen. Many languages, but one faith. I have preached in Switzerland, in England, in Scotland, and now here I am, preaching in New Zealand. A wondrous thing.

God called me, kicking and protesting, to be a preacher. I preach to burgesses, lairds, nobles, men, women, all earthy, mixed-up people, children of Adam and of Christ. I am urgent with the fire of God's consuming righteousness, and would kindle it in your hearts. My beloved Scotland was caught up in power politics, the intrigues of the French and the English and that impudent blasphemer in Rome. What has the sweet savour of the Gospel to say about such cankered malice? What has Christ's evangel to say about the greed of great churchmen, bishops and abbots, noblemen. While God's poor went without bread, without education, without the Gospel.

And who cared? God cared. God sent us a Reformation.

Maybe you shrug a cynical shoulder. I cannot reach your hearts and minds, only God's spirit moves among us mightily. You good people in peaceful New Zealand cannot imagine what it is like to live in a land where the poor beg or starve, where the cardinals and archbishops and abbots live in unbelievable luxury and the people go to the grave ignorant. Your sympathies, I suspect, are with young Mary Queen of Scots. We all love the blue cornflowers and the red poppies more than the oats and the wheat. But it is the latter that give us sustenance. Just remember, though, that with a snap of her fingers she could have had me and my followers barbecued. She had an obdurate heart

against God and his truth. England's reformation began through King Henry. Ours had to fight in the teeth of the opposition of the monarchy. Freedom is a costly thing. Faced by tyranny and lies do you lie down before it.

The founders of this city of Dunedin knew how costly freedom was. Free Church members walked out of the churches and manses of the Established Church in Scotland. Gave it all up for the freedom to choose their own ministers. Presbyterianism has always marched under the flag of rebellion. The Scottish Covenanters faced a Stuart king who would not let them worship as they wanted. Maybe you've seen the slab in the Grassmarket in Edinburgh where they put the corpses of the martyrs. Freedom is a costly thing. Do you know this history, members of Knox Church? Do you want to?

We are most certainly persuaded that we are the heirs of the prophets and apostles and the saints and martyrs. As God's people we will always be up against it, up against the principalities and the powers. How do you read holy Scripture? I have learnt from it that those who hold the money-bags hold onto them like grim death. Words and arguments just bounce off the powerful. They love their smooth words. But the prophets were not smooth. Jesus had to set his face towards Jerusalem.

People call me a hard man. But in hard times one needs plain words, and have to back these plain words with your very life. For me that meant, urging ordinary men and women like yourselves to stand up and resist tyranny, defy their monarch. It was not God's will that things should go on as they were. Nor did they. God sent us a Reformation.

Or was I mistaken? If I had talked smooth words to Mary Queen of Scots nothing would ever have changed. We learn from the Incarnation that whenever an innocent child is born Herod appears on the scene.

If we follow Jesus we bring out Satan from his lair. Or am I mistaken. We have to be gentle as doves, sly as serpents? There is nothing harder on God's earth than knowing when one has to stand up and say No an absolute No; and when one has to say Yes, an absolute Yes. We need to pray as those facing ruin. We need to walk into the history of God's people in the Bible and let them the prophets speak to us. We need to listen to God's saints in our midst.

Is this me John Knox speaking, or is it that man Matheson? Neither of us matter, anyway. But is it possible that the transcendent Word of the Lord of the Universe can still to be heard hidden under my poor words. My plain words.

And you my dear people. I know I am talking to the descendants of the Covenanters, of Thomas Chalmers and Dr Stuart? Their blood yet flows in your veins, as does the very blood of the Redeemer, the man of Nazareth. Who cares? God cares. We dare to believe that God is sending us a Reformation.

Across the centuries, across the continents I reach out to you and thank you for reaching out to me, men and women of Knox Church. Magnify God. Fear not the face of the wicked. Be merciful to the poor. W And let us crave of God with unfeigned hearts his benediction in this work begun to his glory, and for the comfort of his Kirk.