

## **“Reformation Sunday”, a sermon based preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Peter Matheson on 25 October 2020.**

When I began my ministry, way back in the 1960's, we were clear that the church needed all sorts of reform in its old fashioned ways, in its worship, in its theology. As a member of the Iona Community I felt we were in the advance guard of reform. We wanted to break with sentimental patterns of piety, to get into social justice, to reach out to our Anglican and Roman Catholic colleagues, to renew theology by discarding pre-scientific ways of thought. Virgin Birth, Resurrection could no longer be understood literally. And we should be honest with folk that these old ways were done for ever. Moltmann's Theology of Hope was one guiding star. At heart the church is to be forward-looking, as it was in the beginning. It was daunting, but exciting, too.

But here in Aotearoa, as in the church world-wide, little of this chirpy optimism about changing the face of the church survived. Since the Geering controversy and since Vatican 2 large sections of the church have - to put it bluntly - given up on theology. Given up on thought. Anti-intellectualism is widespread, because for many all they can be sure about any longer is their emotional commitment to the faith. Jesus, Jesus Jesus, they cry. You can understand that. But that means critical & difficult issues such as those to do with gender or bioethics or our relations to Islam are decided on a gut level. Fatal. Hopeless.

When I stand here in the pulpit, when you - as Knox congregations do - listen carefully and critically, we know that this won't do. The Gospel is not about us and our precious gut feelings. We are not some religious club. Before God, our own preferences, opinions, feelings, instincts, are of course important. We are who we are. Yet in Bonhoeffer's terms, they are penultimates. Luther put it this way: we are chronically turned in on ourselves, incurvatus in se. So the ancient image of taking off your shoes when you enter holy ground is relevant. If faith means anything at all, we have to take off our old hiking boots, our flash new loafers, sandals, pumps whatever. Metaphorically we have to walk barefoot. Be open to re-inventing ourselves

This abstract preacher talk becomes reality for me when I try to wrestle my way into the life and thought of the great Reformation figures. Our traditional Protestant glorification of Luther or Calvin or John Knox is long gone. Downing popes and bishops and ushering in the glorious new era of **us**. When we mihi

to Luther or John Knox, to Katharina Zell or Argula von Grumbach we say hello to people whose language, actions, commitments are a million miles from ours. We only see ourselves for what we are when confronted by others who are so absolutely different from us. History is self discovery. We don't study the Reformation out of academic interest. Blood sweat and tears is more like it.

Part of the key message, that we have to offer our presentist generation, with its hunger for instant truth, for one-liners, for easy answers, is the humbling insight that truth always means going back to the beginning of things including of course the child within us. Every Reformer worthy of the name combined incredible sophistication with utter innocence. The toughest analysis and the gentlest prayer: the radical reformer, Thomas Müntzer, who saw through the power play of the princes and the corrupt structures of justice of his time, and died young, tortured and executed after throwing himself onto the side of the impoverished peasants and miners: *O kindly God, open up the abyss of our souls, that we come to know the immortality of our being through the new birth of your son, by the power of his flesh and costly blood.*

The abyss of our souls. We don't talk like that any more. Richard Rohr talks of "the laboratory where all such radical change can occur—inside of our very mind, heart, and the cells of our body. I call it the laboratory of contemplative practice, which rewires our inner life and actually confirms in the soul a kind of "emotional sobriety."

But we do talk here in Knox about transformation, and that's what's meant. In her book *The Silent Cry*, Dorothy Soelle suggests that there is the closest link between the mystics - allowing themselves to fall into the abyss of the soul and transformative social justice. Like Bonhoeffer she began with philosophy but moved to this view that truth/justice is to be found by weaving together a sense of wonder with a tough engagement for justice. We have to go deeper. To let go, to walk barefoot. "a man had not yet given up everything for God as long as he held on to the moneybag of his own opinions." Francis of Assisi.

All this clashes with much of our modern mind-set: I got involved in a fascinating conversation recently with a sociologist working in the States. We no longer have any accepted criteria for truth or falsehood, right or wrong. Relativity rules supreme. Truth, justice for most folk are chimaera. Populism rules supreme.

Maybe, this is Matheson speaking now, we have tossed out God and end up with nothing but penultimates. No dimension of mystery left. No cutting edge analysis either.

So we need to return to our heritage, to explore what's there.

Here's a woman reformer, Katherine Zell, from the busy trading city of Strasbourg, on the Rhine, talking about transformation, as only a woman could, liking it to child birth. Again, the language is not ours, but be patient; listen for the meaning: for her Christ is a mother, giving birth: blood, sweat and pain.

The grace of God through Jesus Christ is the true mother, Christ in God and God in him... For he has come to us in our flesh and in great fear birthed us into grace, or restored us to grace, shedding bloody sweat as he did...

Birthed us into grace. Here's me your historian/preacher, offering you all we have from the past: this thin trail of words, from Luther, Katherine,

The analogy I used with my students was walking by the seashore, seeing the thin trail of shells, kelp, tiny skeletal remains and attempting to recreate from that the vibrant life of the ocean. The vibrant life of the Reformation. Scripture is like that, too, of course, on first glance it's just a thin trail of words. The enormous challenge, we call it hermeneutics, is to read them so that the vibrant life of the people of God reemerges for us.

Here we are, then, I in the pulpit, you critically, carefully weighing what I say. Where in all this is the truth? We are over the easy answers. *For the Bible tells me so.* We can quote a thousand texts, but without the guidance of the Spirit, a feel for the whole journey of the people of Israel, of the folk around Jesus, we are just clashing symbols. I cannot stand here without sensing at my side, Sarah Mitchell, David Grant, Neil Churcher, my own father of course. You will feel the same. We are whom we **were**. We are Abraham, Deborah, Jeremiah, Luther, Katherine, Argula, John Knox. They are the transformative life-blood flowing in our veins.

It was always hard yacka, the Reformation, and could be terrifyingly cruel, in theory we're all for transformation. The reality is the ferocious resistance of all the huge vested interests, not least our own. So if we would reform the Church today as we must, we will need what the first woman reformer Argula

of Grumbach called “the gracious friendliness of Christ” - and combine that gentleness with a readiness to ask all the tough questions.

Luther talked of the inner eye, which brings Scripture to life. Our generation is crying out for meaning, for truth, for righteousness. Luther’s new way of talking about God has been classically described as a Sprachereignis. Performative language. A way of talking which **changes** everything. Jesus talked like that. Jesus the man for others, as Bonhoeffer summed it up.. Our whole heritage as Presbyterians is about intellectual and spiritual integrity, is it not? Hard analysis, wedded to prayer of the heart. Crafting a community which lives out the impossible possibility of truth-telling - as David Grant never tired of saying - and of righteousness. Open to the abyss yet absolutely down to earth. Amen.

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