

Trinity 4 2017 Keswick St John 8 and 10 Canon Michael Webb

I had a great coffee after church in Belgrade recently. Not serving cappuccino or chocolate chip cookies but because loads of people wanted to talk about faith. Surprised that vicars don't often get those conversations. One wanted disagree Muslims, someone else asked about hell and some visitors from Canada and Japan asked "What is the C of E?"

So we talked about how church born. One guy said ' Didn't you leave Rome cos Henry 8<sup>th</sup> wanted a divorce?' Certainly true but more than that. Foundation of church part of massive ferment of theological ideas at start of C16th – mad ideas like people should be able to read Bible in own language! - as well as patriotic movements which led to creation of national churches. Remember from school or reading Mantel that it was time of great change and that the old order was changed often with terrible violence.

I said that it was in this ferment that the break from Rome took place and the Church of England set up but that it was only after 50 years of seesawing between Catholic and protestant that it became a church in the middle trying to reconcile the best of the Catholic past and its traditions with the new Protestant emphasis on personal faith in Christ alone as the way to salvation.

But why talk about this today? 2 reasons. Because this year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of key events in Prot Reformation. On Oct 31<sup>st</sup> 1517, Martin Luther, Catholic monk and professor of theology nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg demanding a debate on practices like the sale of indulgences (a sort of get me out of purgatory card) which he believed had no place in Christian theology. His reading of scripture had convinced him that it was God's loving grace and that alone which would take us to heaven. I mention it today because we shall hear a great deal about Luther over the next 3 weeks since the Convention is take Luther's phrase 'Captive to the Word of God' as its theme.

And also because it was his reading of the letter to the Romans which changed his thinking. You will have noticed that over the recent weeks of Trinity and indeed right on until mid September we are reading Romans as our first lesson. At times it may make our brains ache – a bit like today! as we try to make sense of what Paul writes to the Christians in Rome. But it is a book which has been hugely influential in Christian thinking. It gave St Augustine in the C5th a theology that shaped western thought for 1000 years; it was instrumental in the Wesley's vision of a church renewed in the C18th and led to foundation of the personal faith of Methodical Christianity or Methodism. It was true for Luther who discovered within the core message of the Reformation that we can only be saved from sin and death by what God did for us in Christ and that it will be our faith in him and not in good works we do that will bring us salvation. This message of reliance on Scripture as the sole authority for faith and practice liberated him from his doubts and sparked the theological reformation. If you have never read Romans it is worth getting to study it either together with others or with a simple commentary to help you understand.

Now I am not really here to give a history lesson but thinking about how our church was founded can help us reflect on how we are to be the church in the world today. 500 years have passed and the world is very different but we still grapple with "What is the C of E?" Some of Luther's more extreme ideas like his anti-Semitism have been rejected but in more recent times our church has come to see in the Lutheran churches of Germany and the Baltic a partner with whom we can work and share ministry. The agreement we have is called the Porvoo Agreement. Just as we have grown ever closer to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches so we have tried to see the best in other Protestant churches. But our place is unusual in that we seek to discover and hold together the best in all traditions. The C of E calls itself both Catholic and Reformed seeing the best in the continuity of faith back to the apostles and maintaining the need for a personal faith in Jesus. That is why we have located our authority not just in Scripture or just in the decision of bishops but in a humble three legged stool. We find our authority in the balance between faith, the traditional teaching of the church and the exercise of our reason.

So what is the C of E? 1. it is a bridge church seeking to find the best in all and being a connection between differing views. Perhaps suits British temperament but it is hard to maintain in a world often wants clearcut answers. But being the balance is not the same as sitting on the fence or being wishy washy. I believe we need a church which helps to hold different insights in creative tension in a world and church that is ever pulling further apart. Being a bridge in a polarised world is a tough call.

2. we need to be a church that honours our legacy of faith, catholic and reformed. But it cannot be a static church. If we like tradition and old ways of doing things in our ritual and thinking then we always need to be asking where the Holy Spirit is leading us into new places. Church needs to be always changing yet ever the same. We need to be alert to how God wants us to take the best of the past and present it in fresh ways for the new generation.

And finally our church must be one of deep personal faith in Jesus. In our reading from Romans today Paul wrestles with how on earth to do good in his daily life and comes to the triumphant conclusion it is only through the power and presence of Christ working in him. If our life as Christians and as a church local and national is only about outward show and meaningless ritual and does not lead to loving action then it is futile. It is only as we accept the Lordship of Christ that we shall find peace and salvation and become the church he is calling us to be in the world today.