**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 8 October 2017 – where?**

**Gospel****Matthew 7: 15-20**

15“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

**Contemporary reading ‘History: Reformation’**

<http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about_us/how_we_are_organised/history>

The Medieval Church had great power, but it also had its critics. One of the issues with which the first Archbishop of Glasgow had to deal was an Ayrshire movement which was challenging Church teaching. Known as 'the Lollards of Kyle' they not only rejected traditional practices; they positively affirmed counter-argument in favour of priests being allowed to marry (as distinct from turning a blind eye to concubinage) and the right of people to read the Bible and to worship in their own language. 'Lollardy' was a pejorative term (meaning 'muttering') used to describe the radical teaching of the fourteenth century English theologian, John Wycliffe. In Scotland it had produced martyrs such as James Resby, burned at the stake in Perth in 1407, and Paul Crawer, who suffered the same fate in St Andrews in 1433.

In 1517 things came to a head when, according to tradition, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of All Saints Church in his native Wittenberg. Luther's particular focus was the selling of indulgences which purported to reduce time spent in purgatory, with the proceeds funding the re-building of St Peter's in Rome. Thanks to the recently invented printing press Luther's ideas quickly spread far and wide. In Scotland they were embraced by people such as Patrick Hamilton who had studied in Germany and was martyred at St Andrews in 1528.

Others took up the cause including George Wishart and his sword-bearer, John Knox. Wishart, too, suffered martyrdom but Knox, strongly influenced by John Calvin from time spent in Geneva, survived to achieve his goal when in August 1560 the Scottish Parliament rejected the authority of the Pope and outlawed the Mass.

**Everything happens in a context. Great movements catch fire and take hold when the moment is right. When that idea ignites and burns in the hearts and minds of the time. Look back on your own life. Look at those intersections of particular forces and circumstances when you acted – or perhaps more importantly - did *not* take a path which seemed open and enticing in favour of a more narrow way.**

**A single person, even with a great idea, seldom catches the attention of the world and successfully pushes it through alone. Others are allies in the process. Even opponents of that great idea may help its progress by the way they resist it, inadvertently giving more gravitas to the feared reformer.**

**Take 16th century Germany for instance. The map on the OOS shows England, Spain and France are relatively cohesive nation states. This gave their rulers strengths of territory, wealth, and populations from whom they could draw armies if necessary. These nation states could therefore wield power and resist outside powers. They could negotiate or even ignore directives from the Vatican. In contrast, 16th century Germany was still an amalgam of princely states. These were gathered into what was known as the Holy Roman Empire – a temporal power, but buttressed by the political power of Rome.**

**We probably can’t fully imagine how church and state intermingled then. Equally any 16th century person dropping in here wouldn’t understand how separate we try to keep church and state. Debate over religious instruction in schools would be a mystery. Why archbishops weren’t at negotiating tables with Winston Peters next week would be a puzzle.**

**One problem of fragmentation of the German states was they had less negotiating power. They couldn’t make sure that taxes raised by the German church were spent in Germany. There was an increasingly unpopular flow of German money over the Alps into Italy and down to Rome for ambitious building projects by Pope Julian II and Leo X. Last week we saw Michelangelo and his contemporaries being some of the artists thus financed.**

**So the context into which Luther proposed his ideas for debate, included frustrated rulers and a grumpy constituency. We might not realise it but the theological critique he offered the mother church of his time, carried political implications. They suggested relationships between temporal princes and the church and relationships between peasants and rulers could change. The inferiors in those relationships, (the princes and the peasants) would feel there was freedom to be gained as a result of reforms Luther was proposing, especially as his rhetoric strengthened against the power of the papacy at the time. A fascinating biography of Luther I have been reading for this series, written by a Catholic writer, suggests contemporary Church leaders in Rome did not understand the German context – nor valued insights from a small time university professor nor read accurately the degree of disenchantment among princes and people. Does this sound at all familiar? Perhaps in a similar way American Democrats misread the mood of the country in 2016. Even with money and his extroverted style, (and possible Russian collusion) Donald Trump’s message would not have found traction without disillusionment and anger rife in parts of the US.**

**In 16th century England the disgruntlement of the ruler was due to reproductive issues as well as power and taxes. Henry the VII’s need for a healthy male heir coloured his relationship with Rome. Henry virtually declared himself head of the church in England. This was a political reformation more than theological. In some films and TV programmes on this fascinating king, it is clearly portrayed that Henry, like others in his time, was very concerned his eternal well being remained secure. He was not keen to jeopardise his immortal soul. It could be said that his executions of Thomas More and John Fisher occurred because they would not reassure him that his break with Rome was correct and therefore his soul was still safe.**

**At the same time, Lutheran ideas were circulating in England. The death of an early Scottish martyr, George Wishart, deeply influenced the young Scots lawyer John Knox. Later a fiery, non-compromising preacher, Knox frequently got into hot political bother, needing to escape first to England and later to Europe. Ideas from Europe and Britain criss-crossed the seas between. As you read down the timeline you can see tensions between religious groups reflected in Parliamentary Acts passed to suppress whichever group was out of favour with the monarch on the throne at the time. In the mid 1500s the tide was against reformers, but after the ascension of Elizabeth, the tide turned more protestant. Each side suffered in turn. Brave people lost their lives. Unspeakable acts were done by followers of each persuasion. More than one leader had blood on their hands.**

**After James the VI of Scotland became also James I of England, there was a fierce fight in Scotland over his attempt to reintroduce bishops. This is the King James of the King James Bible. It’s elegant Shakespearian prose reflects the vocabulary and style of the time.**

**It wasn’t until Andrew Melville’s work in 1578 that the idea of bishops was more thoroughly pushed back in Scotland and the present Presbyterian government which consisted of layers of councils, at parish, regional and national level were developed. This is the meaning of the words Presbyterian – governance by elders. Though an effective reformer of both the universities of Glasgow and St Andrew’s, Melville life became very uncomfortable as a result of his opposition to the establishment. He was imprisoned more than once. In 1584 he escaped a charge of treason by fleeing to England and in 1606 after time in the Tower of London, he was deposed from his university position. He ended his life in exile in France where he had gone to teach theology.**

**Political fortunes of the times both assisted and resisted the Reformation. Where rulers were sympathetic, pockets of protestant churches developed. The map on the OOS shows how theologies from various reformers influenced locations differently. At the end of the 16th century, Scotland tended to be Calvinist along with some small areas in Europe, as well as other areas with Calvinist influence showing in the pockets coloured red. Lutheran areas tend to cluster in north Germany and Scandinavia. Catholicism still was still then the majority theology in Spain, up through Europe, in Italy, and the Balkan states. Probably St Andrew’s University in Scotland, with its early history of reformation influences should be shown here as a Protestant university.**

**Last week we were reminded Reformations such as that Luther spearheaded, occur roughly every 500 years. Here *we* are, right on the spot. For those used to mainstream western church it certainly feels like something is collapsing. Frequently our ideals of inclusion and freedom of thought, our valuing of rational thinking, our desire for compassion and desire for a wide reaching spirituality clash with the reality of institutional church rules.**

**What are we being called out of? What is it we are being urged into? It is not only a matter of what *we* want – that could be something comfortable and indulging of our preferences. It needs to be a matter of what will save the world; save it from its present self-preoccupation, from our Roman Empire like indulgence of privilege and luxury while others starve.**

**While progressives and liberals shrink from the words salvation and redemption, in fact, these are still needed. We might find it more palatable to call what is needed *transformation.* We Christians need to get our act together. We are ones who can provide the platform on which this transformation can happen – we can provide the necessary spark for the fire to burn. We know conventional, traditional Christianity isn’t attracting people. We need to let them know however, that the foundations of that message still speak to their condition. That the compassion people ask for on give-a-little pages is just a digital version of Jesus telling us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. And social enterprises like Scott Reeves’ pop-up cafes which train baristas so school leavers can get their first job seem very like the injunctions in Deuteronomy to allow space for those poorer and less protected than we.**

**The need in our world is overwhelming. As the Gospel reminded us, people do look for fruit on thornbushes and figs on thistles. They are deceived by false prophets promising what they cannot deliver. When you look in certain directions, the future seems dark. Within the darkness there are small points of light where people of good will - believers and unbelievers - are showing compassion, ensuring there is distributive justice in operation and everyone gets a fair deal.**

**This picture reminds me of the parting words of Mr Atha in Morris West’s novel *The Clowns of God.*  He says this to a small group he has gathered in the Swiss Alps on the eve of imminent nuclear war:**

**“...in the evil times which are now upon us, you are chosen to keep the small flame of love alight, to nurture the seeds of goodness in this small place, until the day when the Spirit sends you out to light other candles in a dark land and plant new seeds in a blackened earth.”**

**What are these times in which we find ourselves?**

**A society which seems to accept at least legislatively gay rights and a church which still cannot be wise enough to interpret the scriptures another way;**

**a time when neo-liberalism has made the gap between poor and rich as wide as ever;**

**a time when the planet is suffocating in the wake of our exhaust;**

**times when natural disasters are on the increase as a result;**

**a time when in the absence of a unifying spiritual focus, people turn to ideologies and fight with those with whom they disagree;**

**times when indigenous non-white human beings are still rated second best too often;**

**a time when depression and suicide claim people who cannot see that small flame of love in their lives;**

**a world where the most noticeable President in the world shows disrespect and hypocrisy in his dealings with people different from himself and whose self absorption means even the people who elected him will not get what he promised; and**

**we have our fair share of people disgruntled because they cannot see much benefit from their taxes.**

**We are that small group gathered, perhaps on the eve of nuclear war if two narcissistic world leaders are not restrained by their officials. We are that small group which West’s Mr Atha says is chosen to keep the small flame of love alight.**

**We have the knowledge and the theology which would help us provide a steadying foundation and a purpose for the compassion many good people are struggling to achieve; young people with stars in their eyes and hurt in their hearts at what previous generations have done to the world. For their various social enterprises to be sustainable they need the wisdom of the millennia undergirding their efforts. For us to influence political leaders we need to know what values we hold and what values we want them to legislate. For us to achieve a reformation know we need to elarn the lesson of the last great Reformation.**

**Those reformers, in *their* chaotic and disturbed times, spoke out.**

**They stood up and were counted.**

**We would find their methods crude and vulgar and polemical.**

**We might find their theology confining**

**Sometimes they caused more disruption than they needed to.**

**But they risked and gave their lives for a new day,**

**a new way of doing faith and life,**

**a new way of being church,**

**a new and fresh rediscovery of what faith is,**

**of the importance of being sure in what it is that you put your trust.**

**That Reformation then, half a millennium ago,**

**calls to us to be faithful in our time.**

**What shape does Reformation need to take in our context,**

**In this time and this place,**

**half a world away**

**and 500 years on down the world?**

**We might flippantly say**

**‘God knows and she’s not telling’**

**I think we do know,**

**but are we willing?**

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