

The Reformation Remembered:

A short lecture for the Blackburn Branch of the Prayer Book Society, 13 May 2017, by the Revd. Canon Dr. Ian Stockton, Canon Chancellor of Blackburn Cathedral.

Reformation Five Hundred Years 1517-2017

This is the year of Reformation 500, commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation's beginning, when on 31st October 1517 Martin Luther issued his ninety-five theses for reforming the Western Church. So began a tumultuous period in European history and the fracturing of the Church in Europe. In Germany for over ten years there has been a careful build-up to this anniversary, with many regional and international events arranged, including in early June the Northern European Cathedrals' Conference in Braunschweig, supported by a Blackburn Cathedral presence. Although there are commemorations now planned in Britain, the overall interest has been small compared to that of our Northern European partners. For some people the Reformation heritage is being commemorated in more secular terms, highlighting freedom and responsibility. Reformation 500 in Germany is an event of great cultural, touristic and economic significance. Today, with more recognition of how the Reformation period was experienced in different European countries, it has become more common to speak in the plural of 'reformations'.



Long years ago in Cambridge, I spent two years working at Reformation Studies, and I thought that I still had some of the notes, extracts from Luther, Tyndale, Calvin, Cranmer and others, and the hand-written essays that I produced, but I have only the books that I bought and kept. So much has been written since then, but at its best history always involves looking at source documents, whether Luther's Commentary on Galatians, the **English Prayer Book of 1549** or William Tyndale's New Testament. In recent years there has been a huge resurgence in history's popularity, with recognition of our need to understand the past, even though there are fashions in historiography, as well as in costume, architecture and liturgy. Inevitably, some aspects of our past receive comparatively less attention, for as human-beings, we cannot but be selective.

The word 'protestant' is used much less in the UK today than sixty years ago, or a hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, or four hundred years ago. In our more secular age, with its diverse forms of

worldwide Christianity, and within a more multi-faith Europe, we do not so readily see ourselves as a 'protestant nation,' in the way that many of our forebears did. The sixteenth century's religious and cultural turbulence brought about varied expressions and experience of Reformation within the different countries of Europe, and within these islands too. The Reformation was multi-dimensional, political and economic, as well as spiritual and religious, and the English Reformation was far more than a Renaissance monarch requiring a legitimate heir, and the Church of England more than a marriage of convenience.

Martin Luther did not seek to divide the Church in Western Europe, but to reform it, and reformation had long been in the European agenda. I remember hearing the well-known English Charismatic Evangelical priest, David Watson, shock some of his protestant audience by speaking of the tragedy of the reformation. At the time it was a controversial thing to say. He was not denying its theological or social benefits, but expressing grief that the Body of Christ was further torn asunder in the sixteenth century.

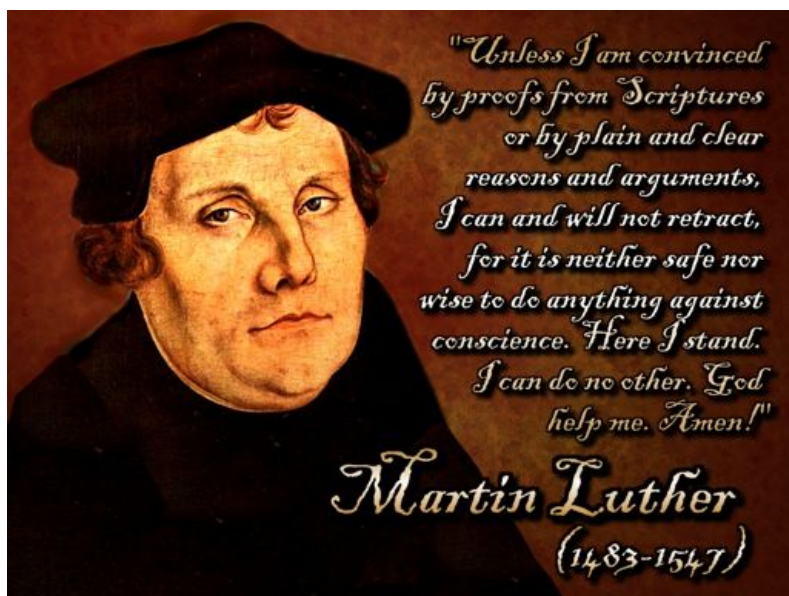
The Church of England by its origin and history is Reformed Catholic, drawing both on both the traditions of the early and mediaeval Church and on the transformation wrought by the reformation settlement. Subsequently, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries our religious landscape changed further through



influences of the **Oxford Movement**, the Ecumenical Movement, the Liturgical Movement and the Pentecostal Movement, and through the effects of international conflict and cultural and technological change. Any Church that values the Reformation is committed to being "*Ecclesia semper reformanda*," always in the process of being reformed in doctrine and practice, in following Christ through the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, knowing both the continuity of God's presence, and

the experience of death and resurrection.

At times stalwarts of the Prayer Book Society might be tempted to say with Henry Francis Lyte, in 1820 it is now thought rather than in 1847, "Change and decay in all around I see." Or alternatively, you may prefer the words of John Henry Newman in 1845, "To live is to change, and to change often is to become more perfect." The early Tractarians, and Newman notably, but others later too, were creative in their interpretation and use of the quintessentially Reformation set of documents known to us as the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles. Times change, churches change and over our lifetime our own spirituality and understanding of faith may change, even if we use the familiar, memorable and comfortable words.



Martin Luther's great discovery through his study of St Paul's Letter to the Romans was that he was justified by faith," and from the Reformation period there developed strongly opposed theological positions about faith and works. Luther found that in Christ crucified he was accepted by God, that no longer did he need to earn God's righteousness by good deeds or rigorous piety, but sharing in God's victory over sin, evil and death, could live freely as a Christian man in the world. It was all of God's grace, achieved not by human works, but received through faith in God's Son.

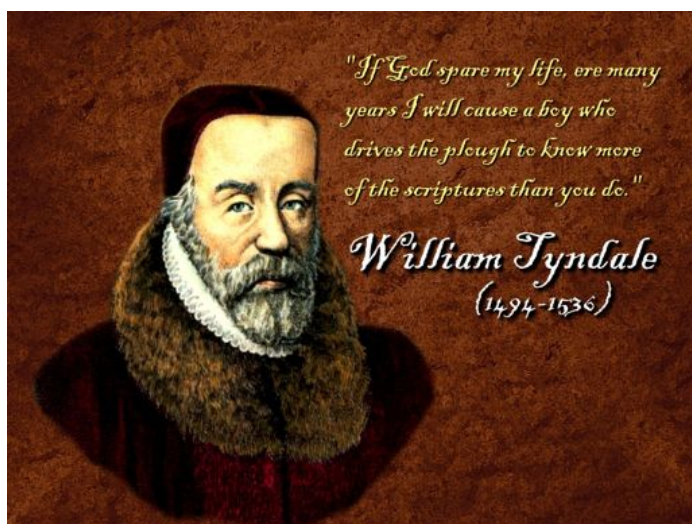
In an autobiographical fragment of March 1545, Luther wrote that, having been troubled by God's justice, "At last, as I meditated day and night, God showed mercy and I turned my attention to the connection of the words, namely, 'the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written; the righteous shall live by faith, 'and there I began to understand that the righteousness of God is the righteousness in which a just man lives by the grace of God.'" He expected faith to bear fruit in good works. "O, it is a living, busy, active thing this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly." (*Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*, 1522).

With the Counter Reformation the positions of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches on Justification became polarised. Yet in 1999 after much conversation and rapprochement, an agreed Joint Declaration on **Justification by Faith** was made between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Churches. At that time, there was in the Church of England little general awareness or celebration of this breakthrough, though the Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in September 1999 took this as its theme. The agreement said, "We confess together that in



baptism the Holy Spirit unites one with Christ, justifies, and truly renews the person. But the justified must all through life constantly look to God's unconditional justifying grace". (Section 4.4). Sometimes English Anglicans seem prey an off-the shelf provincialism, (continental shelf, of course), that misses some of the rich resources of our Protestant and Catholic neighbours.

On 31st October 2017, Reformation Day, we commemorate Luther's initiating of the Reformation through his ninety-five theses, theological points intended for scholarly discussion, calling for the reform of the Western Church. In his studies and lectures he had discovered the transforming power of the Scriptures, and he wanted the Bible to be available for Christian people in their own mother tongue. This zealous and academic monk was also a man of earthy peasant stock. The technological development of the newly-discovered European use of the printing press, meant that Luther's thought was communicated widely and rapidly, and by the early 1520s Lutheran ideas first entered England through merchants and scholarly circles. "Luther was a connoisseur of the vernacular, like his English contemporary Thomas Cranmer, whose speech has haunted formal English to the Present day." (Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, Allen Lane, 2009, p612).



However, it was **William Tyndale**, influenced and inspired by Luther, who translated the New Testament into English, using Erasmus' Greek text. He wanted the ploughboy to be able read God's word in plain English. The Bishops had other ideas, and their conservative approach to the emerging Reformation was to have the offending, imported books burnt. They manned their borders, but their actions fanned the flames of the Reformation.

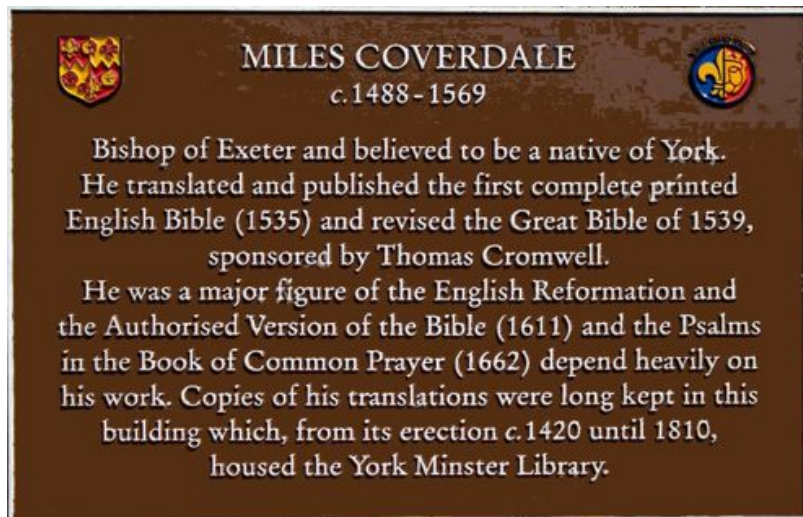
Sometimes, it is interesting to compare the prose of Tyndale, 1526, with that of KJV, 1611:

'But a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, This man also was with him.' (Luke 22.56, KJV).

And won off the wenches as he sate beholde him by the light, and sett goode eyesight on hym, and sayde, This same was also with hym.' (Luke22.56, Tyndale).

About ninety per cent of the King James' Version is drawn directly from Tyndale's translation, including the almost familiar words, "Se that your light so shyne before men, that they may se youre good workes and glorify youre father which is in heven."(Matthew 5.16).

Tyndale's preface to St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, is taken almost directly from Luther's Preface. If the English and Scottish Reformations were later to be strongly marked by a Calvinist (or Reformed) theology, Cranmer included, at this early stage the English connection was with Lutheran ideas. Henry VIII, the Defender of the Faith, broke with Rome, but was resistant, cautious and ambivalent about this new teaching. Meanwhile, canny Archbishop Cranmer and others in key positions were much more influenced by the theology being imported from continental Europe.



If we treasure the Book of Common Prayer, and participate in its offices and liturgies, and use its psalms, translations by **Miles Coverdale**, we are children of the Reformation, whatever later influences we may have been subject to. Members of the Prayer Book Society are also People of the Bible, steeped in Scripture, benefitting by memorable language and phrases and verses that lodge in our minds. Yet I would suggest that the logic of commitment to that Reformation document, which is foundational for Anglicans, means

taking seriously again that the Church is to be "ecclesia semper reformanda", and that we recognise the need for translations and liturgies that are accessible for people today, as well as what is strangely familiar. Cranmer, referring to older translations in the Saxon tongue, argued for the ancient custom of providing Scripture in the language of the people. "And when this language waxed old and out of common usage, because folk should not lack the fruit of reading it was again translated in the new language." (*The Preface of the Great Bible*, 1540 in *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, Parker Society, 1846, p. 119). Indeed, "the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who takes out of his treasure store, things both old and new." (Matthew 13.52)

Currently, the Church of England, has a "Reform and Renewal Movement," but I sometimes wonder, "Where is its theological depth or creative spiritual power?" Luther voiced the need for the Church to be reformed at a time when Europe had experienced the Black Death, was anxious about the threat of militant Islam and was experiencing a transforming Christian Humanist renaissance that looked both to the classical civilisation of Greece and Rome and to the early Christian sources. Luther wrestled with how was the Christian man to be free before God and to enjoy a Church purged of corruption, including the lucrative sale of indulgences. A church seeking re-formation needs to be in creative dialogue with its source documents, with new learning and with the questions of the age.

The English Reformation can be thought of as a period about 150 years long, and in Europe too, the Reformation was a long process, with the devastating horror of "The Thirty Years War," which sets our national religious, political and economic Reformation conflicts into less striking relief. The Book of Common Prayer has been an evolving document, though it is essentially a Reformation document, from 1549 through to 1662, with its pre-history and its subsequent history, interpretation and usage. The Prayer Book, especially in the Thirty-Nine Articles, is a Protestant book, even if it has been strongly owned by Anglicans of a more Catholic hue, who have been deeply influenced by the Oxford Movement. Today many Anglicans, whilst valuing the official formularies of the Church of England, recognise the Articles as very much a document of its time, marked by past theological conflicts, and not as a text to be treated fundamentalistically, but faithfully and creatively.

The Anglican offices of Matins and Evensong are the consequence of Cranmer's re-working of monastic patterns of prayer for a church that was being reformed. At Holy Communion the language of "who made there (by his one oblation of himself one offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and

satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world;" is in part theological countering of the notion that the priest could offer Christ in the sacrifice of masses for the quick and the dead, as in Article XXXI.

I knew Prayer Book Evensong, with its **General Confession**, from an early age, even before I had started



Junior School. With Holy Communion, it was different. I was sixteen and it was "the Swinging Sixties," There was no music at 8am, and there were no hymns and no sermon, and the liturgy was in the Side Chapel. It all seemed extraordinarily solemn and penitential, and focussed on Christ's Passion. There was little about the resurrection of Christ or the Coming of the Spirit. The liturgy shared that late medieval focus on death and penitence that Reformation theology inherited from a recent past that knew huge loss of population through plague, and which sought freedom from fear and sudden death. For me as a child of the Prayer Book, and a son of the Reformation, the newer liturgies brought liberation, **but as for Luther, the greater liberation was in learning that God in Christ loved me, with an acceptance not based on goodness or effort, but on grace alone.**

Within the last century Europe was fractured by two World Wars, but the churches worked at establishing greater mutual understanding and unity. The modern ecumenical movement has achieved much, but now worldwide there is a multitude of different churches, many of which trace their origins in some way to the Reformation, or to subsequent renewal movements, revivals or theological or organisational squabbles. We cannot easily re-write the divided past, but Christian believers can emphasise today the things they have in common, and work with each other practically, and with others of goodwill to co-operate with God's kingdom, taking out of our treasure store things both new and old.

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This short (thirty minutes) lecture was given at the Annual Festival of the Blackburn Branch of the Prayer Book Society at Blackburn Cathedral on Saturday 13th May 2017.

