

## Sermon preached in Visby Cathedral during the Conference

### Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2016

Our conference theme is: *Reformation then and now – constant yet always changing*. Next year will mark five centuries since Martin Luther nailed his theses on the church door at Wittenberg and so initiated the Reformation. I was brought up to think of the Reformation as a huge one-off event which dramatically changed everything, for good or ill. Yet our conference theme shows that we are exploring the idea of 'Reformation' in two ways that differ from this simple picture: (i) It is *then and now* – we are looking not just at a one-off event, but at an opportunity and imperative of change to be found in the life of the Church in every generation; (ii) It is *constant* as well as *always changing* – real continuity is present alongside, and within the dramatic change. I certainly felt that yesterday as we visited some of the extraordinary ensemble of historic churches in Gotland, with their amazing survival of medieval buildings, furnishings and decorations.

We can, I believe, detect the same dynamic of change and continuity in the scripture readings appointed for this morning also [Rom 13.8-10; Mt 5.38-48]. If we explore this, perhaps it will help us in thinking about how we should approach the Reformation 500 anniversary next year.

First, there is the ever-present reality of change. For Christians, there is only one event that counts as being of once, only once and once-for-all ultimate significance: the event of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; and there is only one reality that never changes: the God whom we know in Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Nothing else has a once-for-all status like this, not even the Reformation. And so we should not see the Reformation simply as an event frozen in time, but always as a challenge lying ahead of the Church: *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the Church is always to be reformed, as the great Reformed theologian of the last century Karl Barth said – though he was drawing on St Augustine, who in turn played a major part in shaping the theology of Luther. The world is constantly changing, and so the Church must constantly change if it is to be the Body of Christ in the world, not in order to become more like the world, but so that it can continue to be in a relationship of both invitation and challenge to the world.

In this morning's Gospel [Mt 5.38-48], Jesus himself sets before the people of God of his time the new horizon of God's present call to them – *You have heard that it was said ... but I say*, he repeatedly declares to them. (Earlier in this fifth chapter of Matthew, he makes the contrast even stronger: *It was said to them of old ...*). Jesus' radical challenge sets before Christians in every generation the newness that following him means, the need to discern fresh answers to fresh problems, to listen carefully so that we can hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

This task of discernment is not easy, and faithful Christians, relying on the guidance of the same Spirit and interpreting the same Scriptures, will honestly disagree with one another, as they so often and so vigorously did in the Reformation era. In our ecumenical age, we rightly lament the divisions and the hatred, the cruelty and the violence to which those disagreements gave birth, and we seek to create a new history of reconciliation and cooperation between our separated churches. Yet even as we do that, new arguments, new splits are constantly emerging within our churches.

We cannot expect these simply to go away; but we can hope to handle them with love and respect. In my own Church of England nowadays we speak of the importance of 'good disagreement', and that will be the price of a church *semper reformanda*. In our own time, five hundred years later, we must honour and learn from the zeal for truth of people on all sides of the Reformation conflicts, and we must also disown and learn from their zeal against fellow Christians: Anglicans and Lutherans, with Christians of other traditions too, face these new challenges together.

But if there is always change, there is also always continuity, and that has been visible to our eyes here in Gotland. In England too, the people of God continued the same through the traumas of the Reformation period. We sometimes speak as if all the 'Roman Catholics' were suddenly taken away and replaced by a lot of 'Protestants', whether 'Lutherans' or 'Anglicans'. But the reality was that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the same communities continued worshipping in the same churches, very often with the same ministers, and held together by ecclesial organisations that showed a high degree of continuity.

And so it should be for God's people, for this is not just a matter of history or sociology, but of our theological identity – who we are as a community called together by God at the deepest level of our being. Our God is faithful, and he will not allow his people to fall away or be abandoned. This too is clear from our scripture readings: even as he presents his dramatic contrasts of then and now, Jesus says: *Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets; I came not to destroy but to fulfil* – and so he affirms the holy vocation of the people who sought to follow the law and prophets.

St Paul in turn spells this out when he says, in a passage much loved of Augustine and Luther [Rom 13.8-10], *Love is the fulfilment of the law*. Paul here affirms the good purpose of the *Torah* as delivered to God's people Israel, and he seems to me to be writing very much like a rabbi when he lists various of the commandments and then says: *And if there be any other commandment it is summed up in this word*. I am reminded of the story of the great Rabbi Hillel, about a hundred years before Paul, who was approached by a Gentile who somewhat derisively asked him to recite the whole of the law while standing on one leg. The great scholar Hillel, well aware of all 613 commandments of the *Torah* in all their complexity and comprehensiveness, humbly stood on one leg and declared: *What is hateful to you do not do to others: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary*. I can visualise Paul standing on one leg as he wrote these verses from Romans 13.

And this is the real continuity that counts: the Lord's command to love, to love our God and to love our neighbour. We have to keep on finding new ways of expressing this in new situations, but its simple challenge never changes, and it is to keep that challenge before the world that the Church exists; this is our whole *raison d'être*. This is no easy thing to, because love is not just feeling well-disposed to everybody everywhere; rather, it is about making choices to put the needs of specific people first, ahead of our own – not just people like us, but those very different from us; and not just people whom we like, but those we find very difficult.

This is a costly venture, as Jesus' words show: *turn the other cheek; give your cloak as well; go the extra mile; pray for your persecutors*. These things do not come naturally to us; we can only hope to do them through the unmerited help of the Spirit who comes to us in our weakness – here indeed is one of the great insights of the Reformation, that anything good we can do is *sola gratia*, by God's grace alone.

It is not natural for us, it is not easy for us, but it is what a divided, violent, anxious hurting world needs from us: a church which is a *schola caritatis*, a school of loving, a model society to show the changeless reality of love in an ever-changing world. May God help us all, Lutherans, Anglicans and Christians of all varieties, to become such a *schola caritatis* that the world may believe.