

Sermon for the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost and the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Continental Reformation. 29 October, 2017

Have you ever been so upset with someone, or upset about something, that you just want to take a hammer and ...
(nailing)

What WAS Martin Luther doing?? Was this a bit of vandalism? Vandalism to the door of that Church building in Wittenberg? Or was it more like vandalism to the Church?

Among the many statements about the Reformation as we mark 500 years since that beginning on October 31 1517, most have noted that we should not be remembering schism with joy. Jesus prayed that we may all be one. United. So that the world may believe. And 500 years ago the Church was torn apart.

Even before the Reformation there had been significant schisms in the body of the church. Arguments in the early church led to lots of divisions. Some groups were eager to say that their ideas were more valid and true and important than others. We see that even in the Church in Corinth, and Paul had very clear instructions to them NOT to do that. But divisions continued into the life of the early Church, over several centuries.

The area of modern China and lots of the countries known as the 'stans': Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, etc. were once filled with flourishing Christian communities. The people in that area were mostly what are known as 'Nestorians'. In the 4th and 5th centuries people got very hot under the collar about differences in definitions between who Jesus is as God and who Jesus is as a man. In the 5th century the Nestorians arrived late for a Church Council to talk about it and by the time their leaders arrived they had already been condemned as heretics. An important lesson. Never arrive late at a meeting. They WERE about a month late, but the lesson still applies. Later those areas were overrun by Genghis Khan and by Muslim expansion. Those early splits in the church were nasty though.

Then in the 10th century there was a huge split between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, east and west, a split that has never been fully healed. There are lots of residual issues there, including differences in the words of the Nicene Creed which we often say here, including this morning.

Then in the 16th century, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and many others made waves, made statements, upset a lot of the Church leaders of the day, and the movement which rose up led to another split in the Church, which still exists today.

Those Reformers knew their history. They knew the scriptures. So why did they do what was specifically forbidden and divide the church? At least for Luther that was not his intention. He wanted the Church to return to the heart of what we are called to be, to be re-formed. There were several key issues which sparked the strong response and which led Luther to speak out in such a way that he was condemned. BUT his position was to say, as a prophetic voice, that he could only stand and say what he had said. He had to, to keep his integrity. He wanted the leaders and the people of the Church to listen to God more closely.

In the last century some of those hurts have been healed, but not all and not completely.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote: "Recently I was at a communion service with Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster. Five hundred years on from the Reformation, it remains impossible for Anglicans and Roman Catholics to receive communion together. So at that solemn moment in the service, I lined up at the front with everyone else. But because I could not put my hands out for the bread and wine, I knelt down to be prayed for by Cardinal Nichols. He took my hand and lifted me to my feet. Both of us had tears in our eyes. We are the closest of friends, and being reminded of the divisions in the global Church pains us both very deeply."

I have been using some music from the Taizé Community here. That community in France was founded over 70 years ago as a place to focus on reconciliation. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of young people come there from all over the world and all over the church and pray together and talk and share a vision of a better, more cooperative, more open future in the church and in the world. They look for signs of love and life and God. They look for bridges, not walls.

In many places and many ways there are calls to rediscover what we share in common which is so strong. Some long term prejudices remain though. There are people in some parts of the church who like to hold onto divisions and arguments from the past. Sadly actions, words and theological statements from the Anglican Diocese of Sydney reveal a preference for prejudice and division rather than embracing other Christians in love. Perhaps part of why they act and speak like that is that they don't think people who disagree with them really are Christians at all. I am not alone in having been told that by people who are from that very narrow tradition.

Martin Luther got up people's noses, but what he was asking for was a more open debate on the things that were important. Instead he was treated with contempt and thrown out. The places where Church communities have been coming together in the last 100 years are places where people have been able to start from mutual respect and then conversation happens. It makes sense. It seems obvious. Yet when it happens it is a matter of choice. When we can offer respect and see that we are respected as well even though we hold different ideas then there is actually the opportunity to talk.

Over the last couple of weeks we have been reading passages where people were disrespecting Jesus, trying to push him and trick him, not really listening. For Jesus, and later for a lot of those caught up in the Reformation on both sides, the arguments ended with violence. We really have to learn to have better ways of arguing. We need still to learn to be able to disagree without ending up with hatred, violence and broken relationships. There are ways of doing that, but it starts with openness and actually listening. If we want to talk but one, or both, of us has a hammer or some other kind of threat in our hands then it makes conversation a little difficult.

In the passage we read today (Matthew 22:34-46) Jesus was pushed to summarise the message of God. I think of this as Jesus being asked to put the whole of what needs to be said into a nutshell.

The response from Jesus was: 'Love God. Love your neighbour. Love yourself'. Contrary to what some people inside and outside the Church seem to think the most important thing was not "make yourself aware of what your neighbours do in their bedroom and tell them off if you don't agree". That sort of approach only shows that Jesus hasn't actually been listened to at all. Ask people around us what they think is most important to Christians. I hope that the messages we give show a closer connection to Jesus and good news!

'Love God. Love your neighbour. Love yourself'. For me those are the things that I would want nailed to the door, along with the invitation and the challenge to live them out deeply. You may recognise that they echo through the things I have been saying since I got here.

What would you want to nail to that door? What would you want to have recognised as the most important things we need to be thinking about and talking about and doing here, in Toowoomba, in the second decade of the 21st century?

For me part of it is that even when I get upset with some people and their actions and words and attitudes (even our brothers and sisters from the Diocese of Sydney), rather than picking up a hammer or even shutting off from them I want to listen and talk and be able to understand. And I hope that conversation across differences can happen in ways which begin with respect and openness. Actually talking is important in itself. Deciding that when we disagree we WILL talk about things, and listen, rather than shut off and cut ourselves off from others. That decision in itself makes a difference.

In a couple of weeks time we will be asked to share in suggesting what we should be focussing on here as the church. Rather than nailing things to the doors we will be writing them up on white boards and butchers paper. I wonder what we will discover as we share with each other and as the conversations continue?

The Reformation was about being recalled to the centre of who we are, but not being called back to the past. The Reformers were interested in who they were, as the Church, in the 16th century. When we ask who we are, here and now, in the 21st century we will have different answers. But if they all start from living out that core to 'Love God. Love our neighbours. Love ourselves' then we will be on the right track. Then the true sign will be open doors.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell