

An Anglican Comment on the Reformation 500 years on from 1517: John 21.15-19

the Rev'd Richard Lamey,
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Let me begin with an apology. Not for the whole Reformation...

The title given for this address is wrong in every aspect and for that I apologise particularly to Fr David, not least because it was my idea in the first place.

Firstly, it is impossible and unhelpful to think of the Reformation as being a single event. It was experienced in such different ways in neighbouring parishes and counties across several generations, let alone in different countries, that it makes no sense to think of a Reformation. We have to think of Reformations, of a landscape changed beyond recognition over 150 years and more.

Secondly, I don't think Fr David spoke entirely from a Roman Catholic perspective in July and I am certainly not talking only from an Anglican perspective tonight. We both speak from a Christian perspective, first and

foremost, as people who recognise Christ in each other and at work in each other's Churches in a way which was impossible 500 years ago. The dust is still settling from the series of explosions Luther initiated 500 years ago- and as it does, it reveals that we are all changed. Corpus Christi and St Paul's stand far closer to each other than Corpus Christi does to the pre-Reformation Church or St Paul's to the Church of Luther or Calvin. We may not see structural unity in our lifetime but (simply and wonderfully) we each get on with being the Church God is calling us to be, the Church Christ feeds with his body and blood, the Church the Holy Spirit comes to inspire over and over again.

We share a fundamental belief that God meets us in the sacraments and then calls us out into the world to live as his sacraments there, seeing where he is at work and joining in. We all long to build a transformative community here in church so that we can transform the community in which we are set. We are called, each and every one of us, to know that we are infinitely precious to God and to live like it, for others. We are the Church and it feels right simply to get on with being the church side by side.

So, let me rewrite the title of this short sermon series- because it was not one Reformation but a series of Reformations, and I am talking, as Fr David did, as a post-Reformation priest in Berkshire in 2017. In the most Anglican way I can- full of compromise and a desperate need to be nice- let me talk about what we must learn about the Reformations if we are to continue to be communities of hope and healing in a world which sees conversation and understanding of the other as weakness. Or, to pose the question in another way, what lessons do the Reformations teach which can help us to be the Church better today?

Firstly, we have to hold above all else and privilege above all else a theology which accepts that we merely glimpse God in a mirror dimly. We do not have every answer. We do not have the last word. And our attempts to domesticate and control God, to limit, define, reduce God, are both sinful and doomed. God is God and we are not. His love, his grace, his forgiveness, his tenderness- all of them are held out over and over and over again to people we wouldn't bother with.

We want to say what God does and does not value or will and will not accept. We crave certainty and grasp at power. We long to have people hanging on our every

word, thinking that, like the Pharisees, we and we alone speak for God.

And while it is true that the Church is given the authority to forgive and to retain sins it is equally true that that power is given as the disciples are being restored to life by Jesus. A few weeks after the Resurrection Jesus will say on the shores of Galilee "Do you love me" three times, and each time Peter will reply Yes, you know that I love you, each affirmation cancelling out a denial before the cock crowed. Peter and the Church receive the power to forgive or not to forgive. But that power is given to a fragile community whose leaders know the depth of their own failure. Forgive or don't forgive, Peter and the others are told- but know that I have raised you back to your feet. I know the depth of your failure and so do you. And so, I hope, do we, in our institutions, in our parishes, in our congregations and in our own lives as well.

The first thing, then, that the Reformations must teach us is that God is not to be narrowed, defined, controlled. He does not only work in one Church or in the whole Catholic and Apostolic Church. He defies definition. He rejects limitation. And thank God, he does not think like us, or judge like us, or condemn like us.

As the Psalmist writes, if you kept a record of our sins, which of us could stand? God is God, and we are not.

Secondly, in a world of rapid judgements and eager caricaturing of what is other, what is different, it matters that the Churches buck the trend.

An alien landing in Wokingham finding an embarrassment of Church communities could spend a lifetime trying to plot the differences between us- and when it did, the list of what we hold in common would be four times as long as what we differ on. We do not fear difference- we are learning to see beyond it.

To generalise, we live in a world which increasingly chooses to narrow the range of voices we hear. We live in an echo chamber where the words we hear support what we already hold to be true. Among everything else, the reason so many Remainers were shocked by the outcome of the Brexit vote was the echo chamber they lived in which gave no hint of the number of people intending to vote to leave the EU.

The Post-Reformations Churches have a key role in broadening engagement and not narrowing it. We are learning to listen well to each other. We are learning to look beyond shallow differences to the beautiful depths of all that we share in Christ, whose love is our life and our

song. And that sense of common adventure overcoming difference and history is a gift we can offer to the world.

So, the Reformations teach us to remember that God is God and we all are his flawed, fragile, beloved children. And the Reformations teach us to listen well to difference and to see beyond what separates us to our fundamental unity in Christ.

Thirdly, the Reformations have something important to say to us about knowing when to make a stand and then having the courage to do so, in Christ. I have long been haunted by the decisions facing parish clergy under Henry VIII's reign. Every year a new instruction came out, changing the landscape of faith. But when do you stand and say 'enough'? When talk of Purgatory is outlawed, when a raft of Saints' Days are removed from the calendar, when the English Bible comes, when the nearby monastery is suppressed, when statues have to be taken down, when vestments are put away, when... Well, knowing that the moment you make a stand you will be removed from office and some excitable Protestant put in your place, when do you stand? And if you've let the first three Acts pass for the sake of your precious flock, it surely becomes easier to let the next one go as well? How do you balance your love of the Church with your duty to your people?

And if you're a committed lay person, do you do more than hide a statue of Mary under your kitchen floor and keep your head down because this too will pass? When do you stand? How do you ever decide that this is the trench you're going to die in?

There is no right answer- but it's a stark reminder of how complex moral decisions are, especially when we are talking about matters of life and death. Some things matter hugely. Many things matter not at all. How can you make a fuss about a boy wearing a dress to school if you haven't already given up days of your life to change Government policy on welcoming more Syrian refugees to England? How can you spend hundreds of thousands of pounds refusing to let a gay couple stay in your B and B if you're not also spending the same amount of money feeding the homeless who lie hungry at your door? As Pope Francis beautifully put it in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. If something should rightly disturb us it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life." For their sake,

and for the sake of the Gospel, we must choose wisely where to stand and what to fight for, for the needs of the world and not for the protection of the Church.

We must remember that God is God and we are not. We must listen for God's voice speaking to us through our difference to the great truths which lie beneath. And we must have the confidence to decide when to stand, remembering Gandhi's words that he was prepared to die but there was no cause he would kill for.

Time to sum up. When we look at the world, when we think about the Reformations, we must ask the core question of our faith: 'Where is Jesus in this?' I suggest that he is found less with the Bishops driving seismic change than he is with the confused and unsettled worshipping communities across the country struggling to learn a new language of faith, or relearn an old one, who just want to worship God. He is found less with the tribunals defending the faith by execution than he is with those courageous individuals, on every side, refusing to recant their beliefs to avoid the stake.

And today he is with the voiceless, the silent, the invisible, the lost, the fragile, the vulnerable, the excluded, the human, the daily, the trying, the struggling. He is in glimpses of hope and glints of glory and lasting glimmers of love. He is in every gentle kindness, every loving act of generosity, every bold statement which prefigures the kingdom, every decision to keep a promise to be there and to keep on being there even when being there feels more than we can endure.

Jesus is for us always. He is with us always. He has not given up on the world he came to save. Neither can we. Doctrine fades. Priorities change. Divisions dissolve. We are one because we ask 'where is Jesus' and then hurry to stand with him. God is God. Our differences merely mask a deeper unity. We must know where to make a stand. And the answer always is to stand where Christ is standing, and waiting, out there in the world, calling us joyously, together, to Follow.