

## ***Constipation, Consummation & Conviction!***

*Isaiah 43<sup>1-7</sup>; Psalm 87; 2 Corinthians 4<sup>5-12</sup>*

*The Readings appointed for the English Saints and Martyrs of the Reformation Era*

*We have this treasure in clay jars. (2 Corinthians 4<sup>7</sup>)*

Miss D was a cube of a woman - 4'2" in every direction. She taught, with me, in a Roman Catholic Secondary School and had inspired fear into three generations of Roman Catholics in the Midlands. She and her mother - a tradition Roman Catholic matriarch - came to our very Anglican Nine Lessons and Carols in my previous Parish. Mother sat there with that 'sucking a lemon' face that revealed her distaste for everything that was going on. After the third lesson mother whispered something to Miss D and then began to smile. Next morning I had to ask what it was she said that made her relax. She had simply whispered, "This used to be ours!"

As we gather here today to celebrate The Reformation, it is true that, at least part of this Church, was Roman Catholic. At the time there first was a Christian witness on this site (around 800AD with the first Saxon Preaching Cross) there was only the Roman Catholic Church and that remained the case until the 16th Century. In order to celebrate The Reformation we do need to understand what happened and why and, because this is a sermon and not a lecture, then to see what difference it could (or even should) make to us today.

So, ***Constipation, Consummation and Conviction.***

### ***Constipation***

The polite text books tells us that the place where the Augustinian Friar and the new Doctor of Divinity, Martin Luther, found his inspiration to change the world was in the tower of the monastery at Wittenberg. But the 'Tower' was a polite way of referring to the toilet and we know that Luther spend so long in that facility because he suffered a great deal from constipation. Had Dr Luther had a better diet or a better constitution The Reformation may never have happened.

Luther had become a monk after a vow made during a thunder storm. His family were not at all happy as his mining family had invested a great deal in his education at the law in the hope that he would have a better life. As a monk, Luther was very devout and struggled with his sense of being a sinner. The hours he spent in confession didn't lead to any assurance of forgiveness but rather increased his distress.

It was his Vicar General, von Staupitz, that introduced Luther to the idea that the Latin, *poenitentia*, didn't mean formal penance (as advocated by *The Church*) but rather a heartfelt repentance, which begins with love for God.

In 1510, three years after he went to Wittenberg, Luther was sent to Rome and was shocked by what he saw. The irreverence, the brothels exclusively for the clergy to use and the focus on money pushed him further into distress and increased his doubts about the message of the Church. There is no doubt that the Pope and the Church were both morally and financially bankrupt and it was the scheme of Pope Leo X in 1517 that ignited the touch-paper of The Reformation. The sale of indulgences was the principle means in Saxony of raising funds towards the building of St Peter's Basilica in Rome and the Dominican Friar, Tetzel, was the best salesman. The teaching of the Church had been changed so that the sins of the dead as well as the sins of the living could be forgiven through the purchase of an indulgence: Tetzel's famous advertising slogan was, *When the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.*

Whatever Luther's theological convictions, he acted as a Pastor to protect his people from this extortion and on the 31st October 1517 nailed his 95 Theses to the Church door at Wittenberg. As this coincided with the advent of populist printing in Germany, the points he made were published generally by the time the slow moving wheels of the Church had called the Priest to account. Luther's constipational contemplations had led him to the conviction that justification (a technical word, derived from the law, that principally means that God declares Christians acquitted from their sin and its consequence) is by faith alone. This was radical - and is the foundation stone of The Reformation - because it rendered redundant the sacraments and the power of the Church.

It is no surprise that Dr Luther came into conflict with the Church authorities and, given the practice at the time, this conflict meant his life was under threat and that there was the very real possibility he could be burned at the stake as an heretic. Luther was fortunate to have as a protector the Elector of Saxony, Friederich the Wise who refused to send his monk to Rome and insisted that he was tried in Germany. There followed the Diet of Ausburg in October 1518 and the Diet of Worms in April 1521. Luther was under enormous pressure to recant his views; he had used the printing press a great deal to get his ideas known and had used hymns as a means of teaching ordinary people his new understanding of theology. He stood his ground, despite the Emperor ordering the books Luther had written be confiscated and burned, and in his response to his accusers utters the words that have been immortalised as the birth of The Reformation (and in no small part the intellectual foundation of Europe and of the modern university):

*Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by plain reason (for I do not trust either in the Pope or in Councils alone, since it is well know that they have often erred and*

*contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Here I stand. I can do no other.*

We do not have time to explore the aftermath; the Peasants Revolt; the translation of the Bible into German; the monk that married the nun; and Luther's love of beer and food. This outspoken and frequently rude and offensive man changed the world because he found spiritual relief in the conviction that justification is by faith alone. We have cause to be glad that Luther's bowels were problematic and move on.

### ***Consummation***

The Reformation in England is less straightforward. King Henry VIII is, in the popular mind, the author of the Reformation and of the Church of England. Yet this Monarch challenged Luther's denial of the Roman Catholic belief in transubstantiation in the book he wrote, *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, for which the Pope rewarded him with the title, *Defender of the Faith*. Henry loved Catholicism but came to hate the Pope. Before things settled down to the Church we know know (and that Miss D's mother thought had been stolen from them) there was a great deal of mistrust and pain.

Henry's principal interest was the setting aside of his 24-year marriage with Catherine of Aragon and the subsequent consumption of his marriage with Anne Boleyn. It was lust that gave birth to the idea of a Church in England, but principally to meet the needs of the person who declared himself the earthly Head of Church of England. His most imaginative contribution was to appoint Thomas Cranmer as his Archbishop, whose influence on the short-lived Edward VI, who was devoutly Protestant. The carnage that resulted from his short reign and the subsequent reigns of Mary I and then Elizabeth I would be hard to justify in the name of faith.

There were in excess of 57,000 executions during Henry's 37 year reign and, of these, probably 90 were specifically for religious reasons, 63 of whom were Protestant. There were 284 executions for heresy under Mary I during her 5 years reign, including Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Latimer and Ridley. Elizabeth I executed about 130 priests from the Roman Catholic Church and about 30 of their lay supporters.

Not until Hooper in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Politie* at the very end of the 16th century, setting forth the distinctive Anglican theology, the *Via Media*, governed by the joint and combined claims of revelation, reason and tradition did the Church of England secure a tenable understanding of itself and its relationship to God, the Bible and external sources of authority.

Henry's libido and his religious appetites create the unique ground out of which the Church of England could be formed - neither fully Roman Catholic, yet Catholic; Reformed, but not part of the radical Reformation Movement. Despite the various attempts at legislation, including the Elizabethan Settlement, the Church would not settle until after the restoration of the Monarchy with Charles II in 1660 and the publication of the Book of Common Prayer 2 years later that uniquely united the nation with one voice in worship.

### ***Conviction***

Whether driven by one's bowels or by lust, what is clear in reading again the history of The Reformation and of the formation of the Catholic and Reformed Church of England is that both events were driven by people of conviction: a conviction so great that they would willingly endure death by beheading or burning or by being hung, drawn and quartered. Those who did not die, probably wished they had, enduring - as they did - the rack; their flesh being destroyed by heated metal tongs; being crushed by boards; or being boiled alive in oil. For them, the confidence derived from the conviction that Isaiah's words applied to them and applied to them in a way that excluded all others: **Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.**

I am left wondering where the conviction is in the modern Church? What is there that the community of Christians around us in the UK today would be prepared to suffer for or even to die for. (We are aware of so many places in our world where Christians are suffering and are being executed for their faith: Iran; Iraq; Afghanistan; Pakistan; etc.) There are certainly plenty of campaign groups, but these start with the individual and with interest groups and not with that passion that should consume the Church for God or that arises from the Scriptures. In an age where a regular worshipper has to come to Church but once a month and even the most devout seem not to prioritise worship over anything else, I doubt that some would chip a nail, far less lose it, for the sake of Christ and his Church. It isn't hard to see why the Church has become an irrelevance because all too often it doesn't stand for anything. I fear that, unless the Church finds secure ground to stand on that arises out of *Scripture and plain reason*, I will be the ones who will sit in buildings like these in generations of come with miserable faces nudging our grandchildren and whispering, *this used to be ours!*

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