

Reformation Day

St Finian's Lutheran Church

Adelaide Road, Dublin

26 October 2012

Attending to secular discontents

Dear Friends in Christ, let me start my reflection this morning by thanking your Church Council for this very kind invitation to speak to you on this very important day in the life of your community and indeed in the life of the universal church. The Reformation is hardly an historical event that can be passed over in silence since it certainly played an essential part not only in the development of theology but in European social history.

In ecumenical terms the importance of Martin Luther can hardly be overstated, although, of course, it often was in the most negative and hurtful terms. This is not really a time to dwell on that as we seek to shape a better future together, in the world but also here in our own area of Dublin. Better perhaps then to recall the very positive words of Cardinal Villebrands, at an ecumenical conference in Leipzig in 1983 when he said that:

"Luther has--like all the baptized have--been added, to use a phrase out of the book of Acts, to the Lord Jesus Christ in the tangible form of His church. Through this he has become our brother in Christ. . . . Martin Luther is not only present in the life of evangelical Christendom; he is also present in ecumenical Christendom. We must therefore renew his theological inheritance."

And, of course, that will be increasingly so in the next few years leading up to 1517, including, I gather from my theological friends, an important conference here in Ireland.

So it is in this spirit of fraternity that we gather this morning for this prayerful celebration, marked by a very definite ecumenism and a spirit of being involved in a common search as Paul puts it in the letter to the Ephesians for a greater understanding of "[t]his mystery [as], members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

My own understanding of Luther, and what he was all about, hinges very much on a book I read several years ago, and one very elegant sentence in that work, which has become something of a leitmotif in my own reflection on religious faith in the world, and it is this that gives me my working title for this homily, *attending to secular discontents*. The book was Sir Geoffrey Elton's marvelous work, *Europe from Renaissance to Reformation*, published in 1968. In it he wrote this:

‘It will not do to treat the radical reformers as though only their theology mattered; neither the spread of their ideas nor the reaction of others can possibly be understood unless the secular discontent to which they give tongue is kept in mind.’

It is rather unlikely that Elton was aware of it but this was actually a very accurate description of liberation theology and the other contextual theologies that were emerging at that time. Theologians in the wake of the Second Vatican Council with an increased sensitivity to what had become known as the ‘signs of the times’, particularly perhaps in Latin America but also in a somewhat different way in Asia, had become increasingly wary of what they saw as a kind of ‘groves of academe’ theology, a *theology from above* that, it might be said, began and ended with itself and paid scant attention to what was going on in the world. And yet there was so much that actually required their attention.

First amongst these was the seismic social change that had been going on in Europe going back to the Reformation, and what it can be argued was one of its main consequences the Enlightenment, following which, in Matthew Arnold’s celebrated term ‘the Sea of religious faith’ began to retreat or at least to change its shape and form and become much more individual, personalised and to a great extent privatised

More recently there has been what I see as another tectonic shift in the plates of world Christianity. In the past forty years there has been a geographical shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity. As the African scholar John Mbiti expresses it: “the centres of the church’s universality are no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, and Manila.” This is well illustrated by the fact that in 1900 Europe was home to 66% of the world’s Christians, while today this has fallen to less than 25% and by 2025 it will be below 20%. The African theologian Kwame Bediako has concluded that Christianity is now a non-western religion, if such it ever was. Allan Anderson suggests that what is happening in Africa is in fact an African Reformation, equivalent in many ways to what happened in Europe five centuries ago. Philip Jenkins also argues that this shift to the south will have an impact on the same lines the Reformation had and that Christianity will have a profound impact on the development of the world’s belief and ideological systems. He also argues as ‘Christianity moves southward, the religion will be comparably changed by immersion in the prevailing cultures of those host societies.’ I think this is probably the major challenge facing the Christian churches into the future. How can Christianity remain a coherent message in this world and how can it find a language to express this?

The strains are obvious in all the major denominations. For historical reasons this has been the case in Protestant churches for some time and, of course, for the past month the fissures in a previously morally monolithic Roman Catholicism have become increasingly obvious. The challenge for Roman Catholicism is, of course, all the more given the sheer weight of numbers with 1.2b members spread right across the world and with the great majority now in the south where the secular discontents are clearly so different.

The theological forces are, it would seem, centrifugal, thus putting pressure on the centre, wherever that centre might be, in conservative Rome or in the European liberal academic theological establishment. Last week it could be said, to some extent at least, that Pope Francis went through the kind of experience that Justin Welby and his predecessors at Canterbury have had to live with for years in trying to keep the Anglican communion 'more or less' together and of course several of the issues were the same. The opposing force, as we saw clearly towards the end of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family last month, are centralising, perhaps not surprisingly, in a church that sees centralisation as one of its institutional and spiritual strengths – and indeed is seen in this way by many others. The challenge is enormous.

There are several discontents to be heard here – many secular but also several theological and spiritual and I think it is essential that they all be considered. The temptation is no doubt to become the slave of various ideological agendas: liberal/conservative, traditional/modernist, north/south and whatever else we can come up with in terms of binary oppositions. Of course to many listening to this in other cultural contexts this makes no sense at all and is simply seen, to coin a term, as 'Eurocentricity'. From a wider perspective, a scriptural perspective, two texts seem to me to be essential

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (Jn 10:10) This was the theme chosen for the recent Catholic Mission Sunday and it seemed particularly appropriate given the realities we live with at this time. The truth is that we live in a world where life seems to be constantly under threat, where there is in little sign of flourishing for so many and where; on the contrary, so many people live in a misery and desolation that is far beyond mere poverty. We live in a world of ever-increasing violence and where our environment is constantly under threat in a way that puts even human life on earth at risk; and, of course, more recently the dreadful threat of the Ebola virus which has taken root precisely in the poorest and already most vulnerable parts of Africa where, to use the horrifying expression of the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, lives are often already in fact *"poor, nasty, brutish and short"*. Where is human flourishing in all of this? How much do we really think about it as we read the 'signs of the times'? Certainly not enough!

While not the only ones, these are surely amongst the most urgent of the human discontents to which we have to be attentive if we are to be faithful to the gospel. As we find it in Luke:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,*

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Lk 4:18-19)

We were called from the beginning to be "a church of the poor, for the poor" in the widest sense of that term. We are called to reach out in response to those voices of the marginalised who speak the real truth of our world, the truth we fail to acknowledge, either from within our own society, or from without in those suffering parts of the world where Christ continues to be crucified.

Let me finish with two brief quotations to nourish our reflections:

The first from Ann Case-Winter in *Presbyterians Today* in 2004:

"Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. This motto calls us to something more radical than we have imagined. It challenges both liberal and conservative impulses and the habits and agendas we have lately fallen into. It brings a prophetic critique to our cultural accommodation—either to the past or to the present—and calls us to communal and institutional repentance. It invites us, as people who worship and serve a living God, to be open to being "re-formed" according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit."

And as Elton put it, in our attention to the genuine human and secular discontents of our world

The second from Seamus Heaney is an invitation to go out there and listen since, as he says:

Running water never disappointed.
Crossing water always furthers something.
Stepping stones were stations of the soul.

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