



Time to Come Home

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Isaiah 45.22-end; Romans 15.1-6; Luke 4.16-24

Stop me if I'm telling your story. You learned from your church or your parents that God the Father made you, nurtured you, and cares for the smallest detail in your life; that Christ came to find you, and died for you, and that when you see the nail-marks in Christ's hands you see how much God loves you; that the Holy Spirit makes Christ present to you, gives you all the gifts you need to be a disciple, and empowers you to live as God's free child. And yet you feel you're constantly inadequate for God, you're a square human peg in a round divine hole, and for all your good intentions you can't pray, you can't love, you can't live in a way that pleases God. You know you're supposed to come to church and feel gloriously alive, but in fact on Sundays you feel wretched, because you think "If all that lot knew how I really live and what's going on inside me, they'd be horrified." maybe you avoid church, or perhaps you lurk in the shadows, or maybe you sing boldly and speak vigorously but when you're quiet and alone you groan with a rather different song.

Maybe the truth is that you hate God. You've been socialised never to use the word "hate" and only to utter anodyne platitudes about God. But deep down, if you're really honest, you feel God's constructed a system that promises heavenly joy to everyone but brings only relentless failure and punishment to you. So you hate God. And you're living this double life: saying and singing all the right things in church, but privately festering in fury and resentment against this tyrant of imposed inadequacy.

Is that you? If so, you're at the very place where the Reformation began. Because that's where Martin Luther was for a long time, struggling as a monk in Germany in the early sixteenth century. Luther was a blameless monk. But however hard he tried to be faithful and humble, he felt wretched. He knew the depth of his sinfulness, and he felt a righteous God could only send him to damnation. He hated the righteousness of God that seemed only good for condemning sinners like him. He himself later said, "Far from loving that righteous God ..., I actually hated him." But around the year 1515 that all changed. Luther realised that God's righteousness isn't an angry, judging, condemning curse. Instead it's a glorious, effervescent, gracious gift. We aren't good enough to stare God in the face; but we are given everything we need to be God's companions anyway. All we must do is receive it. Of course we still try to do good things; but not to earn God's favour: simply out of joy and gratitude that we're in God's heart without ever deserving to be.

Imagine all your hatred, all your frustrations, and failed hopes, and self-rejection, and suppressed love, all being transformed into beautiful acceptance, wondrous joy, and everlasting companionship. Wouldn't that be a volcanic eruption of infectious delight? You'd be unrecognisable. That's what happened to Luther. He said, "I felt as though I'd been born again, as though I'd entered through open gates to paradise itself." Countless people have had the same experience since, and been through their very own personal reformation. It's cathartic to realise you've spent your life trying and failing and cursing and hating, and then to discover you can accept, and receive, and no longer strive, and simply let God fill you with grace. Church suddenly becomes a place of gratitude and celebration, a time when you gather with others to whom God has given the free gift of this faith and hope, and, as a people bonded by trust, are filled with God's abundance, and discern how best to share it.

And if you're longing for others to make this discovery, yearning for everyone to be set free from the prison of grief and shame, wouldn't you be furious with anyone who appeared to be inhibiting these precious gifts and this vital truth? That's how the early reformers started to think about the church. They said, "We've discovered the most powerful force in the universe, the forgiveness of sins that

comes as a free gift of God – but you seem to think we have to earn it and some of you seem to think we can even buy it with money.”

What was it that had been locked up and hidden away by the church, and was now about to be let loose on a fervid world? Well, we’ve already seen the central power of the Reformation: it was a renewed understanding of being forgiven and accepted by God, in complete trust and united with Christ, which together came to be known as “justification by grace through faith.” But this wasn’t a new doctrine – it had always been there in Paul’s letter to the Romans and Galatians. This sense that the grace offered in the Bible had been hidden away, and kept a secret, led to a new Pentecost – a passion to make the scriptures available to the common people in their native languages, in the conviction that the Holy Spirit would do the rest. The pattern in the middle ages was to keep the Bible behind a veil of commentaries, all written in Latin. Luther regarded the Bible as a revolutionary discovery, buried in cobwebs for 1500 years. If you imagine reading a precious, passionate, and long-buried love letter addressed to you, and your hands shaking as you read it, then you get a sense of what the rediscovery of scripture meant to the reformers. They felt the same way about worship. No longer was worship something done far away by a priest with his back to the congregation in a language few people knew. Now it was to be done in words and in a way all could understand, and it was to be something everyone did together.

The single idea that crystallised all these transformations was this: God isn’t just for those set apart from the rest – the holy, the religious orders, the priests, the educated; God is for everyone. God isn’t just for those who are good enough; God is for you and me. God doesn’t despise those who live a worldly existence in agricultural labour or daily commerce or domestic service: the world may be fallen, but it’s still good. Everyone is called to be a priest in whatever path of life they tread, and no vocation is too humble or obscure to be pleasing to God. This is why we celebrate Reformation Sunday. Because there’s a place in the heart of God for everyone, and even though none of us can ever find our own way there, God finds us and brings us home. And to discover that is to unearth an amazing and dynamic power.

It’s a power that had huge social implications. If you’ve been running a church or monastery that becomes fabulously wealthy saying masses for the dead in order to build up their righteousness in God’s sight, and you discover justification by faith, you’re going to go out of business overnight. And if you’re a wealthy merchant, and you’ve been used to feeling guilty about your worldly wealth, and investing in monasteries to pray for your soul, and you suddenly discover that you’re saved by grace and truly called into your worldly vocation, then you’re going to find yourself with a lot of leftover capital. And if you and others reinvest that capital in commercial enterprises, that might just lead, in a short space of time, to an explosion in the economy.

If you’re so sure that the shape of the church and of society has to change, and you’ve been inspired by the notion of justification to see how it might change, then it’s a small step to forming a rationale for ousting tyrants, and taking action to transform unjust social structures, and beginning to articulate a theory of human rights. And if you’ve discovered that the created world is not a place of evil to be escaped, but a theatre of God’s glory, drenched in traces of God’s grace, then you’re going to be motivated to explore the natural sciences like never before. That’s why anyone who’s grateful for capitalism, human rights, or the natural sciences should be celebrating Reformation Sunday too. But given how profound these developments were, it’s not hard to imagine there were losers; and because there were losers, we can see how quite quickly a tidal wave of grace turned into a tsunami of fury.

If you see the church as project-oriented, short-term instrument for getting something done, then you might say the dynamism of the Reformation justified the destruction. But if the church is more like a family, where the relationships between the members are more important than getting anything in particular done, then the Reformation is more like the spear being driven into the body of Jesus on the cross. Then Reformation Sunday is a day of profound grief and repentance, as well as genuine gratitude – and it should be a moment for resolving to make things different in the future.

Not long ago a friend of mine made a painful discovery. He'd grown up with his father and his stepmother. He hardly knew his real mother, but he came to understand she was a wild and wayward character, and it was best if he didn't see too much of her. As my friend graduated from university, and began to make a life of his own, he had cause to spend more time with his real mother, and he found she was very different from the crazed harridan that had always been described to him. He began to wonder how much of her deviancy was a story fabricated by his father and stepmother to justify the disruption to their family caused by their marriage to one another. It wasn't that he suddenly despised the two people who'd brought him up: he still loved and was grateful to them. But he started to change his judgments about trust and the truthfulness of remembering.

I wonder whether my friend's story may be a parable for Protestants today. Sure, the Catholic church of the sixteenth century was in many places corrupt and confused and conniving and in need of conversion. *But it's had one.* Maligning the church quickly became a habit, and in no time all kinds of Christians decided they had a right to declare what was the true faith and to excoriate everyone who wasn't exactly like them. And we've never lost the habit. And all this castigating and vilifying and misconstruing and demonising has been done in the name of justification by grace. Well my friends, it may have been justified then but it certainly isn't now. And I regret to say I don't see a whole lot of grace in it. This isn't the way to celebrate Reformation Sunday. It's not justified, and it's not grace.

Think about another parable – the best-known parable of all. A man had two sons. One ran away. One stayed at home. The one who ran away eventually realised being away from home was no fun. It meant being away from everything that made him know who he was. The one who stayed at home was cross and self-righteous and went out into the field and sulked. He thought he was staying at home but in truth he was as far away as his brother. The one who ran away we might call the Protestants. The one who went out into the field we might call the Catholics. But the words the Father has for both wayward children are the same words, words that are full of love, full of a desire to re-form us again, full of grace. This is what the father's saying: "We were made to be one family. I can't love just one of you. My love is made for both of you. How can you say you love me if you're still separated from your brother? Don't you realise you can't be whole until you're one with another, and you continue to break my heart as long as you divide my body? It's time to come home. It's time for both of you to come home."