

**21 Pentecost  
October 29, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

On this Tuesday ... Halloween ... October 31, Christian Protestants around the world will celebrate Reformation Day. The town of Wittenberg, Germany will host the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church ... named All Saints. The town, which has a population of 50,000, is expecting 400,000 tourists. For most historians this began the Protestant Reformation.

So what was the Reformation, and what does it have to do with us as Episcopalians?

Before I address that question I want to do a very broad brushstroke history of Christianity. That history obviously began with Jesus's life, death on a cross, and his resurrection to new life. During his life he had gathered a band of followers ... some named and many unnamed. To those who were sick he was a healer. To the outcast he offered hospitality. To those who were grieving he offered comfort. To those who faced injustice he was an advocate. To those prone to spiritual experiences, Jesus was a mystic. He fearlessly spoke truth to power ... and it got him killed. Yet, death did not contain him.

My guess is that after Jesus' death and resurrection those who had been his followers looked at each other and said, "What just happened?" ... not just about the Resurrection, but about the entire experience from their first meeting of Jesus until his Ascension into heaven ... "What just happened?"

So those followers of Jesus began telling others about the story ... but each had their own twist. Depending upon their experience of Jesus those different stories focused on healing, or inclusion, or justice, or mysticism, or whatever it was that had had the greatest impact on that person's life in their encounter with Jesus. Within a hundred years there were communities all over the area from Jerusalem to Rome with many different writings and letters about Jesus ... and lots of different viewpoints and perspectives.

In the meantime, these new Christian communities had begun to become the Church as we know it today. Christianity became an institution ... and it had institutional needs. One of the main needs was to have everyone on the same page ... so they began to select the writings that were to be included within the institution, and those that were to be discarded. This was the formation of the Bible as we know it today. The many writings were narrowed down to just a few.

By the Fourth Century there was also the need to have a clear mission statement. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 Church leaders hammered out what we call the Nicene Creed. Those who adhered to it were faithful Christians. Those who did not were heretics. There was a clear marking of who was in and who was out. The diversity of expressions of Christianity was narrowed down to those who agreed to a common faith expressed in the Nicene Creed.

Here is where the first broad brushstroke comes in. Jump ahead 700 years ... in the 11<sup>th</sup> century there were two centers of Church authority: one in Rome and the other in Byzantium ... what is now called Constantinople. The leaders from both centers had been at odds with each other for centuries. In Rome the language of the Church was Latin ... in Byzantium it was Greek. In Rome they decided that the only true holy communion bread had to be unleavened ... in Byzantium it was leavened with yeast. Lastly, Rome added a few words to the Nicene Creed, and those in the East objected. This was the final straw, and the Church split into the Roman Catholic Church in the West, and the Orthodox Church in the East. It was called the Great Schism. That was in 1054.

Now jump ahead another 500 years. In Europe the Church and the various Kingdoms were in a strong alliance ... the Kings couldn't do much without the Church, and the Church was dependent upon the monarchs. But lots of things were changing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century ... discovery of a distant land across the ocean, new ideas about the rights of kings and the rights of people ... and the power of the Church as opposed to the power of the Gospel.

However, the Gospel was in the domain of the Church ... and it was written in Latin. Latin was the language of the educated, not the vernacular of the people. So, some rogue scholars began translating the Bible into a language that could be understood by the common person. The Church resisted ... in some places even burning Bibles written in a "common" language. Yet, this only emboldened others. Then, on October 31, 1517 a priest and teacher at the University of Wittenberg in Germany posted 95 objections to some of the practices of the Church. Martin Luther had protested. The Protestant Reformation had begun.

The Protestant Reformation was many different and complex things; it radically altered every sector of European society ... church, culture, politics, economics, universities, governments, education, and the everyday lives of ordinary people. The Reformation spawned a historical way of thinking from which we continue to benefit today. It protested clerical corruption and church hypocrisy that had festered for a millennium. People had had enough of religious authoritarianism, exploitation and abuse. Purification of the church and restoration to its original integrity, however idealistic, became the order of the day.

The Reformation also birthed a revolutionary and dangerous idea ... that ordinary Christians, as opposed to any centralized religious authority, could ... and should ... read the Bible for themselves, in their own language, and draw their own conclusions from it. That Bible, by the way, is now available in 2,370 different vernacular languages.

One of the most fundamental questions of any religion is who has the right or authority to define its particular faith. For Protestants, the answer to that question seems to be "no one" ... no one person or institution could define the faith for a particular group of Christians. What has distinguished Protestantism is its principled refusal to allow any authority above Holy Scripture.

Today there are over 20,000 Protestant "denominations." What had started as a narrowing of the idea of Church at the Council of Nicaea in 325, was shattered by Martin Luther twelve hundred years later, and the consequence of his protest was a proliferation of expressions of Christianity. We Episcopalians are one of those expressions ... but we are just a drop in the bucket.

Our Episcopal Church is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion ... all those churches that have their origin in the Church of England. The Church of England came about in 1533 when the Pope excommunicated Henry VIII for his divorce of Catherine of Aragon. In retaliation, the king decided he had no use for the Roman Church, and Henry VIII appointed himself as the head of the Church in England, and he confiscated all the church property in his country. The beginnings of our Episcopal Church were in an argument between a king and a pope ... about a divorce and annulment.

However, the voices of the Protestant Reformation happening on the European continent had been heard in England by the time that Henry VIII broke with Rome. The Bible had been translated into English, and public writings against the abuses of the late medieval church were all present and lively in the universities and elsewhere.

Henry VIII died in 1547 ... after having eight wives ... and there followed a period in the Church of England of seesawing between a return to Roman Catholicism and an assertion of the ideas of the Reformation. Again, a very broad brushstroke ... the Church of England ended up with a liturgy like that of Roman Catholics, and a theology that include Protestant ideas. It is often called the "via media" ... the middle way.

So, what was ... and is ... the legacy of the Protestant Reformation from an Anglican or Episcopal perspective? First and perhaps most obvious is the Book of Common Prayer: this is the liturgy in English, devised and compiled by Henry VIII's Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. While the Protestants in continental Europe fought over matters like how one is saved and the exact meaning of the Eucharist, Cranmer thought that all would be well if everyone just prayed together, and so he created a prayer book for all to use. The only doctrinal statements to be assented to ... for the laity at least ... were the creeds of the early church. In this way, the practice of prayer took precedence over the statement of beliefs.

As the British expanded their empire and engaged in missionary activity, they took the Book of Common Prayer with them. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Book of Common Prayer was translated into numerous different languages. In the twentieth century, it has been revised in many countries, as modern reformers attempted to bring Cranmer's language and theology

up to date, and create worship that was culturally appropriate for their contexts. The liturgy that we use here at St. Cyprian's ... although the exact words are not included in the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer ... is based upon the liturgy of that first Book of Common Prayer.

As I mentioned, it is often said that the English Reformation created a kind of via media, avoiding the confessional wars of continental Europe. Richard Hooker ... an early English theologian ... forged a system which appealed to scripture, reason, and tradition and, like a three-legged stool, the Church only stands strong and level if all three legs are present in equal proportions. The Episcopal Church does not have a Book of Common Theology ... we have a Book of Common Prayer.

Supposedly, that means that we can pray together even when we disagree on other matters, such as the way we read Holy Scripture. This congregation knows that that is not always the case ... it is the way that Holy Scripture is read around the issue of gays and lesbians in the life and leadership of the Episcopal Church that caused a split here at St. Cyprian's in late 2006.

Obviously, this is not my typical sermon ... more of a lecture than any of my ramblings about how we might take seriously what Jesus took seriously. But, I'll end with a story about an encounter I had this week with a remarkable man ... The Right Reverend Victor Atta-Baffoe, Bishop of the Diocese of Cape Coast in Ghana, a country on the west coast of Africa.

Bishop Victor ... as he likes to be called ... received his seminary degree at Episcopal Divinity School at Harvard, and has an honorary doctorate from Yale Divinity School. He was the Dean and President of the seminary in Ghana before he was elected bishop. He was in the United States to dedicate ... along with our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry ... the new Absalom Jones Resource Center in Atlanta. (Absalom Jones was the first African American priest in the Episcopal Church).

Bishop Victor had expressed an interest in visiting some of the places along the East Coast where men and women from his country were imported as slaves. His plan included visiting Charleston and Savannah ... and someone in Atlanta suggested that he come to St. Augustine and visit St. Cyprian's ... the person had heard many good things about us. I don't know who that person is, but I'm flattered that they made the suggestion ... and I feel honored and blessed by Bishop Victor's visit.

Bishop Victor showed up about 9:30 on Tuesday morning, along with his driver/friend/coordinator Fr. Kris. When I showed him our church, I told him some of our history and the history of Lincolnville. Before he left Bishop Victor said prayers for us at St. Cyprian's and blessed this sacred space ... in English and his native tongue.

I then took him on a tour of sorts of St. Augustine ... the oldest slave cabin over on the corner of South and Blanco Streets ... the "Slave" Market on the Plaza ... Fort Moses ... and then the Middle Passage marker on the Mission grounds.

It was at Fort Moses that Bishop Victor really made contact with the purpose of his visit. As one walks from the parking lot to the Fort Moses Visitor Center there are a series of markers telling the story of slavery in this country. On the first marker is a map of Africa with different colors indicating the four major African tribes that were captured for the slave trade. Bishop Victor stopped and pointed to one of the colors and said, "That is my country. My Cathedral in Cape Coast is across the street from a "slave castle," and from the front steps of the Cathedral I can see the doorway and ramp the slaves walked down to board the ships. It is called the "door of no return."

We then moved to the next marker which explained the "Middle Passage." The slave trading ships would generally disembark from England and would sail to the west coast of Africa where they would trade goods for slaves. That is the First Passage. Then, loaded with slaves the ship sailed for the British colonies in America ... Virginia and the Carolinas. That is what is called the "Middle Passage." Then loaded with cotton, rice, tobacco, and other goods the ships sailed home to England. The marker at Fort Moses has a drawing that many of you have seen ... it is an old drawing ... an overhead schematic of the ship's hull with outlines of slaves ... shoulder to shoulder ... lying in every available open space ... like sardines in a can. Obviously, Bishop Victor had never seen this drawing. He said with a choked voice, "Those were my people."

The next marker had a replica of the shackles worn by the slaves and he mentioned that at the "slave castle" museum across from his Cathedral they had "piles" of the shackles. It was a sobering visit and by his presence next to me, I came to understand the story of this country's slave history in a whole new way. It was truly an honor and a blessing to have the opportunity to be with Bishop Victor for those few hours.

So what does this story have to do with the Reformation? And what does it have to do with us on this 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost? Bishop Victor is a fellow Anglican ... when in this country he calls himself an Episcopalian. He is a product of Henry VIII's break from Roman Catholicism and the influence of the Protestant Reformation upon what was then the "new" Church of England. Many of the Anglican Churches and Provinces in Africa are very conservative, but not Cape Coast, Ghana. I went to their web site and their core values sound like the core values of this congregation ... radical hospitality, inclusion, justice, etc. Although Cape Coast, Ghana is over 3,000 miles away from St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church in St. Augustine, we are obviously of the same ilk.

I will end with noting the connection to this morning's reading from Matthew's gospel. Bishop Victor's blessing of this sacred space were these words: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ... spoken in English and his native language.

Amen.