

National Bible Society of Ireland
Blackrock (Cork) 2016

Introduction

Welcome again, everyone, to our service honouring the word of God in our lives. We gather in the shadow of 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. A bit like Brexit, what Martin Luther did on 31st of October 1517 shook the mountain of mediaeval Christendom and triggered an avalanche of consequences, some foreseen, many unforeseen. The Reformation can be viewed from many different perspectives. For a while, I was teaching in the Church of Ireland Theology Institute in Dublin. The students eventually felt it was safe to ask me did I regret the Reformation? I'll tell you my answer at the end. For now, all I would say is that it is not possible to regret globally an event which gave rise to such an astonishing variety of ways of being a disciple, a follower of Jesus. The division of Christianity is painful to us still today; but there's not denying the new life which still flows today from the Reformation.

Topic

At the very centre of the Reformation stands the Bible — once a ground for separation and now a treasure to be shared.

Step 1

A year before 1517, a book was published which signalled a shift in attitude and understanding. Erasmus of Rotterdam published in 1516 his edition of the Greek New Testament, the first ever to be printed in Greek. Comparing the Latin and the Greek, Martin Luther found significant differences, confirming his suspicion that the received account of the Gospel was not faithful to the original. While still under the Imperial ban, he translated the New Testament in German; through the following decades he oversaw the translation of the whole Bible eventually into the language of the ordinary people. If you could afford it, everyone could have a Bible. The Bible assumed, in this way, a central place in experience and worship of the church of the Reformation. It became not simply for communities but also for the individual a place of encounter. The Bible Societies are later heirs to this democratisation of the Scriptures.

Step 2

Partly as a result, the Roman Catholic Church was wary of the Bible and resisted the popular reading of the Scriptures. At the same time, the Council — I mean the Council of Trent — in one of its Decrees of Reformation said that every diocese should hire a scripture scholar and even divert funds for that purpose. Of course, the Catholic Church moves slowly but when it does move it can really get going. A good example of this is one of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council the current lectionary. The Council itself was hugely inspired by the word of God and promoted with new energy and enthusiasm the place of the Word of God in the life of God's people. An immediate practical fruit of that was the creation of the lectionary. This new set of readings for use at Mass was put together in an extraordinarily short space of time — about three years! It has, of course, limits and weaknesses that we all recognise. Nevertheless, it was immediately recognised as a major achievement: in the words of the Council, it opened up more lavishly for the faithful the Table of God's Word. While it did take about 400 years (!), eventually the embrace of God's word was full, enthusiastic and energetic.

Step 3

As a kind of compliment, the churches of the Reformation took up the Catholic lectionary and, with adjustments, adopted it as the Revised Common Lectionary. This means that nowadays, many churches on this island are reading more or less the same readings every Sunday. On a *practical* level, this means we can share resources for preaching, bible groups and lectio divina prayer groups. On a *symbolic* level, it is profoundly gratifying that Scripture which used to be a point of division is now a practical point of shared experience and prayer. The churches of Reform truly rediscovered the Word of God; eventually the Roman Church too came to the same insight; and now in a kind mutuality of gift, we share the Word of God, especially through the lectionary, in a rich and powerful way. It is, however, more than practical and more than symbolic.

We, as Christ-believers, face the challenging times in which we live. We live in a culture which is resistant to faith—actually any kind of faith. We know this directly because we experience a common, alarming failure: the failure to hand on the faith as a deep and humanly rich experience. My favourite example is the young girl who, on being asked if she could name the four Gospels, confidently proceeded: John, Paul, George—oh no, that the Beatles. This true anecdote speaks volumes to me. Not only is there no “Velcro” for the the great proclamation of the Gospel, there doesn’t even seem to be a capacity to know even basic aspects on the level of information. What should we do?

Probatio 4

For the future of the faith, Scripture is not the only building block of the future but it is an essential one. Two aspects strike me particularly. The word of God is a place of encounter. As we open the Scriptures in prayer, we find ourselves in the presence of God. Nothing is more important than this personal being in the presence of God. It creates a bank of experience—a kind of Velcro—an experience of being with God for which there is no substitute. Secondly, in my now extensive experience, the opening up of God’s word leads to all sorts of questions about faith, belief and practice. In that way, prayer and study promote the development of an adult faith. A grown-up faith, which we *can* talk about and *are not ashamed* to talk about, is one of the great desiderata of today. The good thing is that none of this needs to be done in isolation. As we in the different church read more or less the same reading every Sunday, what could be more fitting than a joint or ecumenical reading?

Peroratio

Finally, how did I answer the question: do I regret the Reformation? My answer involved a parallel analysis. I compared it to the division of Ireland into two states from 1920 onwards. I do regret that division chiefly because of what each state became. It would have been a completely different Ireland if we had been compelled to work out a more tolerant future together. Likewise, after the Reformation, each side became a kind of distortion of the Christian church. Fortunately, we live in a time when there has been great healing, real respect and a genuine regard for the gifts of the Spirit in all the traditions. The new energy of the Word of God has been central to that coming together. Thanks be to God!