

REFORMATION ANNIVERSARY - Living in Fire

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- [0 : 0 0] Please be seated. Oxford is a beautiful city and those who've been there I'm sure would agree with that.
- It's sort of the epitome of classy England in a way. It's got great second-hand bookshops. It's got the Bodleian Library. It's got a university culture.
- It's got quite a nice covered market way. And just off St. Giles is the pub, The Eagle and Child, where C.S. Lewis and Tolkien and others used to meet and drink beer as a group called The Inklings would talk about their work and their writing and reading and so on.
- It's only just a few doors up from the theology faculty room where I used to go regularly for postgraduate Old Testament seminars when I was doing my PhD in England. And if you walk up the Banbury Road, the other side of the main streets, you come to a red pillar box which hundreds of people walk past every day.
- They have no idea of the significance of this red pillar box but as I'm sure many of you would know, it's outside the house that John Murray used to live in. Who's John Murray, you would say?
- [1 : 1 7] Well, John Murray was the great editor of the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary and so much mail did he produce that they actually put a pillar box right outside his house.
- And you can see it with a little plaque to say, in this house lived John Murray and this pillar box is put there, especially for him, in effect, 130 or 40 years ago or something like that. Oxford's a bit spoiled by busloads of tourists but it's still a great place, very genteel sort of society.
- And notwithstanding those dozens of murderers that Inspector Morse has found and brought to justice, Oxford is the last place that you would expect an act of horrific barbarism to take place in.
- But 450 years ago to this very day, the 16th of October, 1555, there was a grotesque double execution.
- In a ditch at the end of the Broad just by Balliol College, which I also used to visit as part of my postgraduate studies, two men, one wearing a black gown with some fur on it, the other in a poor Bristol freeze frock, whatever that is, were led out to die.
- [2 : 3 3] One of them had been the Bishop of London, probably the third most important bishop in England. The other had been the Bishop of Worcester, a town towards the Welsh border, south-west of Birmingham today.
- They were forced to listen to a sermon that propagated heresy. They were manacled by iron to a stake, back to back. Faggots of wood were placed under them and around them.
- Gunpowder was tied around their necks and the wood was set on fire. One of them, Hugh Latimer, the former Bishop of Worcester, died fairly quickly.
- But on the other side, the wood burnt very slowly. So the reports say that Nicholas Ridley, the former Bishop of London, basically had his legs burnt off before he actually died and the fire caught fire to the top of his body.

And a crowd watched as they were burnt to death. As the fire was lit, Bishop Latimer, 70 years old, called out to his younger colleague words that have become famous, which I think I actually first heard when I was even at primary school.

[3 : 56] Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out.

Who were these men? Why were they killed in such an awful way? And what was the candle that they thought they were lighting that day?

Latimer was born in 1485 in Leicestershire to a farming family. He went to Cambridge, was at Clare Hall. Later he became a fellow of Clare Hall.

And until about the age of 30, he was a very zealous, somewhat violent and bigoted papist. That is, supporting the Catholic theology and teaching propagated from the Pope in Rome.

He was converted by a very brave man, really, a man who in Henry VIII's time was actually put to death for his Protestant theology, a man called Bilney. Bilney had heard Latimer preach, recognised that he was an educated man, but also he thought an ignorant man.

[5 : 06] And so he told him what the Bible taught. And Latimer was converted. And he became an equally zealous, but less violent, preacher of Protestant faith.

In fact, he became the most famous preacher in Cambridge in those days. And so famous and so popular and so influential that the Bishop of Ely forbade him to preach in the diocese because he preached the Protestant teachings that we find in the scriptures.

He became a royal chaplain in 1530, then was given a post as a vicar in Wiltshire. Periodically, I guess because of his influence, because he was a popular preacher, he was actually very influential and therefore spent various times in prison, faced excommunication, various charges of heresy and so on.

But because of the growing Protestant faith of Henry VIII and others and his advisors, he became the Bishop of Worcester in 1535, though he retired in 1539, rather than agree to revert to more Catholic teaching that was being propagated at the time.

At the end of Henry VIII's reign, he was in fact in prison for nearly a year. But then when Edward VI became king, he was released, he was urged to resume his bishopric of Worcester, but he declined and spent most of Edward VI's reign advising and being with Archbishop Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, at Lambeth Palace south of the Thames in London.

[6 : 39] One of the first things that Mary did when she became queen in 1553 was to have Latimer arrested, put into the Tower of London, the next year taken to prison in Oxford, and then in October, on the 16th of October 1555, had him burnt at the stake in Oxford.

Well, these Tudor years were very turbulent times, as many of you will know. Up to the 1530s, England was thoroughly papist, that is, accepting the authority of the Pope in Rome and the teaching and traditions thus promulgated and propagated.

It's worth knowing a little bit about what the Church was like up to that time. Many clergy, including bishops, were basically absentee. They received the living, got paid, but did no work.

They paid some curates or other people to do that sort of thing and made quite an income of it. So, an earlier Bishop of Worcester, the bishopric that Latimer himself had in the 1530s, an earlier Bishop of Worcester, spoke no English, never visited Worcester, lived in Italy or France, if I remember rightly, and just took the money that was due to the Bishop of Worcester.

So, it sort of shows the corruption and the ignorance that was around in the Church of the time before the Reformation. The English Bible was forbidden until the late 1530s.

[8 : 03] The monasteries were corrupt. The Church lacked understanding and was full of ignorance. And where you get ignorance on spiritual matters, you end up with superstition. And so, the Church was thoroughly superstitious.

People would visit relics. They would sprinkle themselves with holy water. They'd pray to saints or pray to Mary. They'd pay money to get relief from purgatory. All sorts of superstitious practices to try and win the favour of God or guarantee a better place in heaven or just to get there.

Services were conducted in Latin and most people's Latin was little better than yours and mine. For mixed motives, Henry VIII wanted a break with Rome.

More popularly, we know that that was in part because of his desire to be divorced from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. But also because he was under the growing influence of those who'd discovered and recovered the Bible's teaching and realised how far from the Bible's teaching was the Roman Catholic, as we would now call it, but the Catholic Church under the Pope in Rome.

And so, for the personal reason of a divorce, as well as the growing Protestant understanding and teaching of many of Henry's advisors, not least Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer, the later Archbishop of Canterbury, Henry broke away, in effect, from Rome.

[9 : 27] But there's debate about how much personally he accepted Protestant faith or how much he was under the influence of his advisors. And Henry, being a fairly strong and rather fickle person, his advisors didn't always outlive him.

And various of them were put to death at different times for different reasons. And it seems that his official policy swung to and fro between being more Catholic theology and more Protestant theology during his years.

When he died in 1547, after finally one wife outliving him, I suppose, he was succeeded by his son, a teenager, Edward VI, one of three children, the elder two being daughters and hence not first in line for the throne.

Edward VI had been brought up by devout and Protestant dukes and protectors and so on and was himself, it seemed, personally thoroughly committed to the Bible's teaching and to therefore Protestant theology.

And so in the short reign of Edward VI, from 1547 to 1553, Protestantism took hold in England. The Bible was read in English and distributed as widely as people could afford.

[10 : 45] People began to preach the truths of the scriptures. The liturgy or the prayer book was reformed twice in 1549 and then more thoroughly in 1552, the precursor of the Book of Common Prayer as we would have it in the Anglican Church these days.

It was the full flowering of Protestantism in the Church of England in England. But Edward died young. Died in 1553, a young man unmarried without children and he was succeeded by his elder sister Mary.

Mary was an avowed Catholic, probably partly because of her father's divorce of her mother and therefore by way of allegiance to her mother.

And so Mary reversed things quickly and viciously. She was vehemently papist and immediately put the leading reformers into prison and had many of them executed in her reign of five years.

That's a bit of the background. Nicholas Ridley, the other man to be martyred on this day 450 years ago, was somewhat younger than Latimer.

[12 : 02] Latimer was 70 when he died. Ridley in his early 50s, born in 1503 in Northumberlandshire. He also went to Cambridge to Pembroke College. Later he became the master of that college.

He became a chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer, in 1537. He became a chaplain to Henry VIII in 1540. And in 1547 became Bishop of Rochester and then under Edward VI was translated to become the Bishop of London.

Again, when Mary became Queen in 1553, one of her first acts was to have him arrested, put in the tower, along with Latimer, transferred later to prison in Oxford and then put to death in 1555.

Latimer and Ridley had different contributions to the English Reformation and different legacies for us. Latimer was the great preacher of the English Reformation.

Popular, colloquial in his language, he preached down to earth sermons that people could understand, but he preached with a fearlessness and boldness along with his great oratory skills and style.

[13 : 13] Hear this, this is a beginning of a sermon he preached to Henry VIII himself one day. You imagine preaching these words at the beginning of a sermon to a king, no less Henry VIII.

Latimer, Latimer, thou art going to speak before the high and mighty King Henry VIII, who is able, if he think fit, to take thy life away.

Be careful what thou sayest. But Latimer, Latimer, remember also thou art about to speak before the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Take heed that thou dost not displease him. Well, that's putting the King Henry VIII in his place, surely, at the beginning of a sermon. In another sermon I remember reading a few years ago that he preached to Edward VI, he began his sermon along these lines.

Do not covet. Do not covet. If I was to say for three hours only those words, do not covet, it would be enough to you. Preach that to a king.

[14 : 19] And in another sermon he preached about bishops, words that strike me as being singularly contemporary. He describes these bishops as, under their rule, that lording and loitering hath come up, but preaching hath come down.

And he described bishops of his day as pampering their paunches, munching in their mangers and moiling in their gay manners and mansions.

And I imagine he used the word gay in an original sense, but in a contemporary sense it may well be words that still ring true, sadly. He was a man who took seriously the preaching of Christian faith, but practised what he preached and was a man who was regarded universally as saintly and humble, unambitious and godly.

Ridley was more the theologian, possibly came to reforming views or Protestant views through some study that he did in France. No one's quite sure where it began, it seems, for him.

He was the advisor to Cranmer. And so Cranmer, who's regarded as the architect of the prayer book of the Anglican Church, Ridley's hand lies well behind that in most of its pages.

[15 : 42] He was certainly involved in the reform of the prayer book of 1549 and 1552. He was a man as a bishop who started schools and hospitals because of his love and care for the poor and for the needy.

Certainly a prayerful and godly man. Well, as we reflect on these times that seem so far from us in many ways, it's easy to be contemptuous of the brutality of those times.

Mary was queen for five years, during which time over 300 Protestants were put to death, often barbarically, and they included at least four children and many women.

They weren't traitors, they weren't thieves, they weren't murderers. They were mostly pious and devout and godly people who were put to death for their beliefs.

On the other hand, it's equally easy, I think these days, to be dismissive of what are often regarded as stubborn Protestant heroics. Why should Latimer and Ridley and others be so uncompromising, knowing that they would be put to death in her life?

[16 : 51] And especially in a pluralist society like ours, where variations of Christian faith alongside all sorts of other faiths are often held as being equally valid, weren't they just fools and stubborn, stupid people for holding so rigidly to the doctrines of faith that they did?

Were those issues really life and death issues? Well, these are instructive times and if you excuse the pun, it's worth asking what is at stake here?

You see, the issues of the Reformation go to the very heart of the Christian faith and the Christian gospel. They are important issues not just for then but for now also.

And as I mentioned at the beginning of the service, the theology of the Reformation is often summarised under four headings. Firstly, Scripture alone.

The issue of authority in the church is always a contested issue. Before the Reformation, the Pope's authority was absolute.

[17 : 58] What he said went. But in the period of the Reformation, both on the continent and in England, the Reformers, the Protestants, recovered Biblical authority.

authority. That is, the authority for the church is not the Pope or a human person or not even the King but is the authority of God as mediated in His words in the Scriptures.

That is, the Bible is our ultimate authority. And so, you can read in the 39 articles, one day if you're bored in church, you'll find them at the back of the prayer book, I think. You'll find the articles that attest to that, that the official doctrine of the Anglican Church is that Scripture alone is our authority.

And you see it in the Bible, of course. For example, in 2 Timothy, Paul writes that all Scripture is God-breathed, it's God's Word to make us wise for salvation in Christ.

And so, it's seen in the Reformation by the example of Latimer and Ridley who were people who read their Bibles time and time again and Ridley in particular, apparently, memorised huge slabs of the New Testament, especially when he was in prison.

[19 : 12] And that's why we sang that children's song, the best book to read is the Bible. It's seen in the preaching of the Reformation when for the first time in decades or centuries, people began to hear the Bible being expounded and its truths explained.

So, that's the first Reformation theme, Scripture alone, the issue of authority. The second is Christ alone and soon in the service we'll sing a song of that theme, In Christ Alone, My Hope is Found.

In the pre-Reformed Church, salvation came not merely through Christ, not only through Christ, but through our combination of good works or human combination of good works and acts of devotion and almsgiving and payment of money and pilgrimages and all those sorts of things.

But in the time of the Reformation, the Protestants discovered or recovered the biblical teaching that salvation is by Christ alone. His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead are absolutely and totally sufficient for our salvation.

Nothing else is needed either from us or from a priest or a Pope or from anybody else. Absolutely and totally sufficient is the death and resurrection of Christ for our sins and our ultimate salvation.

[20 : 32] And so the sufficiency of Jesus' death transformed the view of the church, the Protestant church, about the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

No longer an altar but a holy table, no longer a reenactment of a sacrifice in a mass but rather the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the Bible teaches. The sufficiency of the death and resurrection of Jesus and His great high priesthood ascended into heaven transformed their view of prayer.

So that you don't pray to saints or to Mary, you pray to Jesus directly then to God through the throne of grace in Christ and so on. That's the second thing in a nutshell.

Thirdly, grace alone. When salvation is regarded as even in part an act that we contribute to, then salvation is not by grace but something we earn or merit or deserve.

That was certainly the pre-Reformation Catholic teaching. Yet the Bible is clear all through the pages of the New Testament, indeed in the Old as well, that salvation is an act of God's grace that we never deserve.

[21 : 50] We don't even contribute to it. We come empty handed to receive salvation as a free gift of God. We are sinners when Christ died for us, Romans 5 teaches.

Even more clearly in Ephesians chapter 2, those great words of grace, that it is by grace you have been saved as a gift of God. We don't earn it, deserve it or merit it.

Our good works are the fruit of faith, not the means of achieving or earning salvation. So the Reformation recovered the Bible's teaching about God's grace or mercy to save us.

We don't earn it or deserve it and that's why we sang just a few minutes ago that song, Only by grace can we enter. Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone and fourthly, the flip side of that coin, faith alone.

If salvation is by grace alone, undeserved by us, we contribute nothing to it. We receive that gift through faith alone.

[23 : 00] Indeed, even the Bible teaches that faith is ultimately a gift of God to us. Perhaps the Bible passage that summarises these issues most clearly of all comes in Romans 3.

the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe has been disclosed to us. For there's no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

They are now justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by His blood effective through faith.

And that's why at the beginning we sang the first song, My Hope is Built on Nothing Less Than Jesus' Blood and Righteousness. Now these are not unimportant matters.

These are not matters of sort of peripheral or confusing theology. They are matters that are central to Christian faith and central to the Bible's teaching.

[24 : 10] They are worth dying for is what I'm saying. Before he died, Ridley, the former Bishop of London wrote a farewell letter in which he said amongst other things this, to die in the defence of Christ's gospel it is our bounden duty to Christ and also to our neighbour.

Blessed are they therefore that die in the Lord and if they die in the Lord's cause they are most happy of all. Let us not then fear death which can do us no harm otherwise than for a moment to make the flesh to smart.

For that our faith which is surely fastened and fixed unto the word of God telleth us that we shall be soon after death in peace in the hands of God in joy.

From death we shall go straight unto life. Farewell dear brethren, farewell and let us comfort our hearts in all troubles and in death with the word of God.

Nor are these matters merely antiquated matters. Another slogan that arises out of the Reformation is the Latin expression *semper reformanda* a church reformed but always reforming.

[25 : 39] That is the church in any age needs to be always in the process of being reformed. that is the church didn't become reformed in the time of Edward VI and stay reformed.

It always needs in every generation to be reformed. And sadly all of these issues, these central issues remain under serious attack within the church today in the West.

In Anglicanism at least and in other denominations it seems to me most probably as well, the Bible's authority is under attack. Not necessarily from papal authority, though in one denomination that is clearly the case, but in general in Anglicanism from all sorts of traditions that are not biblical, the authority some would say of experience, I've experienced this therefore I know it to be true even if it's counter to the Bible's teaching, or human reason regarded as an authority.

The Bible alone is to be our spiritual, scriptural authority, whereas sadly so often the Bible is relativised, sidelined, neither preached nor read.

The sufficiency of Christ's atoning work is under attack. In our society and in our church pluralism is rife. So the people regard there to be all sorts of different ways to God, not only in Christ.

[27 : 12] Universalism is preached as though regarding that everybody can go to God. And so we find in Christian faith, in the Christian prayer book, in Christian preaching, that the cross of Christ is marginalised and dismissed.

We find that grace alone is under fire, for itching ears want to hear that not that we're sinners, but that we somehow merit God's favour and salvation.

Indeed, the language of sin is foreign in many pulpits, somehow reduced into psychobabble of pop psychology and the holy judgement of God on the final day is rarely heard by many.

And finally, faith alone is therefore also softened or weakened as a central pillar of Christian faith. good works, piety, religious devoutness and other things are regarded as just as equally valid for getting us to heaven.

Sadly, too many Christians today are just indifferent to these issues, whatever they think. Religion is regarded as a matter of choice and not truth. Christian ignorance, which is growing, means that we're much more prone to superstition.

[28 : 31] Bible reading is not practised as it ought to be. Christian confidence becomes lacking and hope confused. These are theological issues that we ignore at our peril.

It matters that Scripture alone is our ultimate authority. It matters that Christ alone is the basis of our salvation. It matters that grace alone is the means of our salvation.

It matters that faith alone is our response to God's offer of salvation. It ought not surprise us that Christians veer away from truth.

For example, Paul warns us in 2 Timothy that people will flock to heresy with itching ears. You see, the candle of Latimer and Ridley is often under threat.

Nor ought it to surprise us either that faithful Christians are opposed and indeed persecuted even sometimes by those within the so-called Christian church. Jesus warns us of such opposition and the New Testament shows us that the opposition is not just from outside the church either.

[29 : 40] The candle of Latimer and Ridley is often under threat. And in 1 Peter 4, indeed in 1 Peter we've seen how persecution is the context of that letter in recent weeks.

In today's passage in verse 12 onwards, Peter says this, We ought to be to be blessed.

Because the Spirit of God is resting on you. We ought to expect there to be heresy and opposition these days.

But the example of Latimer and Ridley and what they stood for reminds us that the cause of Christ is worth dying for. the cause of Christ and his gospel was worth the deaths of Latimer and Ridley.

It was worth it precisely because these truths are true. Because death has lost its sting through the totally sufficient death of Christ for our salvation.

[31 : 04] So the cost of martyrdom is not the absolute cost that some think it is because it's the gateway of life. It's worth their deaths because an imperishable inheritance awaits, guarded by God and kept for us who are protected by faith as we saw in 1 Peter 1 a few weeks ago.

The deaths of Latimer and Ridley were worth it because we remember in 1 Peter 1 that setting all our hope on Christ is not in vain.

their deaths were worth it because as we saw at the beginning of 1 Peter 1 by God's mercy we've been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

So let us heed this exhortation of Latimer. Christ with his death hath delivered us from the curse of the law. He has set us at liberty and promised that when we believe in him we shall not perish.

The law shall not condemn us. Therefore let us study to believe in Christ. Let us put all our hope, trust and confidence only in him.

[32 : 28] Let us patch him with nothing for as I told you before our merits are not able to deserve everlasting life. It is his doing only.

Let us pray. Lord our God we give you thanks for the lives of Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. We thank you that they were faithful to your truth even unto death and we pray that the candle they lit that day may not be extinguished neither in England nor in the Anglican church around the world but that we may hold fast to the authority of the scriptures alone trusting in Christ alone that salvation is by grace alone received through faith alone and with confidence and hope we look forward to being reunited with all your people of every age in your imperishable and undefiled heavenly inheritance kept for us through Christ.

Amen.