

The curious thing about what history calls 'The Reformation' is the way historians try to analyze and define it. I've several text books that try to roll about 100 years' worth of human endeavour into one definitive movement. They try desperately to impose start dates and end dates on this movement. These books name names and assign 'blame' - and then suggest that the 500 years between then and now have been the church just trying to live with the result. Nothing could be further from the truth - but all that analysis makes a good starting point.

The Reformation (so called) gave us much to celebrate and plenty to consider where our relationships within the family of God are concerned. We could focus on the misery caused by the feuding and warring factions of a church that found itself suddenly split by theological hair-splitting. We could mourn the loss of unity or pretend that all that was behind us, but the truth is the church was born from change and is driven (called) to change.

Reformation (re - formation) is the spirit behind Jesus' confrontation with the religious leadership of his day. A faithful, knowledgeable, Jewish man had an obligation to learn and to struggle with the religious precepts of the time. And through his engagement with and immersion in Scripture, and his constant awareness of the work and presence of God in the world, Jesus understanding of the way things ought to be was a challenge to the folks who wanted stability, and who drew power from that stability.

Jesus calls attention to those who seek power for the sake of power (at the expense of God's glory & power) and so it is right that on the Sunday we acknowledge our reformed history that Jesus words linger in our ears for a while.

But...these words always make me uncomfortable - as I stand here at the (pulpit) offering 'wisdom' as one called to lead, teach and journey with you as God's people...

Jesus reform sought to remind everyone where the 'power of faithfulness' comes from - and he urged God's people to be mindful of the way leadership was being exercised in their midst:

“...you are not to be called teacher, for you are all students...call no one your father, for you [all] have one father...nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah”

This call for real humility echoes the themes of the reform of the 16th century, as voices within the church called for the church to remember the Gospel - to examine practices that asked too much of the (so called) common people, and provided comfort (in excess) to those who called themselves leaders in the church.

Reformation in the time of Luther, Calvin and Knox was about access and language and giving the people of God full access to the words that foster faith. It was about curbing the excesses of the powerful and giving glory to God in all things.

Reformation meant examining rituals and encouraging education and while it sometimes built fences around the things of God, it just as often destroyed barriers that kept people from engaging more fully with the things of God (?) so what does reformation look like today?

Technology? Accessibility? Shifts in leadership or education or a new understanding of the Sacraments? The Church keeps all these things in mind as our historical context demands, and if we are true to reformation 'guided by Scriptures and the Spirit', then we are always a church being rebuilt.

As we read Scripture in changing circumstances, we are required to understand both circumstance and Scripture differently. As we adapt to 'the world as it is' we must always consider our responses and our actions (and our excuses) in light of the eternal nature of God's love made known in Jesus and revealed even now by the Spirit.

Reformed and always reforming - that's what we say about ourselves; even as we hide behind jokes about how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb: (answer - none - Presbyterians don't change things) But Reform is not about changing music or changing the style of worship or the look of the sanctuary - Reformation is what happens when curious people meet the spirit of God in the world, and change their attitudes towards one another, or change their hearts towards people they once thought were 'enemies'. Reform involves admitting mistakes and making amends. Reformation in 2020 looks like lives overwhelmed by acts of love - overwhelmed from the inside and from beyond ourselves. And in this sense, the church has always been a place of reformation, and God's people are always reforming.