

Sermon Reformation Sunday 8th November 2010

John 9,1-12: To see means to believe

Dear Parishioners

Do you know why we actually celebrate Reformation Sunday and what it reminds us of? We are celebrating this day to remember the historical event when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses at the Castle-Church in Wittenberg – according to the theologian and historian Philipp Melanchthon this happened on the 31 October 1517. So on the first Sunday in November we actually remember the birth of the Lutheran tradition, which started with this very courageous act by Martin Luther. But why should this be important for us who are part of the Reformed Tradition or for those of you who are part of the Roman-Catholic or Anglican Tradition? What could this historical event signify for us?

For us who are Protestants it is important to remember the birth of the Reformation in Germany. Because even though we had our own reformation in Switzerland there was a very strong link between the leading figures Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. So we can't just look at our own reformation without seeing the whole context of what happened during those important years in the early 16th century.

For me personally it is important to remember that Martin Luther risked his life for his faith. He was so convinced that the church of the time needed reform, that he risked everything. We should not forget that Jan Huss was killed because of his attempt to reform the church only a century before Martin Luther. Luther only got away with it because of the political coincidence that the governor of Sachsen supported his ideas and that the Pope couldn't risk losing this governor's favour. So if you like, it was also the historical circumstances that made it possible for Luther to spread his theology and to find followers for his way of seeing and living Christian faith. Besides this he had never intended to found a new church – all he wanted was a reform of the Roman-Catholic church of the time.

For us today Martin Luther can serve as an impressive example of someone who really fought for his faith. When a person is convinced that they have found the truth, this can release incredible energy in him or her, which can then make enormous things possible. But how come that someone has such strong feelings for their faith that they will even risk their life? Have you ever experienced something similar in your life? For Martin Luther it was a spiritual experience during a dreadful thunderstorm that led to his very strong faith and that made him fight for a lifetime. He described that during that stormy night, when he was close to death, he felt the presence of God intensively and also he must have felt the fragility of life.

The Bible story that we heard today about the healing of the Blind man also tells us the story of someone who had a very strong faith and whose life was transformed because of his faith. Recently in another service we have had a look at the first part of this story when I talked about how different people experience the same event in completely different ways and that we should be thankful for the good things that happen to us. Today I will focus on the aspect of faith in the story. Because the more we listen to that Bible story, the more it reveals to us its deeper layers.

In the Bible to be blind is also a metaphor for someone who is not a believer. Someone who hasn't found the light yet - as the evangelist John would describe it - or with other words when someone doesn't believe in Jesus. Of course if someone doesn't see the light then this means that he or she is blind. With this background information the healing of the blind man receives another meaningful aspect to it. This is also a story about someone who realised who Jesus really was and who could finally believe. Probably even someone who was against Jesus beforehand and who finally decided to follow him. In this sense he had like Martin Luther a deeply spiritual experience. Now the question is how he reacted after having experienced this deep feeling of seeing the light? We are being told that he went out and told everyone what had happened to him. He is so convinced that what he knows, everyone should hear about. And again this is very similar to what Luther did after his experience with God during the thunderstorm: He went out and posted the 95 thesis somewhere, where everyone could read them.

I would call the next step that both of these men made a confession of faith. Because they can't keep their joy and knowledge for themselves, they want to share it. As I said earlier such an experience can release an enormous amount of energy. And this is to some extent also what Reformation Sunday is all about – it's about remembering the content of our faith.

Now for us this is a bit complex because in the Reformed church – unlike other denominations - we don't have an official creed that everyone would accept as an expression of their faith. At the moment this is a subject highly debated in the churches in Switzerland, because many people actually ask for a creed, something that officially summarises our faith. Today we said the Apostle's Creed together, which is one example of such a creed. They use it in slightly altered versions in the Roman-Catholic, the Anglican and the Lutheran Church. But it is not officially *our* creed. I don't know if you know that Godi Locher, who used to be the Minister of the Swiss Church here in London, is going to be the President of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches from January 2011. And he is one of the people, who really want the Reformed Church to have their own creed again. So maybe next time we celebrate Reformation Sunday, we might have our own creed again, which will help us to express our faith as a community. But until then the Apostle's Creed is a very good way of expressing and sharing our faith together. And hopefully it releases a lot of energy in us that makes us go out and share our faith.

Amen