

Sermon at KENDAL URC on the 6th of November 2011

“Being Reformed - *ECCLESIA REFORMATA SEMPER REFORMANDA*”

(based on Readings from Matthew 10: 16-20, 26-27 and Romans 3: 21-28)

We pray.

Loving God, as we reflect on what it means to be your church, your people, walking in faith, always searching for new ways to worship you more wholly,

we ask you to be present among us.

Inspire our thoughts and stir our hearts and minds, through your Spirit, which is beyond the bounds of time and place.

Amen.

Last week was a special week in the Christian year. It featured important days of commemoration. What did we celebrate last week? ...

(All Saints, All Souls (Halloween), Reformation Day)

The 31st of October has been celebrated as the Day of Reformation among many Lutheran and Reformed Christians since the 18th century. It is actually a national holiday in Slovenia, in parts of Germany, and in Chile.

We don't often hear much about Reformation Day and the Reformation movement in general in our churches and in our society in the UK these days.

For that reason, I thought I would take us all on a journey of re-discovering the roots of our Reformed faith.

We are part of the United Reformed Church, which has itself been formed from former Presbyterian, Congregational, and Churches of Christ Churches. As Christian churches, they all had a few things in common.

The one thing that particularly connected these three denominations, though, was that they were all Reformed Churches.

Now we know that the URC isn't the largest denomination in the UK and its dwindling numbers might make us worry about its future at times.

But let us look at the wider context:

The URC: 68,000 members in 1,500 congregations.

Worldwide: 80,000,000 Reformed Christians (Presbyterian, Reformed Congregational, Waldensian, United and Uniting churches in 108 countries)

The United Reformed Church is a member of the WCRC - the “World Communion of Reformed Churches”, a body which connects the many local Reformed Churches in various countries of the world.

These 80 million Christians worldwide all have one thing in common: a Reformed Christian faith.

I think it's worth looking at what it means to be Reformed in a bit more detail.

First of all, I will remind you of the main characters during the period of the Protestant Reformation.

The person who is commonly blamed for starting the whole Reformation movement is **Martin Luther**.

There is a lot that could be said about Luther, but what made him known and stand out from other people at his time, was that Luther, who was a Roman Catholic monk in Germany, studied the Bible in depth and discovered that there was an alternative way to understanding God's grace from what the Roman Catholic Church was teaching. Luther wanted to correct the misunderstandings of the Catholic faith and wrote various letters filled with theological analyses to his superiors.

The Roman Catholic Church wasn't pleased with Luther's ideas and he ended up being persecuted for his thoughts. He spent a long period of time in hiding, and used that time to translate the Bible, which at that time only existed in Greek, Hebrew, or Latin, into everyday German.

Martin Luther was a man who was down to earth. He enjoyed a good meal, he did like the occasional drink of wine, and he certainly did not believe in celibacy.

His way of life and his theological arguments inspired many Christians in Germany, who also believed that the Church needed to be re-formed, re-ordered and re-newed.

Around the same time, in Switzerland, another person was seeking the reformation of the church: **Huldrych Zwingli**.

Zwingli was a humanist scholar, as well as a preacher, and, like Luther, saw the Biblical texts, not the rules of the church, as the foundation of the Christian faith.

He became known when he published a book about the misunderstanding of the Eucharist (or Holy Communion) in the Roman Catholic Church. For Zwingli, Communion was not a mystery of salvation happening to those sharing bread and wine, but a memorial of the Last Supper, and the Roman Catholic Church was celebrating it all wrongly!

Martin Luther, much as he agreed that the Roman Catholics were wrong, thought Zwingli didn't understand the meaning of Communion either, which is why there was an early split between Lutheran Churches (those who followed Luther's beliefs) and Reformed Churches (those who followed Zwingli's beliefs).

Then came **John Calvin**.

Calvin was highly educated and lived in Switzerland. As a theologian, he followed in Zwingli's footsteps, but wanted to enrich Zwingli's very simple Communion liturgy with the singing of psalms and connecting Communion directly to the sermon, which, for Calvin, was the most important part of a service.

Because Zwingli's Reformed service had become acceptable in churches in Switzerland, Calvin's changes weren't received well, and he had to flee to France.

There, Calvin continued to work on various psalms and canticles, as well as publishing his "Institutes" - a book summarising his belief and his views on anything related to church life, like on how to understand Baptism, Communion, or Ministry.

The whole Reformation movement very much originated in Central Europe, as you can see, but it started to spread into other countries across the world.

The person who influenced the Reformed Churches in Britain was John Knox.

John Knox was a Catholic Priest who became involved with the Reformation movement firstly in the political realm and then later also in the Church. He started working on the Book of Common Prayer with the Church of England, but was forced to leave the country when the Roman Catholic Mary Tudor became Queen of England. Knox spent some time in Geneva, Switzerland, where he met John Calvin. Calvin's views inspired him further, and he eventually returned to Scotland, where he led the Protestant Reformation movement. Alongside others, John Knox formed the Protestant Church of Scotland, the Kirk.

These four people, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox, were most influential in the Reformation movement across Europe, which ultimately led to the formation of churches such as our own United Reformed Church.

One person I haven't mentioned yet, but who is also commonly known in connection with the Protestant Reformation, is **King Henry VIII**.

You will all probably know much more about Henry VIII than I do, so I won't talk about his life in great detail.

He is seen as a Reformer, because he was seeking political reform. He was, however, not supportive of the Protestant Reformation movements in Central Europe.

Henry VIII mainly formed the Church of England because he himself could be the head of that church and ultimately relieve the Pope of his authority in the church. Henry did not dispute any Catholic doctrines, though, and I think he did not realise quite how many Reformatory thoughts he inspired in England.

And these Reformatory thoughts, the main themes of the Reformation movement, I will introduce to you now.

On our service sheets, mixed in with the Order of Service, are some Latin phrases. Because the Protestant Reformation started in the Middle Ages, when theology was only debated in Latin, the key themes are still called by their Latin names today.

Most of these themes were mentioned in the reading we heard from Romans 3, which was one of the key passages for the Reformation.

I will explain these phrases very briefly now.

The Latin word "Sola (i, o)" means "only" or "alone" in English.

Soli Deo Gloria - means to the Glory of God alone.

It means that we do not come to worship on a Sunday because it's tradition or norm, it means we do not care about each other because we want to gain a reputation as good people, but it means that whatever we do, we do for God. For God alone and to glorify only God, no one else and not even ourselves! Romans 3:27 states clearly: "What becomes of boasting? It is excluded." Soli Deo Gloria means that praising God should be the only reason for everything we do.

Sola Scriptura - means that the only Basis of our faith is Scripture. As a Reformed Church, we do not have to abide by the ancient rules of church tradition, but we do have to look at the Bible for guidance in all we do. Only the Bible can help us to make sense of life and to live a fulfilled life with God.

Sola Fide - means that faith is all we need. In Romans 3:26 we are told that God "justifies the one who has faith". We do not need to impress God by achieving certain tasks, or by leading particularly great lives; all we need is to have faith that God loves us and that God is alongside us in what we do.

Only if we have faith, we can truly encounter God!

Sola Gratia - means that God's grace is all that counts. Romans 3:28 says "a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law". We cannot expect God to reward us for things we do well and to punish us for things we mess up. God doesn't weigh our deeds up like that. God acts out of grace. And God's grace is incomprehensible for us, but it is the only thing we need to achieve. And since it is God's gift to us (which is mentioned

in Romans 3:24!), we can all have God's grace for free, without earning it in some way or other.

Solo Christo - means that only through Christ we can understand how to live a Christian life. We all know that there are parts of the Bible that seem to contradict each other. Some rules and regulations in the Old Testament are contradicting things that Jesus teaches in the New Testament. Romans 3:24 gives us the answer for that: "redemption ... is in Christ Jesus". In other words, we do not need to live by all the rules of the Old Testament anymore, because Jesus gave us a new strategy for life. The only rule he gave us is to love (God, our neighbours (i.e. each other), and ourselves).

Some questions we ask ourselves nowadays are about issues which did not exist at the time the Bible was written. As Reformed Christians, all we need to ask ourselves is: What Would Jesus Do? Only in Jesus, God has revealed himself to us in a fully human form, in a form that we can understand and relate to.

To sum up: As Reformed Christians, we don't need many guidelines for our faith.

All we need is to live to God's glory, to focus on the Bible, to have faith, to trust in God's grace, and to remember Jesus in our daily lives. Simple!

The Reformation made life a lot simpler for Christians, by looking back at Biblical teachings rather than at traditional rules and regulations.

So what does being Reformed mean for all of us here this morning?

The Latin phrase for this is: **Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda**.

In English: The Reformed Church needs to be constantly re-forming!

And Reformed churches all over the world have continued to change and to re-form themselves since the time of the Reformation. For example, we don't often have half-hour sermons anymore, which was the minimum length of time for Calvin's sermons. Our hymn books are re-newed every now and then. Or most obviously for the United Reformed Church, it has only existed for 39 years because several Reformed churches decided to come together as a new, Reformed, denomination.

To be constantly re-forming means vitality, it means to be actively looking for ways in which old traditions can be reformed.

The URC has various initiatives which can help local churches to be involved in this constant process of re-forming.

Vision4Life was one of these ideas that was meant to transform the URC. We are now approaching the end of its last year, which is the year of Evangelism. Evangelism, scary as it is, was not only at the heart of the Gospel, but also at the heart of the Reformation. It is something that ordinary people did, and that every Christian should be involved in - not by standing in market squares and preaching at the unbelievers, but by engaging with our faith and by looking for ways in which we can reform our churches. We heard a reading from Matthew 10 earlier, which was the reading chosen for Reformation Day.

It reminds us of the opposition that Jesus and his disciples faced, as well as of the opposition that people like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox faced.

Matthew 10:27 teaches us to engage in Evangelism, quite simply:

"What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops."

Evangelism means talking about faith in all sorts of contexts: With fellow Christians, with those who do not know about God, in situations where injustice oppresses people, and maybe even in worldwide movements like the current Occupy movements.

Evangelism is part of the re-formation of our church.

Another current URC initiative is the **Vision 2020** framework, with which local churches can assess where their strengths and weaknesses are, and which can help us all to transform our weaknesses and the be reformed again.

Last but not least, the upcoming **Campaign of Radical Welcome** offers a very practical way of engaging in reforming our churches quite radically; and it is this campaign that reminds me most of the need for constant reformation in our churches and in our own lives.

The thoughts I would like to leave all us with this morning are:
Which opportunities for Reformation do we see in Kendal and at Kendal URC at the moment? What can we do to enable constant Reformation?