

Pentecost 22
28/10/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 33:12 - 17
Psalm 46
1 Peter 2:1 - 10
John 8:31 - 38

Reformers of the Church: Alexander Henderson (1583 – 1646)

Although though “Reformation Day” has slipped off the calendar, gathered as we are in front of our rose window with its four faces, it seems good to devote a day to the Reformers of the church. Starting with Alexander Henderson (1583 – 1646), over the next few years we shall work our way around the window and refresh our appreciation of the Protestant Reformation. The four faces enshrined here belong to a great company, from every part of the church in every century who have applied their energies to the renewal of the Church. From the beginning the people of God have shown a capacity to distort or stray from key elements of their faith and practice. Things of primary importance have often been pushed aside while what is secondary, or even peripheral, has been allowed to claim pride of place. This is true in biblical history. We see it from the time Moses came down the mountain to find the people worshipping a golden calf, to the controversies between the prophets and the people, and the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day.

The Reformation began as a protest against certain perceived faults in late medieval Roman Catholicism. There were many facets to the Reformation, but at first it was a movement of sincere Catholics who wanted to reform their church. From Luther onwards the central thrust was to privilege the witness to Christ in Scripture as the guiding source of the Church’s life, and to oppose anything that seemed to deform the apostolic faith. The Reformation sought to create the situation in which nothing would come between the life of the Church and the source of its faith.

The struggle for this priority can be seen in John. Jesus is teaching his audience that being true disciples means relying on and living by the truth of what he has taught and shown them. What he brought had the capacity to renew their relationship with God, which is why this truth will set them free. His audience is not convinced and instead claim privilege based on their heritage as children of Abraham. But Jesus focussed on what that heritage means in terms of faith for living, rather than ancestry. Despite their protestations, the children of Abraham have been in bondage: in Egypt and under the Romans. To Jesus they are in danger of becoming trapped again by placing their reliance on Abraham as father of their race, rather than their faith. Abraham’s status was a gift of grace: it is because God chose him, and he chose to trust God that he is revered. Jesus’ audience missed the mark regarding this aspect of the life of their Father. And they missed the mark in rejecting the things Jesus said to them, which came from the same source as Abraham’s call. Their desire to kill Jesus for the things he said is the sign they have departed from living by the truth of faith. Jesus’ accusation is they have “left no place for his word”. That is: they have shut themselves off from the newest manifestation God’s grace, and are refusing to be corrected.

This struggle is one the church has had, and will continue to have on its long march though history as it slips into giving priority to secondary things, and prophetic voices are raised to call it back to first things. All our four figures responded to this dilemma in different ways, governed by the needs of the church in their time and place. But all aimed to maintain the priority and centrality of Jesus Christ as head of the Church, the cornerstone around which the living body of the church is built. All worked for the church to be a living witness to God's marvellous deeds, set free to offer praise and service to God who journeys with us in life.

It is impossible to go into Alexander Henderson's life in depth, and I commend Sue Blackwood's excellent article about him in the Spring Newsletter. Henderson was a second-generation reformer who was born after the others in our window had died. (He lived exactly one hundred years after Luther.) The sort of theology and church history we were taught made much of the theology of the Continental reformers such as Luther and Calvin, to the neglect of the English church tradition, which has affected us very deeply in this country. This building, named The Presbyterian Union Memorial Church commemorates the 1859 union in Australia of three disparate strands of Scottish Presbyterianism. Henderson represents the Scottish Covenanters, the first generation of which under John Knox, (in the 1560s,) and then under King James VI (1566 – 1625) bound themselves by religious and political oaths to maintain the Reformed cause in Scotland. James signed the first Covenant (1581), which became known as "The Kings Confession", but in an attempt to consolidate his grip on power appointed three representatives to Parliament under the title of Bishops. This did not make him a friend of the Presbyterians who stood for freedom in religion. Later when the Kingdoms of England and Scotland were united, and James VI became King of England also (as James I), he denounced Presbyterianism, upheld the Divine Right of Kings and the Apostolic Succession. This set the scene for the coming period, which was marked by intense conflict over who had the power to determine the worship, doctrine and governance of the Church in the United Kingdoms, and whether Scotland would remain Presbyterian or return to being Episcopal. When James' successor, Charles I (reigned 1625 – 1649) attempted to impose Archbishop Laud's Book of Common Prayer on Scotland it met with strong resistance, culminating in the renewal of an expanded version of the National Covenant, signed in Greyfriars Churchyard on 28 February 1638. (Graphic)

Alexander Henderson began as an Episcopalian but became convinced Presbyterianism most closely expressed the form of church governance found in Scripture. As the controversy gathered he emerged from the solitude of his quiet country parish to become a key figure. A man of deep piety, wisdom and learning he gave the church theological, practical and diplomatic leadership of a very high order. He was a central figure in the Westminster Assembly, which commenced meeting in 1643 and produced the Westminster Confession, A Directory of Public Worship, and two Catechisms. These documents, only partially and temporarily received in England, were adopted in the Church of Scotland and became the yardstick of the Presbyterian Church.

The arguments Henderson engaged in were ecclesiastical and political: doctrinal and practical and reflected deep differences in the history of England and Scotland. Henderson resisted the imposition of Episcopal order on Scotland. Unlike many of his confreres he seems not to have sought a uniform Presbyterian order for both

Kingdoms. He favoured maintaining the integrity of Scottish Church life, based on the reformed faith, as introduced from Europe.

In amongst this struggle, which is cultural and political as well as theological and liturgical, Henderson's priority was that the church's life should be ruled by Jesus Christ. His form of theology came to be known as standing for "the Crown Rights of the Redeemer." Christ is the Lord of the Church and religion should be free: Kings or worldly rulers have no place in determining matters essential to the life of the church. The word of God in Christ is intended to judge, rule and renew the life of the faithful, gathered in Congregation, Presbytery and Assembly, concepts that occur in our own Basis of Union. But don't make the mistake of thinking Henderson's piety prevented him from participating in political processes. He was fully involved and later when the King visited Edinburgh, where Henderson had become a Minister he served as his chaplain. He was gracious, respectful and yet uncompromising in maintaining the distinction between royal power and ecclesiastical power.

Alexander Henderson left room for the word of God in his own life, and gave himself to the struggle of creating structures that left the church free to be ruled by the word of God, the source of its life. He was big enough to see that, provided Christ was allowed to rule in the church, proper relationships could also be maintained with the world. The question of religious freedom continued to be a lively one in Scotland, which suffered yet more controversy in the centuries to come before a new unity came to the body of Christ in that place.