

Trinity 19

The two kingdoms

It's the 19th Sunday after Trinity, the year is 1528, 499 years ago. The Reformation is underway. We're in church in Marburg; the preacher is Martin Luther and his theme is 'The two kingdoms', our theme for this morning (incidentally, when I planned the series I had no idea of that coincidence of timing). It's an old theme but as you might expect of a reforming preacher, he gives it a radical twist. The old theme is there in our two readings this morning. The two kingdoms are the kingdom of God that Jesus preached – where God is king, where justice reigns and love of God and love of neighbour is the law of the land; and human kingdoms where rulers have to use the sword to execute justice. So, in our gospel reading, one kingdom is in fact an empire, the Roman Empire ruled by Caesar, where the Pax Romana was kept by armed legions, financed by taxes paid with coins bearing the image of the emperor. Jesus says, 'pay your taxes'.

I don't know whether you remember that scene in the Monty Python film 'Life of Brian' where they're discussing in a seditious way what the Romans have ever done for us and someone says 'the aqueduct' and another 'sanitation' and a third person pipes up 'and the roads' ('well, yeah, obviously the roads'). Irrigation. Medicine. Education. And the wine. Public baths. 'All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?' And the final thing mentioned is Peace; they have brought peace. The Romans did do quite a lot for 1st century Judeans and Christians recognised that

they provided a social and political space in which their new gospel message could be spread and could prosper. Though there were periods when the Roman empire turned on this new religious movement and persecuted it, there were greater spells when the Pax Romana and its usually tolerance of religious diversity suited them well. It was worth paying taxes for. Indeed St Paul went so far as to say, in Romans 13, that 'those authorities that exist have been instituted by God; they are God's servants, his ministers (the same word as used of those who exercise authority within the church). That's not the whole story of course. Within 6 or 7 years of Paul writing those words the mad and monstrous Nero used saw the fledgling Christian community in Rome as a convenient scapegoat for the great fire that he may well have instigated himself; thus began the first great Roman persecution of Christians that included the martyrdoms of probably both Peter and Paul and led the writer of the book of Revelation to depict the Roman Empire as the great dragon or serpent, the very incarnation of evil.

The early church suffered periods of persecution at the hands of the empire but mostly benefitted from the Pax Romana which allowed space for the growing influence of the Pax Christiana. And in the 4th century Christianity became the official religion of the empire and from then on enjoyed in much of Europe a special status and relationship to worldly power. The conversion of heathen lands, including the reevangelisation of our own country, happened when the local king or ruler embraced the faith and his people followed him. Kingdoms tolerated only one king – there was no political diversity – and by and large they adopted one faith – there was no religious diversity. And that situation obtained until and after the

time of the Reformation. The country we now call Germany was a part of the Holy Roman Empire, but the empire had nothing of the authority of its predecessor. Power lay in the hands of a patchwork of city states, duchys and pryncedoms ruled over by a landed aristocracy. But times were changing; the economy was moving from the land and its villages into the cities and towns. A new mercantile class was growing in influence. The success of the Reformation often depended on the choice of the local ruler – hence Germany today still has areas that are predominantly Catholic or Protestant. At the same time there was growing social discontent amongst the peasant classes, those at the bottom of the pile from the old feudal system. Many of those peasants embraced the new form of religion with its offer of unmediated access to God and the sense of liberty and freedom from oppressive authority that seemed to promise.

God has ordained the two governments: the spiritual, which by the Holy Spirit under Christ makes Christians and pious people; and the secular, which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they are obliged to keep the peace outwardly... The laws of worldly government extend no farther than to property and what is external upon earth. For over the soul God can and will let no one rule but himself. Therefore, where temporal power presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads and destroys souls. We desire to make this so clear that every one shall grasp it, and that the princes and bishops may see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing one thing or another.

Ah, the peasants thought, yes we have found a new spiritual freedom, free from the tyrrany of princes and bishops. There was in the years following Luther's sermon, a huge uprising that was eventually suppressed by the aristocracy whose forces killed somewhere between 100 and 300 thousand of the peasant forces. They did not have Luther's support – indeed he preached against them.

The peasants have taken upon themselves the burden of three terrible sins against God and man; by this they have merited death in body and soul... they have sworn to be true and faithful, submissive and obedient, to their rulers... now deliberately and violently breaking this oath... they are starting a rebellion, and are violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs... they have doubly deserved death in body and soul as highwaymen and murderers... they cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the gospel... thus they become the worst blasphemers of God and slanderers of his holy name"

Perhaps the peasants should have listened more carefully to what Luther said in his sermon. The worldly kingdom includes everything we can see and do in our bodies. And this includes everything that is done in the life and government of the church. The only thing not included, and that belongs to the Heavenly Kingdom is faith in Christ. "Christ alone" and "faith alone".

From our point of view that allows the state far too much purchase on the life of the church and it justified both mass slaughter and a conservatism about the social order that arguably led to an increasing pressure of social injustice that led to the explosions of communist revolution in the early 20th century

inspired by the philosophy of Marx and Engels who could categorise the influence of Christianity on social progress as malign.

But what Luther did purchase for the whole of western thinking was space for individual conscience. He did not allow temporal rulers to interfere with what we would now call freedom of religion. It was legitimate to resist the worldly kingdom when it tried to coerce in matters of belief:

We are to be subject to governmental power and do what it bids, as long as it does not bind our conscience but legislates only concerning outward matters... But if it invades the spiritual domain and constrains the conscience, over which God only must preside and rule, we should not obey it at all but rather lose our necks. Temporal authority and government extend no further than to matters which are external and corporeal.

Here then are the seeds of freedom of conscience – that, arguably, has led inexorably to freedom of religious and political belief and therefore to religious pluralism and political choice, that is democracy.

Luther got an awful lot wrong. The Reformation is not a story of goodies and baddies, but his central conviction of justification by faith in Christ alone and of the individual's unmediated relationship with God had consequences not only for the church and religion; it was a decisive factor in setting into train the modern world as we know it – and, incidentally, it is an indictment of the modern secular culture's lack of interest and appreciation of its religious roots that so far I've only noticed one measly documentary on the Reformation at this 500th anniversary of its onset. Other countries are doing rather better:

the Playmobil figure of Martin Luther is astonishingly their all-time best seller, with the millionth mini-Luther having been shipped in June.

I'm glad so many somewhere appreciate his significance. He didn't get everything right but he made an extraordinarily brave stand for a freedom of belief from which all in the modern world have benefitted whether they share his faith or not. So cheers to you, Martin Luther.