

Dissent

I wonder if you saw a recent television programme in which Dr David Starkey drew a parallel between the religious extremism and accompanying violence that we sadly see in parts of our world today and the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The parallel was uncomfortably convincing, and for Christians particularly salutary.

By the early part of the sixteenth century the need for the Church to be reformed was all too apparent. The programme focussed on two men who were at the forefront of the momentum towards reform. One was Martin Luther. And the 31st of this month marks the five hundredth anniversary of his nailing of his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg – an act which is seen as the symbolic beginning of the Reformation in Germany.

The other was William Tyndale, who is commemorated today in the Church of England calendar. His special achievement was to translate the Bible into English, parallel to Luther's translation of the Bible into German. Both translations were hugely influential. Though not clearly acknowledged at the time the Authorised Version of 1611 drew largely on Tyndale's work.

The sixteenth century was thus one of great religious change. The two sides in the dispute, Roman Catholic and Protestant, were vehemently opposed, and many acts of extreme violence and cruelty were carried out on both sides. Tyndale himself suffered a particularly gruesome execution in 1536.

A good indication of the health of a nation or of an organization is surely its ability to accommodate and cope with dissent, with opposing views. In that regards the Church in the sixteenth century totally failed. Only since the aftermath of the Second World War has there been any real rapport between the divided parts of the Church. St Paul's plea for unity which we heard in our Bible reading just now (Ephesians 4.1-6) was paid little more than lip service up to then. Yet even though violence between different Christian groups is now happily rare there are still barriers to overcome.

Beyond the Church there are many countries in the world where dissent is forbidden. Opposition parties are banned, the media are controlled, public protests are mercilessly suppressed, individuals who speak up are arrested and interned, often without a fair trial.

Even though Christian history is far from untainted the Church and individual Christians have a duty to challenge and condemn such injustices. We have to acknowledge with humility the failures of the Church in the past and strive to work together for a better world – a world in which St Paul's call for unity based on love may spread to all people – a unity which embraces and celebrates diversity.

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