

Pentecost 20C, October 27th, 2019 (Reformation Day, October 31<sup>st</sup>)  
Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

## Protestantism: A Voice for Moderation

### Introduction

We live in time marked, characterized by what is often referred to as Identity Politics: in other words, the decline of social cohesion, a perceived deterioration in what we used to refer to as the common good, or the good of all, and a rise in the recognition of groups and sub-groups; perhaps we could call them tribes. In keeping with this change, the focal point of societies has moved from economics to cultural identity. It appears that as economic equality has broken down within societies, a sense of anger has arisen leading people to identify with their tribe rather than the society at large. Groups consider themselves to be victims, unrecognised and marginalized. These tribes or groups increasingly become absolutes in the way we think about ourselves and others. The significance of this for democracy cannot be understated. We are in a democratic recession

This morning I want to think about this contemporary problem and what the broadly-based family of Protestantism, may offer, may bring to the table in terms of intellectual energy and ideas. Today I am taking the liberty of not reflecting specifically on the readings just read, but more broadly upon the nature of Protestant consciousness.

### The Protestant Principle

So what is the essence of Protestantism? The answer is both simple and complex.

The simple answer is this: *protest*. That should be no surprise. The word protest sits *within* the very word Protest-ant. For those who have a smattering of knowledge about the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, you would know that this ethos of protest was triggered by the practice of indulgences in the then sole Western Church, the Church of Rome. Indulgences, were as it stood a “nice little earner” for the Church, as Christians were encouraged to pay a fee, as a means to cancelling the debt that a person had accrued because of their bad deeds. It was like a user-pay metaphysical tax for sin, which released you from having to pay the consequences – time in purgatory - for that pesky affair or dodgy financial transaction you engineered. So, the short answer is that Protestantism was born *in protest* against Rome.

But there is more to it than that, because the ethos of protest against the Roman Catholic Church was not just a one-off thing, but rather reflects the very soul of what Protestantism really represents: its DNA.

Paul Tillich, the German pastor who fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and ended up in North America, becoming a leading theologian there, wrote in 1948 an article called the “*Protestant Principle*”. In that article, Tillich made the point that while institutional Protestantism may have a “use-by date”, the ethos that it represents, its mood of protest, may outlast it. In that article, Tillich proceeds to analyse what this mood or ethos of protest is about. In a nutshell, he says, it includes two points: the first, the *Protestant obligation*, meaning the commitment to give expression to God’s will in the world: to build justice and love in a world which resists it, to build the kingdom in a world that denies it. The second aspect is more interesting, but more difficult: the *Protestant reservation*. What he means by this, is Protestantism’s scepticism or doubt about human beings and the cultural, political and of course religious structures which we build around us. And the reservation is this: that human beings and human social structures *claim too much for ourselves, that we over-reach ourselves*, that we falsely purport to represent absolute truth, and claim its concomitant: absolute authority and power for ourselves. For Tillich, Protestantism at its best, challenges all expressions

of authoritarian and fundamentalist movements. Tillich understands that we humans long for the final word, from someone, *from anyone*; we long for the definitive truth. The Protestant Principle pushes back at that, asserting that the only absolute truth is this: *human beings can never attain absolute truth*, that “the final word” is always with God and *only* with God, and will only be revealed with God at history’s culmination, at the end of the world. Claims to understand, to represent the entirety of truth are delusional and dangerous. And so, he writes; “*The Protestant Principle is the prophetic judgement against religious pride, ecclesiastical arrogance and secular self-sufficiency*”.

### **The Challenge to Tribalisms**

So, returning to where we began – the rise of Identity Politics – where separate and different cultural identities have set themselves against each other, Protestant thought has a ready tool in its armoury to manage the challenge before us: the protest against identity interests in society that claim too much for themselves. But – and here is the rub – included amongst these is Christianity, which increasingly today casts itself, projects itself as little more than just another identity amongst others in the ‘conversations’ and screeching of the deaf.

Let me conclude with reference to the current Australian Freedom of Religion Bill which the Federal Attorney General, Christian Porter is preparing as we speak. In the light of what I have just said, it seems to me that while such a law is broadly necessary, the danger is that it becomes a “sword” to be used by Christian groups against secular groups, rather than a “shield” to protect the legitimate rights of all. The Protestant Principle calls everyone to account: the secular, the religious, social majorities and minorities as well as governments: all of us. The Protestant Principle, invites us to acknowledge our religious, cultural and sectional biases for what they are, and then to live wisely “in communion” with God and each other, or as Reinhold Niebuhr back in the divided Detroit, of 1928, put it “to live with other people without making each other miserable”.

I think it is a truism that we will never escape from thinking about ourselves and our societies in identity terms. But we need to remember that the identities dwelling deep inside us, are neither fixed, nor necessarily given to us by our accidents of birth. Identity can be used to divide, but it can also be used to integrate. That is the vision of Protestant moderation.