

Sunday, October 25th, 2020 (Reformation Day, October 31<sup>st</sup>)

Readings: Jeremiah 31\_27-34 , Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

## The Protestant Principle: Nothing to Stand Upon Other than Christ

### Introduction

I want to do three things. First, ask the question, what is the essence of Protestantism; second, ask what is the connection between Protestantism's essence and what has become known - reflected in our Romans reading - as the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Third, I want to ask whether Protestantism needs to rethink itself.

### The Protestant Principle

I would make a bet that most Anglo-Celtic Protestant Christians when asked what being Protestant is about, would answer, "not Catholic". That was my experience as a child, when I saw that being Protestant carried an essentially negative identity: something that you were not. Recipients of history, we Anglo-Celtics were victims of the Anglo-Irish conflict of our ancestors. But we need to be able to understand Protestant identity positively, for what it offers in its own right. And so, to the first question: 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 term Protestant. 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 Catholic Church. 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 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 had. 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 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, the ethos of protest, may outlast it. In that article, Tillich proceeds to analyse what this 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 resistant world, to build the kingdom in a world that denies it. The second aspect is more subtle, and because of its subtlety, more difficult: the *Protestant reservation*. What he means by this, is 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 we *claim too much for ourselves, that we over-reach ourselves, that we falsely purport to represent absolute truth in reality, which is after all, always only ambiguous, always just relative, always contingent*. In Tillich's thought there is targeted in the crosshairs, fundamentalist and authoritarian movements - political and religious, that claim absolute authority, absolute power, because they and they alone, apparently 'possess the truth'. What is it about the human condition, Tillich asks, that predisposes us to need to claim a monopoly on the truth? Tillich understands that we humans long for the

final word, from someone, *from anyone*; we long for the definitive truth. People hang, literally hang on the words of politicians, scientists and pastors, slavishly repeating their latest thoughts. Tillich tells us that the Protestant Principle, pushes back at that, the Protestant reservation asserts 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 to us at what Catholic theology refers to as the “beatific vision”: when we directly see and relate to God after death or at the end of history. 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*”.

### **Justification by Grace through Faith**

The second question is how does this ethos of protest, fit with the insight of the apostle Paul concerning justification by grace through faith? The answer is not difficult. You may recall that Martin Luther, the initial father of the Reformation, was an Augustinian monk. What marked his personal journey was the gnawing insecurity and anxiety about his unacceptability to God. His reading of Romans, in particular the passage before us this morning, fell like a thunder-clap, awakening him to the realization that he *was made* acceptable to God by the work of Christ alone. In short, it dawned upon him, that he was already justified *before* God, *by* God.

This insight about our acceptability to God, because of what *God has done for us in Jesus*, is the great leveller, it reduces to mere vanity the bloated claims we make for ourselves, the intumescent platforms upon which we stand. Put another way, it goes to the very heart of the problem of the human condition. Driven by anxiety – a universal human experience – the insight that we are acceptable to God and accepted by God, potentially does for people what it did for Luther: frees us from the pathological need to prove ourselves, the neurotic drive to claim too much for ourselves, the narcissistic behaviour that uses others for our purposes. The teaching of justification by grace, assures us that “it is not all about us”, that we can “get over ourselves” and the anxieties that we carry. Justification by grace is the antidote to the human behaviour of over-reach. The connection between the Protestant Principle that warns us against religious arrogance and the Protestant emphasis upon justification by grace are connected: both encourage a genuine and realistic sense of ourselves, a deep humility with regard to our identity.

### **Rethinking Ourselves**

And so, to the final question: how does the Protestant Principle which challenges our habitual over-reach in our claims to truth, ask us to rethink our attitudes toward society, toward others?

Let me frame my answer in terms of the current debate over the Freedom of Religion issue being pursued both federally and within NSW, made notorious through the Israel Folau episode in 2019. My sense about this debate is that many Christians and not a few denominations feel increasingly vulnerable in our contemporary Australian climate. It is often suggested that secularism is the enemy. Moreover, I suspect that there is a creeping defensiveness toward other religious traditions, as they prosper through immigration. In a word, we Christians are accustomed to a monopoly of religious power in Australia, and our insecurity makes us wary of having to ‘share the stage’ with others. The Freedom of Religion Bills may be the result of just such insecurity and fear. As the NSW Moderator, the Rev’d Simon Hansford stated on Friday last,

*"It is disingenuous to portray Australian's Christians as victims of persecutions and to bolster their religious freedoms to the detriment of our diverse religious communities, many of which are subject to discrimination, some of which is unconscious and some, sadly, deliberate."*

Consistent with this, has been the view of the Uniting Church in Australia, from the very beginning, that any approach to religious freedoms, should occur through the lens of a Human Rights Act which would facilitate “the competing claims and values” inherent in such a discussion.

So, in sum, the Protestant Principle asks us to be very cautious about narrow dogmatic claims – theological, moral or political – that may appear to bolster our cause. The Protestant Principle challenges all fundamentalist claims to absoluteness – social, economic, political and religious. The deep, deep insight of Protestantism is, as Martin Luther put it,

*Christian theology, like everything else, is only ever partial. Total faith and total theology are impossible, because we are only human.*