

Presbyterian - Say What???

“Beginnings”

So to begin this morning, who recognises this symbol?



It's the symbol for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. It's symbolic of Moses' calling in Exodus 3 where he encounters God's presence after seeing a bush that was burning but not consumed. Why it was chosen is debated but the consensus is that the Church is like the burning bush – suffering and troubled at times but sustained and kept alive by the Holy Spirit.

Thing is, you say Presbyterian to people and they often say, “Say what???” And that was me! From coming from a non-church background I had really had no idea who or what the Presbyterian was about.

“When I say Presbyterian or Presbyterian Church, what comes to mind?”

- Traditions?
- “Dead” worship?
- Old people?
- Infant baptism?
- Cromwell Presbyterian Church?
- Process?
- Order?
- Hymns?

There are roughly 75 million people who identify as Presbyterians in the world. South Korea has the highest number of Presbyterian churches.

Now at this people will say, “I’m not into denominations, I’m not a Presbyterian, I’m a Christian.”

And I am with you on that point.

Our collective call to follow Jesus always overrides any denominational allegiance.

So this morning will be the first in a number of messages that flesh out what a Presbyterian Church is.

Why?

Well, for one, to dispel some myths.

Another is that when you become part of congregation or church, you always become part of something bigger, with all the quirks that come with that. There are ways and understandings about doing things that aren’t always obvious.

And it has to be said, Presbyterians have great beginnings.

To understand what it means to be part of a Presbyterian Church, you have to go back, back to beginnings.

Wednesday afternoon, 2pm October 31st, 1517.

So let me take you back to Wednesday afternoon, 2pm October 31st, 1517.

A young monk went to a church in his town and did this:



He nailed a list of 95 statements and questions to the door of his local church.

Among other things, in the time of Luther people believed in purgatory, a place where those who weren't quite good enough for heaven could be cleansed of their sins in preparation for eternity.

An 'indulgence' was a piece of paper or certificate you could purchase to have your sins forgiven and lessen the amount of time spent in purgatory.

He was outraged with the idea that God's forgiveness could be bought and that you didn't even need to be humble and repentant.

Were people trusting in Jesus or a purchased document?

Did they put their hope in God or the pope?

This simple act sparked what became known as the Reformation and led to the birth of the Protestant Church as we know it today.

His name was Martin Luther.



Luther did not want to start a new church - at that time there was essentially two churches – the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic – there were no Baptists, Presbyterians, Brethren's or Assemblies of God and so on.

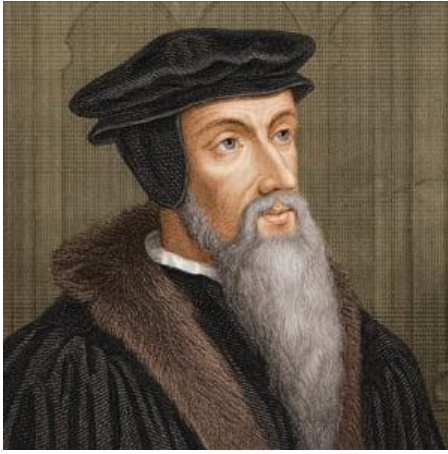
Through his study of Scripture Luther wanted to see the Roman Catholic Church *re-formed*: changed and renewed and repentant of where it had become corrupt and return to the clear teachings of the Bible. This notion quickly spread because of a new invention – the printing press!

Luther and his ideas were condemned yet by that time the sparks had become a fire in Europe.

John Calvin

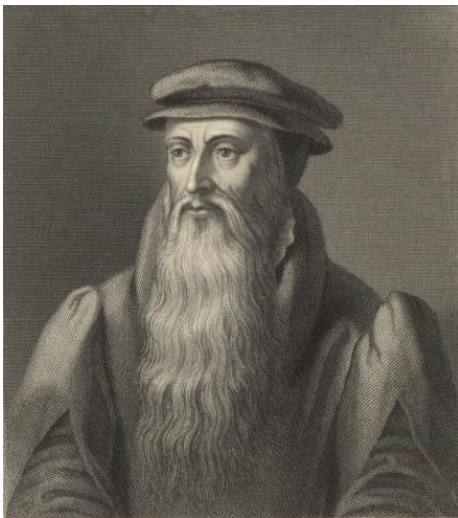
Meanwhile in Geneva, Switzerland, this guy was captured by the Reformation movement.

His name was John Calvin.



Calvin began to write vigorously in defence of the Reformed view of the church and his works were quickly disseminated throughout Europe. Like Luther and others, he too believed the Church had strayed from God. He emphasised the preaching of the Word of God, personal faith in Jesus Christ, corporate governance of the church and social concern. Not only was the church transformed through his influence but the whole of Geneva.

John Knox



John Knox spent time with Calvin in Geneva and after seeing what had been achieved, returned to Scotland to reform the church there. He dismantled the hierarchy present in the churches and believed that the Biblical model leading the church was through 'Presbyters' the Greek word we translate as 'Elders'. Churches joined with Knox in his vision and soon the Church of Scotland was established.

New Zealand

Jump forward 200 years and primarily Scottish and Irish migrants came to New Zealand and brought their faith with them and where it became known as Presbyterian.



Has anyone here ever lived in Petone?

A cross on the Petone foreshore marks the arrival on 20 February 1840 of the first Presbyterians intent on settlement.

Many Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland had emigrated to New Zealand. Those seeking a warmer climate settled in established themselves in Waipu. Those who wanted ~~some where just as bleak~~, somewhere that reminded them of home 😊 settled in the South Island and established Dunedin.

The Five Solae

So that's 400 years of history compacted into just over 500 words.

But what did these Reformers believe, at great personal risk?

What was at the core of who they were and that the Presbyterian Church holds too today?

The chief of these was this:

Sola scriptura – (Latin for) "**by Scripture alone**"

2 Timothy 3:16

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Since it is Scripture alone that is God-breathed, since it rebukes, corrects, teaches and trains in righteousness, it alone is the final and supreme authority the Church.

The Reformers were able to read Scripture and it altered every facet of the Christian life.

It had a profound effect on the congregational worship.

If you think morning worship is a drag now I want you to imagine for a moment coming to Sunday worship in the time of the Reformers.

For the next hour you will sit in silence, apart the occasional 'Amen': no singing, no chatting to your friends or neighbours, no asking questions. The priest stands before the people as their representative and mediator before God.

He will speak, pray, read the Bible and chant in all in a language you have no comprehension of: Latin.

If you fortunate enough to be offered communion it will only be the bread because you are not considered worthy to drink the wine.

Afterwards you head home having completed your religious duty even though you are none the wiser to what your religious duty actually was.

If you fearful about your salvation you will remain fearful and hope your religious devotion was enough.

What the Reformers saw in Scripture something different.

- Worship involved the whole body.

Congregational singing, which had been largely forgotten, was brought back to the people.

The reason we sing songs together today traces its roots to the Reformation.

If you get to take part in the Sunday worship in any way, you can trace it back to the Reformation.

- The service itself was no longer conducted only in Latin.

The Reformers insisted that the Bible be the language of the people.

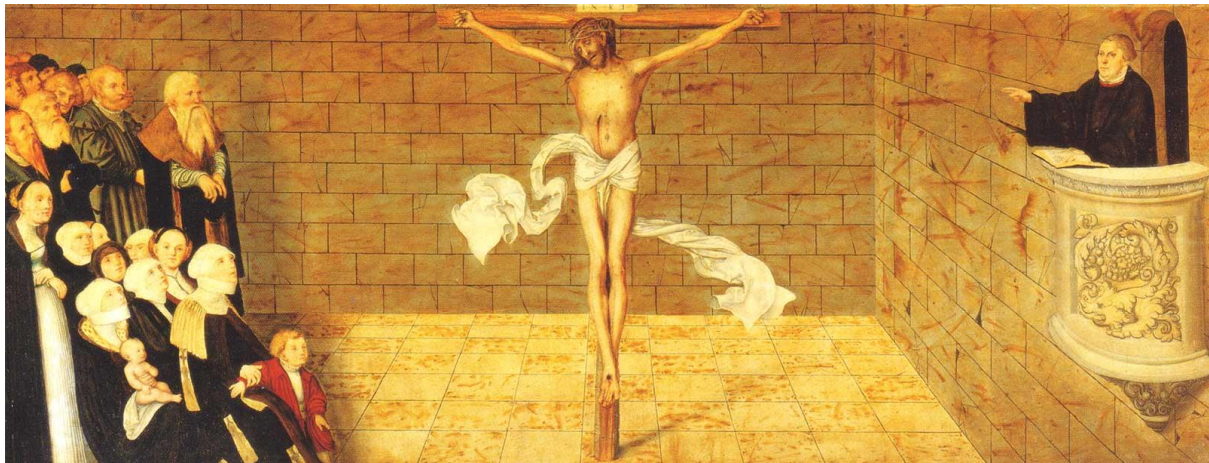
They were adamant that Scripture belonged to God's people and was not solely a special class of people.

It took Luther for example, 10 years to translate the Bible into German.

Preaching, prayers and singing was in the vernacular, which means, “the language of the people”. For Luther it was German, for Calvin it was French and for Knox it was Scottish☺ (a form of English apparently☺).

- Spiritual oversight is by a group of elders and exclusive to one person. The name “Presbyterian” is from the word *presbyteros* which is translated as elders. The church then is governed by elders of equal rank. They also did not believe that churches should be independent. Looking to Acts 15 – where Paul and Barnabas present their case before a larger group of elders – is the inspiration for the General Assembly (held every two years in New Zealand).

- Preaching was to be clear, explaining and expounding the Scriptures. It had one ultimate goal: to point people to Christ.



This painting is by Lucas Cranach, a close friend and supporter of Martin Luther. It captures the place the preaching has even today.

- On the right Luther is preaching from the Scriptures, but the Scriptures always point us to Jesus. Therefore preaching should do the same. Preaching is not primarily aimed at educating or entertaining people, nor is it primarily aimed at changing people’s behavior - it is to point to Christ who hung on the tree in place of sinners.
- On the left the congregation listens to Luther preaching, but their attention is also on Christ. They see Christ and hear Christ. Jesus should always “get in the way” between the preacher and the parishioner. This, then, is how the laity evaluates preaching – by what the preacher says about Jesus.

- And central is Jesus Christ who died for sinners. The garment wrapped around Jesus represents the activity of the Spirit.

So to be Presbyterian, to truly be a Presbyterian church (or any church for that matter) Scripture is central pointing to Jesus.

In line with the Reformers the Presbyterian Church confesses that:

“The supreme rule of faith and life and the supreme standard of the Church is the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”

Martin Luther when tried for heresy stated:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason ... I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

So today if a significant issue needs to be addressed the question is, “What does Scripture say on this?”

Whatever traditions are held, or what social science might say or cultural norms, Scripture holds the ultimate authority.

This commitment to Scripture led to a revolution in belief about salvation:

***Sola fide* – “by faith alone”**

***Sola gratia* – “by grace alone”**

These two hang together.

It was in reading Scripture that he read these words (among others) that we heard earlier:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Salvation is received by faith – which means trusting – in Jesus alone.

Salvation includes being declared just by God; we have right standing with God through faith in Christ death and resurrection.

Our good deeds, good works, a good life, an ethically upright life, isn't enough. There is nothing we can do that save ourselves and bring us into relationship with God.

It is by grace alone.

We cannot earn. We cannot merit it. We cannot warrant it.

Salvation is pure gift given through and in Jesus.

That does not mean that good works do not matter.

The Reformers would say that the *order* is important.

Deeds or works are result and evidence of following Jesus.

Salvation precedes good works – good deeds are the fruit of knowing Jesus Christ and living in his name.

Solo Christo – “Christ alone”

Only Jesus is the unique and decisive way God has come to us.

He is distinct and definitive embodiment of who God is.

We may discover truth elsewhere and God can speak to us in different ways, yet ultimately Jesus is the one who reveals God to us.

His life, teaching, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension bring us to God.

Salvation is found in Jesus alone. No one else can save.

And is the world's true King; our loyalty belongs to Him alone.

That also means there is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ.

Presbyterians take this very seriously.

All believers, though their roles, gifts and ministry may be different, stand on equal footing before God.

Elders are chosen from among the people and given a great responsibility - first and foremost of continuing to point people to Christ and also overall governance and spiritual oversight of the church.

Soli Deo Gloria – “Glory to God alone”

No one else gets the glory, not saints, angels, the Virgin Mary, church leaders or ourselves.

Glory belongs to God alone since is the Author and Perfector of our Salvation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To be truly Presbyterian is to hold to these deep convictions.

“Looking at these five phrases, are there any that stand out to you and why?”

So to finish: my hope out of this is *not* that you become a Presbyterian.

For each of us it reminds us again that our good deeds, a nice personality and ethical life aren't enough.

Knowledge nor being brought up in a Christian family is not enough. Whatever we think we can bring to God to merit our forgiveness and acceptance is not enough.

My hope and prayer is that we all have a grasp that salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone.

And not just in our heads but in our hearts.

My other hope and prayer is that we remained grounded in Scripture as the supreme authority for our collective and individual life, confident it still speaks as the Word of God into our world today.