

Ein feste Burg

Sermon for Reformation Day 2017 New College, Oxford

What is Reformation? The Latin word 're-formatio' originally means a physical reordering of matter. It could still be used in this literal sense in Luther's times: to take a typeset text apart and re-set it can be a re-formation as can be the translation of a text from one language into another. The concept can even be applied to turning a text into song. Martin Luther uses all of these re-forming activities as ways of disseminating the gospel; and he does it nowhere more powerful than in his hymns.

The hymn 'Ein feste Burg' which forms the basis for today's cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach is Reformation theology *in nuce*, taking as its starting point the interpretative translation of Psalm 46.

We have heard the Psalm from the choir from the Book of Common Prayer in Miles Coverdale's version. He was influenced both in his Bible translation and his hymn writing by Martin Luther. Luther and Coverdale had both grown up with the Latin psalms, chanted daily in their Augustinian community; the imagery and rhythm of the parallel structured lines were ingrained in their mind in a way which presumably the choir boys can understand best. Psalm 46 resonated especially strong with those who came to it from a communal singing experience; it is one of the processional psalms, sung by a collective we as they walk towards the city of God. I'll read the first part of the Psalm in Luther's translation – just listen out for the music in his German.

Ps 46: 2 GOtt ist vnser Zuuersicht vnd Stercke / Eine Hülffe in den grossen Nöten / die vns treffen haben.

3 Darumb fürchten wir vns nicht / wenn gleich die Welt vntergienge / Vnd die Berge mitten ins Meer süncken.

4 Wenn gleich das Meer wütet vnd wallet / Vnd von seinem vngestüm die Berge einfielen.

There follows a description of the city of God with its holy place of the Tabernacle, culminating in a strong chorus, repeated at the end:

8 Der HERR Zebaoth ist mit vns / Der Gott Jacob ist vnser Schutz

In re-forming the Psalm into a hymn for the 16th century, Luther starts fairly closely to the text. 'Refuge' for him takes the concrete form of a 'Burg'; he had experienced the protective power of castles on the Wartburg and was experiencing it again on the Veste Coburg while waiting for the outcome of the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1530.

But the hymn is not about physical safety; the real enemy aren't the heathens of the psalm or the Catholics on the other side of the Augsburg debating table but 'the enemy of old', i.e. the devil. From here, Luther takes off to a radical reading of the psalm as talking about spiritual struggle. That leads him to identify in verse 2 the God Zebaoth acting on behalf on those trusting in him as Christ (sing): *fragst du, wer er ist – er heißet Jesus Christ*. He reads the text as speaking of the same salvation history he had read in the letter to the Romans: salvation by grace alone, not through armed struggle. Physical fighting is pointless; as the last verse says, this is not about goods, honour, even one's own family – but the promised kingdom of God which will remain. And the only weapon which will work in that case is 'das Wort' i.e. the word of God, sola scriptura.

We can follow the concentration on the Word in the Bach cantata. From the contrapuntal struggle of the opening, the music develops through the reflective movements to the harmonic coming together of all voices at the closing chorale. Johann Sebastian Bach fully understood the spiritual dimension of the struggle Luther was portraying.

This was not always the case in the centuries of singing the hymn when all too often the spiritual struggle was dragged back to mean whatever military or political operation was current. Part of this was due to the changes to the music. Luther's version of the tune is a dance of defiance, strong cross-rhythms hurling the word at the devil (sing): "Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn." In the course of the following centuries congregational singing slowed down, the tune was evened out as the hymn was used in big gatherings to invoke God not for help in gaining the heavenly kingdom but for the success of a collective we in defending a worldly version of the Empire.

Both readings of the hymn clashed in the 'Kirchenkampf', the struggle of two factions of the Protestants during National Socialism. While the German Christians, loyal to Hitler, would start their meetings with (sing) 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott', the Confessing Church, defiant of Hitler, would close their meetings with the last verse, stating that the devils of this world will need to let Scripture alone, thank you very much, sung in Luther's cross-rhythm. To make clear the original meaning of the hymn, it was necessary to re-form it back to its origin.

The other possibility was to re-form it into a new text. How this could be done shows a letter Dietrich Bonhoeffer sent from the Tegel prison, only weeks before he was executed. It includes a poem among reflections on Protestant hymnody and how to live 'Nachfolge' (discipleship) in a radically secular society. In the poem entitled 'Christen und Heiden', Bonhoeffer turns to the opening of Psalm 46 and to Luther's reading of it as salvation through Christ.

Christians and Heathens

1. People go to God when they're in need,
plead for help, pray for blessing and bread,
for rescue from their sickness, guilt, and death.
So do they all, all of them, Christians and heathens.
2. People go to God when God's in need,
find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,
see God devoured by sin, weakness, and death.
Christians stand by God in God's own pain.
3. God goes to all people in their need,
fills body and soul with God's own bread,
goes for Christians and heathens to Calvary's death
and forgives them both.

To come back to my initial question: What is Reformation? For Luther as for Bonhoeffer Reformation is the reformulation of the Biblical message for the here and now. I think we could do worse than follow their example.

Amen