

## **The Witness of John Knox**

*(Script for Presentation on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017 –  
Reformation Sunday)*



I am grateful to be here with you, to have the opportunity again to preach the Gospel, and to tell the story of the Reformation, in which I played a small part. I always thought the resurrection of Lazarus was Christ's greatest miracle, but he was in the tomb only 4 days! For me, it has been about 500 years!!

I was born in the year of our Lord, 1514, in Haddington. I trained in Theology and Laws at St. Andrew's University and was ordained as Priest at the age of 22. In my early years I worked as a tutor for the children of an Earl. Finally, God by His grace led me to the home of Hugh Douglas to teach his two sons. And in that I immediately found myself associating with those at the very core of the Protestant movement in Scotland.

It was a difficult time in Scotland. It was a time of great poverty. It was an unsafe land for travel. The rich could travel from town to town as they had their soldiers to protect them. But the poor had to band together in large groups in order to protect themselves from the bandits. It was a time when the church had many failings. So much of what the church made most important was not scriptural. It was a church in which the priests were even out of touch with own Laws!!! Of the 17 Bishops in Scotland, 12 had illegitimate children (and that's just the Bishops). Some towns would refuse the appointment of a new priest to their parish unless that priest brought with him his own woman. The Lutheran movement was underway, but it was hard to learn of it as books containing such things were banned in Scotland. And it was a time of political uncertainty. In Scotland there was a great fear of England, so Scottish powers sought comfort through the "Old Alliance" with France. So the French were a presence and an influence in our land.

But all changed for me in 1543. The master of the house supported the return from exile of one James Wishart to his native land: to preach the gospel and the doctrines of the Protestant faith. He traveled the land in secret, preaching to the hungry in places of safety. It was at one of these quiet events with the Lord of the manor that I first heard him preach, and I felt cut to the quick by the message of gospel and the cause of Reformation.

In 1546, the Bishop Beaton took Wishart – that Prince who showed me Christ – and burned him at the stake as a heretic. I feel guilt about this to this day, for in those days I was his friend and protector, yet my sword was no match for the small army the Bishop sent. Peter's failed attempt to support His master on the Mount of Olives, and Peter's three-fold denial of Christ in the courtyard have since that day taken on deeper meaning for me. But as Elijah had turned over his office to Elisha, so I assumed the role Wishart left behind. On that day I swore, by all the powers in heaven that I would give my all to ridding

our land of its Papist ways, and see that God's TRUE church would pervade this land with Christ's message infusing every heart.

A handful of those angered by Wishart's death took Beaton's castle, killed Bishop Beaton and hung his body by a rope over the walls of his own castle as a warning against any other who would challenge the gospel of Christ. They held the castle for many months. As for me, I began to preach fervently the gospel and promote the true faith.

Once I was called by a Bishop's court to stand and answer for my heresies, which I willingly did. It was such a foolish affair. I debated a man called Arbuckle—a man with a small mind. I took his arguments, held them up to the light of truth and made him twist and turn in his words. At one point I drove him in his logic to claim that the Holy Spirit indeed did inspire the apostles to write the gospels... but only after the books had been written. And these men ruled the church for centuries??! No wonder the Church has been lost in darkness! They could find no fault in my doctrine, so I was released.

The scoundrels of the church brought in a French army to lay siege to the castle. In this time I wanted for them spiritual encouragement, so I joined their ranks within the walls and preached daily to them from God's word. But the French finally stove in the walls and captured all. And for 19 months I pulled an oar as my punishment upon a French galley in the English Channel. Our Catholic captors taunted us so, making fun of our Protestant beliefs, trying to force us to follow theirs. One day an officer on the ship offered me a painted image which he claimed to be of Mary the mother of Jesus, demanding that I kiss it. The officer forced the picture into my hands and renewed his demand, saying, "the Blessed Virgin has saved so many from their trials. Pray to her now so that your suffering may cease!" In response I said, "If the Lady has saved so many, let here now save herself by learning to swim!" And I pitched the image overboard, to the great cheer of my fellow captives. That was the last time they taunted me.

But this lesson, and others, convicted me of things which weren't right in the Catholic church: God cannot be captured in pictures, nor do we need Marys and saints to stand for us before God. God truly knows us, loves us, answers our prayers. I will not hide it: it was hard on the galley. Persecution brings the righteous closer to God, for in the moment of oppression, the only thing left to call on is God's divine love of God. In the moment of oppression, we grow to understand and share in Christ's passion on the Cross. And, at an oar...there is no better way to gather strength as His warrior.

I was released in March of 1549, but the question now was: "Where do I go, and what do I do?" There was Scotland where I would face certain death as a heretic..... and then there was England, where Archbishop Cranmer was trying to extend the reformation there. There I went. Cranmer appointed me to the parish of Berwick. It was a wonderful time for me: I could recover from my time in the galley and I had time to do what I was called to do...Preach! But also, there was time to study the growing number of books on the Protestant faith. It was then I learned of the thinking of John Calvin, for he, above all, had defined how the church was to be! And I met my future wife – Marjorie Bowes.

In 1551, after two years in Berwick, I was appointed by the new regent (the Earl of Northumberland) to be one of six royal chaplains to King Edward of England. The young King Edward was keen on reforming the faith. I had an annual income from post of 40 pounds, which seemed like a king's ransom. Two Chaplains were to be in attendance within the court of the King, which allowed the others to roam freely and preach throughout the country, which I did, proclaiming the reformed faith. Northumberland eventually took me to the Court. But there I quickly came to see that Cranmer was a conservative, wishing to move slowly in implementing the reformed faith. Others were more radical, and I quickly joined their ranks. And we immediately had a cause, for Cranmer was just completing a Book of Common Prayer that was to have use in all the churches of England. It was our desire to infuse it with the teachings of Calvin, both in doctrine and in practice. I argued for changes so forcefully before the king one day, he ordered the pressed to be stopped until the controversy was resolved. In the end we won and lost. A page was pasted onto the cover of the Church of England prayer book, declaring clearly the reformed doctrine of the Supper. But "the black rubric" – the direction that all should kneel at the communion table – that still remained.

After losing this battle, I continued in my attempts to reform the faith. But in truth, my heart was no longer in it. I could see the powers growing against our movement in England and there was little I could do to stem the tide. But I had some success. I was the author of many of the Articles of Faith for the Church of England, which formed its subordinate doctrine. And I understand that they remain so to this day, even for the Anglican Church here in Canada.

Things went from bad to worse with Edward's untimely death and the ascension of Mary Tudor to the throne. The hand writing was now on the wall, for she was a Catholic and committed to reinstitute the old religion. She banned the Book of Common Prayer and imprisoned Protestant Bishops. Again my life was in jeopardy. With Catholics on the throne now in Scotland and England, there was only the continent for me.

I first took up residence Dieppe in France, hopeful that my time in exile would be short. From there I wrote letters of support to colleagues at home and in exile, and pamphlets circulated in England calling for change. And to make the Catholics even more angry, I caused to have printed on the cover of one pamphlet the words: "Printed in Rome by Permission of the Pope"! One has to have some fun in this life, even in serious times! Yet as I waited in Dieppe, I saw the persecution of the faithful increasing in England. Cranmer was imprisoned and killed and the unbending were martyred for their faith. The weak were converting back to Catholicism by the droves to save their own hide. And my anger towards Mary Tudor began to burn deeply. It appeared to me that she was trying to rule in place of God rather than under Him, so I grew in my conviction that people of faith had the right - yea the obligation - to seek changes in government when those in power would stand against God...even if this needed change be brought about by force.

Now I was not the only man of conscience in exile from England. There were some 800 of us spread over Switzerland, Germany and France. Eventually, I went on to reside in Geneva, and most of the next four years of my life was spent in this glorious city, where I could study and meet the theologians of the day. Geneva was the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles for here the church was most sincerely reformed. So there I made a home with my new wife, Marjory Bowes, whom I married before setting out to Geneva. She gave me two wonderful boys.

Of course John Calvin was in Geneva. He was a most learned man: a gifted Biblical scholar and theologian. He could lay so plain the doctrines of God, in speech and in books. He became my mentor in faith. But Calvin was a purist for doctrine, and would stomach no heresy. That year, Michael Servetus visited the city to debate Calvin. He was a heretic who proclaimed that Christ's death would be a benefice to ALL men, regardless of their belief. But Calvin declared, "I shall never let him depart alive". Captured and convicted, that ungodly man was put to death at the stake, consumed and committed to the flames of Hell! Some say that Geneva was a harsh place with repressive laws, but I say it was a place where God's justice ruled and ruled supreme!

Reformed minded Englishmen established an English congregation in Geneva, and they asked me to be their minister – a position I humbly and joyously accepted. We became the first and the only true reformed Church in the English language in all of Europe and it was the goal of the clerics and members of that congregation to eventually take this model to England and make it bloom and blossom there when Mary was gone. Well, they didn't have long to wait. Mary Tudor died and was succeeded by Elizabeth—a Protestant by default as the church denied her legitimacy. My whole congregation in Geneva then left for their homeland with high hopes, and again I faced the question, "What do I do now?" It seemed unlikely to me that the Reformation would ever fully encompass England, given the powers at work against it, so I set my sights again on Scotland and returned there in May of 1559, after an absence of 12 years.

This was not to be an easy task. Mary of Guise, the Queen Regent ruled the land. She was a Catholic, trying to increase in Scotland the power and presence of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the French. I traveled at length preaching the gospel and encouraging the saints who were growing daily more determined to bring change to this land. People started to confront the Catholics, there were even riots. One such demonstration happened on St. Giles day in Edinburgh in 1559. After the Queen Regent had participated in the parade, the demonstrators tore the image of St. Giles off its moorings and beat his head upon the road while crying "Fie upon thee, St. Giles!" There was then seen a scene seldom viewed in the land – fleeing friars! Down went the crosses, off went their fancy robes, the priests panted and fled as if from the very gates of Hell. It was a wonderful sight! Little did we know how, in a symbolic way, this little event would prefigure larger events yet to come.

The Lords were sympathetic to the mood of reformation and keen on political change, so amassed an army of some 5,000 men who would not be intimidated by the French soldiers of Mary. For most of a year they faced Mary time and again in what became a civil war, but it was not until Elizabeth sent from England 8 ships to support the Protestant cause that we won the day. Political reform was now assured, which gave us the opening to bring about the more important goal – the reformation of religion in the land.

And so we began in haste. The parliament commissioned six of us to draft a confession of faith. In five days we accomplished the task. We easily came to one mind about the definition of doctrine as we were inspired by God. The difficulty in the task, however, was the fact that all six men were named John! The confusion of our talk at table, I am sure, rivaled the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel. The parliament continued in its reforms as well. They banned the celebration of the mass and abolished papal authority in the Church. And so the reformation had begun. Next we wrote the Book of Discipline, which directed how worship was to be conducted, the proper practice of celebrating the sacraments, the order for a new form of church government – based on a group of elders, called a Session. This became the blueprint for the establishment of the new church.

The problem was that we now had a new official religion, but only 12 ministers of the faith in all the land. The common citizen of Scotland, for the most part, was still untouched by these grand changes, anxiously waiting to see if anything would improve their lot in life. And poverty was still rampant. And so I was busy: Caring for my flock at St. Giles Church in Edinburgh, working to establish a truly national church, training new Protestant ministers to serve the church, and caring for my two boys after my wife died that winter. Finally, we got what we desired most and in 1567 we became a protestant nation. *Thanks be to God!*

From this time on I moved to the periphery of the debates and contented myself with pastoral duties. In 1572 I grew gradually weaker and passed away in my bed at the age of 58.

### The Legacy of John Knox

The motto of the Reformed Church is: “reformed and always reforming”. We see this in the story of John Knox and the history of the Reformation itself. The reformers were mid-wives to the birth of a new church that had many beliefs and practices radically different compared to the parent.

Knox and the early Church of Scotland leaders were also instrumental in fostering a greater practice of democracy, not only in the church but also in the society. They also brought a greater sense of compassion for the poor and a stronger desire to respond to their need. Among their priorities was a desire to institute a system of public education for children—of boys and girls—and theirs was the first system of public school education in Europe.

Since those days we continued to be a church that is reformed and reforming. We no longer burn at the stake those who disagree with us, nor do we bring about religious change by force. As well today we consider Roman Catholics to be our brothers and sisters in faith.

Our heritage is to continue as our future: being shaped by the Gospel and being responsive to the needs of the less fortunate. In this way we will continue to be reformed and reforming.

Sources:

“The History of the Reformation in Scotland” by John Knox

“Trumpeter of God: A Biography of John Knox” by W. Stanford Reid