

## **Reformation Sunday**

### **Order of Service**

#### **Theme:**

Today is Reformation Sunday, when we remember the faith and deeds of those who preceded us, who struggled to bring the church closer to its goal as the body of God's faithful people, and we reflect on our own responsibilities in moving the church closer to the goal that the Scriptures hold before us.

#### **Call to worship - Scripture reading:** Psalm 44:1-8

#### **Prayer of approach:**

We come to you, our God and our King, to offer to you our worship and thanksgiving. You have redeemed us from the hand of the enemy, you have rescued us from darkness and falsehood, and have brought us into the kingdom of light where Jesus Christ is king. He is the truth, he is our light, he is our redeemer. Accept the praise that we bring as your rightful due, because you alone are our God and no other is worthy of our praise. Amen.

#### **Prayer: Confession, assurance, supplication, Lord's Prayer**

Loving Father, we may always come to you and you receive us, because of your mercy and grace. You have called us by your name, bringing us out of darkness into the kingdom of light. But still, Lord, we often turn back towards the darkness in our continuing rebellion and sin against you. We your church, the people called by your name, have gone astray, we have rebelled against you, and chosen our own way. Forgive us in your great mercy, Lord, for we are unable to approach to you unless you cleanse and restore us.

We thank you that we can have confidence in you, that you will forgive all those who turn from their own way and seek your mercy. Renew us in your grace, comfort us in your love, and strengthen us to be more faithful to you, and aid us as we seek to bring renewal and reformation to your church, that it may be worthy of your name. This we ask in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together in the words he gave us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and bring us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.

#### **Scripture Readings:** Isaiah 5:1-7, 1 Timothy 6:3-16, Luke 10:1-16.

#### **Sermon:** "Reformation Sunday"

## Reformation Sunday

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day when we commemorate the tumultuous events of the sixteenth century that have shaped the churches of the West into what they are today. Today we remember many men and women who contended for the faith in the face of a corrupt and decadent church that had departed from the teachings of the Gospel. These are our forebears in the faith, the ones who set us on the path we follow today. It is not unfitting, therefore, that we should call to mind the struggles they engaged in and the sufferings they endured for the sake of the Gospel. And more than that, we must also bear in mind that the denomination of which this church is a part stands in what we call the “Reformed” tradition, a tradition that has as its central doctrine of the church the conviction that the **Reformed Church is always Reforming**. That is, we recognise that while the church is certainly a living community of faith, witnessing to Christ and worshipping the living God, it is by no means perfect. It has not attained to all that God intends it to be, and because of our predilection to sin the church will always be lacking in some way or other. Thus the reformed church, the one which has already made significant changes to its understanding of the gospel and the nature of its corporate life, will always be examining itself to see how we can move ever closer to the goal set forth for us in Scripture.

If we have ceased to be active in reforming the church, we have in fact ceased to be a Reformed church, because reformation cannot stand still; we must maintain the impetus to reform the church, so that we too make our contribution to moving it closer to its goal of a church that expresses the Gospel of Christ in our day. If we have ceased to be active in reforming the church, we have denied one of the major beliefs of the Reformed tradition: that our tendency to sin always leads us astray, and we constantly need to call on the grace of God to return to the Scriptural faith and practice. So the reason we remember the Reformation today is not just to celebrate the past, but to call to mind also our responsibility today. We can and should learn from those who have endeavoured to reform the church in previous generations, to see how and why they succeeded, where they may have missed the path, what remains for us to do today, and to pass on this heritage to our children so that they too will continue to build and rebuild the church of Jesus Christ in faithfulness to his teaching. As we

build on the contributions of our predecessors, so too our children and their children after them will continue to build on what we do today. So we have a double responsibility: to reform the church in our day, to bring it closer to the church that God calls it to be, in so far as we understand what that means; and to leave it in such a condition that our children may continue to move ever closer to that goal, without first having to undo the damage that we may have done through our neglect and irresponsibility.

The need to reform the church is evident from Scripture. The passage from Isaiah indicates to us the continual need for reform in the life of the nation of Israel. We are aware of the sin, restoration, new obedience, repeated sin, further restoration, further sin and restoration that happened throughout the history of God's covenant people in Israel. God planted his people like a precious vineyard, tended it carefully and provided for its every need, yet it failed to bring forth the fruit that was expected of it. Isaiah's prophecy of judgement on Israel is not merely a condemnation of the sin of the people and the punishment that was coming upon them, but it was a prophecy of purification, of purging, of refining, so that once again the nation would be restored to its faith and obedience to God. Paul the apostle contended even in his day with those who were disturbing the church by false teaching and sinful lives. At that early stage, even before the first generation of those who had known Jesus had passed away, the church was falling away from his teaching. Is it any wonder then that over the centuries that passed until the Reformation in the sixteenth century that many abuses and false teachings had become part and parcel of the life of the church.

### **What does it mean to reform the church?**

To reform the church does not mean introducing bureaucratic changes, nor altering its management structure, nor tinkering with its Book of Order, but to return to the ways of the Gospel. To reform the church means to put an end to the false teachings that have been overlooked, or tolerated, or even approved. It is to discipline those who pervert the truth, to dismiss from office those who no longer are faithful to Christ, to call to account those who misuse their place in the church to promote their own agendas and aspirations, rather than promoting the cause of the Gospel. The reform of the church does not come about through a pressure group setting about altering the church so that it conforms to its own conception of what the church ought to be like,

for that merely leads to conflict between different pressure groups with competing conceptions of the church. Rather, it is for the whole church to turn again to its roots, to recover, to rebuild, to rediscover, the conception of the church which is held out for it in the Scriptures. It is a task for the whole church; not for the clergy, not for the Presbytery, not even for the General Assembly, because the church which is to be reformed is first and foremost we who make up that church. The official courts of the church can pass resolutions, make decisions, debate legislation, approve budgets, and discuss administration. But they cannot reform the church, because reform arises not from agendas and discussion papers but from revitalised **faith**. Faith comes not from votes and resolutions and legislation, but from hearing the **Word of God**. Only by recovering faith, through hearing again what God has said to us in the Scriptures, can we begin to reform the church. That reform may lead to changes in resolutions and agendas and legislation, but this must arise from renewed faith: they cannot bring about renewed faith.

To hear again what God has said to us in the Scriptures sounds a relatively simple procedure. Surely that is what we do Sunday by Sunday in our services. But we can unfortunately become so accustomed to the Scriptures, so familiarised with them, that they can become domesticated, they can be tamed and house-trained. We can become so used to the Scriptures that we no longer recognise that we are not dealing here with a house-cat, but with a wild tiger. The risk of keeping a tiger as a house pet is that any time it can return to its wild and dangerous ways. Just so with the Scriptures; they are not tame, they are not domesticated, they are not house-trained! We can read the Scriptures on a regular basis and become so used to them that we no longer recognise that at any time they could turn on us and tear us apart. We are sinners saved by grace; but that grace cannot be presumed upon. We remain sinners still, and thus are vulnerable to the searching criticism and exposure of Scripture which can at any time bring our sin into the light. We cannot tame the Scriptures, it is rather for the Scriptures to tame us, to lead us into the light of God's grace, to expose our sin so that we are obliged to confront once again our need of God's grace. We are to come under the discipline of Scripture, to allow it to shape and direct us in all that we do, so that we do indeed live according to the dictates of the King of Kings.

But we have become so accustomed to hearing the Scriptures read and preached, that we miss noticing that here we have the piercing words of the Living God. We can lose

the sense of awe and fear and sheer terror which we ought to feel when God speaks to us. We need to consider the response of the people of Israel when God spoke to them out of the cloud at Mount Sinai, giving to them the commandments of the Covenant he made with them: they did not sit down and discuss them; they did not applaud the spectacle before them; no, they trembled with fear and begged Moses, Do not have God speak to us or we will die. **That** is the response we should have to the Word of God: do not speak to us or we will die! Can you imagine the terror of the people confronted not merely with the words of God, but with God himself speaking those words to them! Yet we so casually, so easily, so lightly read out Sunday by Sunday the words of that same God who inspired such terror in those who heard him. To hear the word of God afresh is to recover a sense of terror through recognising that here we are not dealing with pious legends, pleasant fairy stories, amusing parables, but with the power and majesty of the Living God.

Unfortunately we have many in the church who are prepared to dismiss the Scriptures in just such terms. There are too many who despise the Scriptures, who rend them apart and mock at them, and teach others to do likewise. These are not those outside the church, but those within its ranks, within the clergy, the ones appointed to lead the people to the grace of God. I have spoken before on the folly and error of those who mocked and denigrated the stories of the birth of Christ. We have for years had to endure the antiquated and obsolete ramblings of men like the theologian Lloyd Geering, who has confessed that he has never believed in God, even before beginning his training for the ministry. We have had regular visits to New Zealand by Bishop Spong, whose ideas on the nature of Christianity are ludicrous in the extreme. We have had to endure the eccentric ideas of Barbara Thiering, who invents her theories seemingly out of thin air. None of these people represent the truth of the Gospel; but they are unfortunately the ones the media love to interview, and the ones who claim to be at the cutting edge, moulding the Christian faith for the future. They are of course doing nothing of the sort!

People like these do not represent Christian faith, but humanistic unbelief. They do not hold fast to the gospel, but are presenting an alternative Gospel that they seek to convert us to. They do not call us to repentance and point us to the grace of God, the God who loves to receive repentant sinners. Instead, they spend their time deriding the gospel and those who hold fast to it, and seek to justify all manner of sin and to

comfort the guilty by denying that they have anything to worry about. Whatever God is, whether he exists or not, he is certainly not going to condemn anyone for any sin they may commit. These deluded blind guides of the blind are assured that God will accept all who come to him without placing any demands upon them whatsoever, without requiring anyone to repent. This of course places incredible strain on the Gospel, as it becomes impossible to conceive of any purpose behind the death and resurrection of Christ. The Gospels teach us that he died as an atoning sacrifice for the redemption of sinners; but if there are no sinners, if there is no need for redemption, why then did he have to die? These questions remain unanswered, because once the fabric of Christian faith is torn apart, it simply continues to unravel until there are left only a few threads, certainly not enough to warm the heart when pain and sorrow come upon us, not enough to protect us from the evils of the world, not enough to shelter us from the wrath of God on unrepentant sinners.

### **How do we go about reforming the church?**

We do not set about reforming the church by proposing new rules and regulations, nor by embarking on a crusade to ferret out all those who disagree with us, nor by trying to impose some doctrinal conformity on everyone, regardless of what that doctrine might be. Rather, we begin the reform of the church by examining our own hearts and lives, by seeking from God to know the shortcomings of our own lives, because we cannot forget that the church is first and foremost, ourselves. The Church is not the General Assembly, it is not the Presbytery or the Session, the church is all those who confess the name of Christ and claim membership in his body. So to reform the church means first of all to reform ourselves. We are the church; are we willing to be reformed? Are we prepared to bring our lives under the searching gaze of the God we worship and serve so lightly? Are we prepared to examine what we believe and how we live, to see whether it conforms to the gospel of Christ? If we are not prepared to do this, then we cannot embark on a mission to reform the rest of the church. What credibility or integrity would we have if we asked others to do what we are unwilling to do ourselves?

Not only that, the reform of the church is not to be carried out as a crusade against doctrinal and moral error, in the spirit of self-righteousness and pretensions to moral probity, but as a desire to heal the church from its often self-inflicted wounds, to cure,

to restore, to reconcile. It is a task carried out not in indignation but in humility, not with loud shouts and sloganeering, but with weeping and repentance, not with anger but with fasting and prayer. If we are not prepared to weep over the church, beseeching God to turn again to heal us, then we have no right to clamour for reform. For reform without weeping and prayer will be merely reconfiguration, reform without repentance will be merely re-arranging the deck-chairs on a sinking ship, reform without a return to the Gospel will be merely marketing strategies and publicity campaigns to try to turn around a declining membership, with no real understanding of why it is in decline.

The reformation of the church is first and foremost a reformation of the heart, a return to faith on the part of those who make up the church, a return to obedience to Christ, the head of the church. It begins with new faith, new attentiveness to the Word of God, new love for each other and commitment to living the truth of the Gospel before the world. To be a Christian, a Christ-follower, is to be a person of faith. That is what marks us out from everyone else around us. Not our piety, not our morality, not our doing-good to others, not our doctrine, not our lifestyle, but our **faith**. Because the root of Christian life is first of all to believe the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, that comes to us as a call to turn from our sin, and to place our trust in Christ as the only one who is able to save us. It is to rest on the grace of God, believing that he has opened the way to salvation for us, accepting the way of salvation that he has provided, rather than demanding that he save us some other way, or even that he allow us to save ourselves. It is to throw ourselves on the mercy of God, trusting that he will indeed save us, forgive our sins and grant us new life in Christ. That is the heart of the reformation of the church: to be filled with fear before the living God and to cry out for mercy. Apart from that, all change is bureaucratic tinkering.

### **What is the goal of reformation in the church?**

The goal of the reformation of the church is to become God's people, called to witness in the world to the new life God has provided for us in Christ. We are unable to be witnesses to that gospel if it does not in fact shape the lives we lead. If the church does not live according to the gospel, seeking to love one another and to care for everyone whether they are believers or not, if we do not proclaim the truth of the Scriptures that God has entrusted to us, then we are unable to be the witnesses that

God calls us to be. I recently read an article which discussed the problem of the continuing decline in numbers which almost all major denominations are experiencing. It was pointed out that the problem is not so much the inability of the church to bring new people into its fellowship; rather, it is keeping them there once they get inside and see what the church is really like. If we are not living as a community of God's people according to the instructions he has given us in Scripture, then newcomers won't stick around. In fact, we need to worry about the ramifications of the Fair Trading Act with regard to the misrepresentation of goods and misleading advertising!

To build the church we need to bring new people to faith in Christ. But if we are not living in faith ourselves, we will certainly not be able to induce others to do so! The reformation of the church is necessary because we fall away from our faith and need to have that renewed and rebuilt. Only then can we be the witnesses to Christ that he calls us to be, only then can the church display the new life which it professes to have. But if the gospel hasn't obviously done much to save us, why should we or anyone else expect it to do much for others?

### **The call to continue in the faith**

We saw in the passage from the Gospel of Luke read earlier that Jesus sent out his disciples to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God to the people of Israel, the ones God had called and prepared to be the first recipients of this good news. Yet the people of God rejected it. Jesus warned his disciples that they would not always be welcomed with open arms, but would instead be rejected and ridiculed. They were not to be distraught at this, however, for it was not them who were being rejected but Christ, the living God who had come in the flesh to his own people to live among them. Just as the prophets of old had foretold judgement on the people of God because of their sin, so too Jesus foretold the judgement that was to come on those who rejected him. Even Sodom would not be judged as harshly as those in Israel who rejected Jesus. Not even Tyre and Sidon, ancient Philistine cities which had given trouble to Israel for centuries, would not suffer as much as the towns of Galilee that mocked at the news of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The principle remains true, that judgement begins not with the heathen or the unbelievers, but with the house of God. If those who have received the good news yet still turn away from God and

persist in their sin, surely they are worthy of greater judgement than those who have barely heard of the grace of God in Christ.

That is our position today: we have received the grace of God, we have responded and become members of the people of God, we have come to worship God. But have we turned away from our sin? Do we still harbour disbelief in our hearts? Does the church of which we are a part really live up to its calling in the gospel? We have a responsibility to ensure that it does; that those with whom we meet are living in faith and obedience to God. Let us then set our hearts towards God; let us continue the task of reforming the church, and to teach our children to do likewise. Let us not fail the grace of God in our day, but may God himself be with us to bless us as we seek to bring new life, new faith, new obedience and new witness to the gospel in the church which is reformed, yet still needing reform. May God grant that it will be so. Amen.

## Offering and dedication

Gracious Lord, you have given us many things by your grace, and we praise and thank you for your provision for us. We bring to you these gifts as a token of our gratitude, for the support of the work of your church in this place. Bless those who have responsibility for this money, grant them wisdom and good judgement in the use they make of it, so that your name will be honoured and praised. This we ask through Christ our Lord, who though he was rich yet became poor for our sake. Amen.

## Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession

God of goodness and grace, hear our prayers as we come before you. Receive our intercessions which we offer for your holy church and for the world to which you have called us to minister as your servants.

We pray today for your church, remembering with gratitude the labours and the faith of those who went before us, those who did not flinch from the fight for truth and the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. Give us that same courage, build us up in that same faith, strengthen us in commitment and love for you so that we too can face adversity and peril when it comes for the sake of the gospel.

**Response:** Lord Jesus, head of the church, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray that you would restore your church in our day. We acknowledge our sin in departing from the truth entrusted to us by former generations of your people. We have not followed their lead, and have instead abandoned our confidence in the Scriptures, denied the truth of what they contain, and brought contempt on the gospel by our indifference to your call to repentance and faith. Forgive us our sins, and bring us again to new faith and commitment to Christ, so that we may be worthy followers of our only Lord and Saviour.

**Response:** Lord Jesus, head of the church, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for the revival of the faith of those who have grown cold in their love, who have been seduced by the ways of the world, who have grown contented in their commitment. Stir us up again, Lord, so that we can press on in the path of discipleship. Grant us new life, give us new hope, raise up in us new vision for the work of the gospel and the building up of your church, that we may live only and always for the glory of your name.

**Response:** Lord Jesus, head of the church, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are charged with the responsibility of preaching your Word, teaching Christian faith to others, and leading your church in its ministry in and to the world. Give them insight into the Scriptures, confidence in their ministry, understanding of the truth, and courage in confronting error and sin. Restore the faith of those ministers who have lost their way, renew in them their commitment to the truth of the Gospel, and grant them repentance from their sins.

**Response:** Lord Jesus, head of the church, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are persecuted for their faith around the world. We remember our many forebears in the faith who suffered persecution, imprisonment, torture and death for their testimony to Jesus Christ. We thank you for their courage and their strength in faith, and we ask that you would through your grace give that same courage today to those who suffer for the sake of the Gospel. Uphold them in your love, and keep them strong in faith, looking for the reward which is kept in heaven for all the martyrs throughout the ages. Give us that same courage, so that if we are tested for our faith, we too will remain strong and steadfast.

**Response:** Lord Jesus, head of the church, **Hear our prayer.**

Sovereign Lord, your church is in need of your grace. Grant to us today and always that which we need to serve you in obedience, faith and love. Renew your church, revive your people, restore the glory of your name in our midst, for this we pray through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns as head of the church for ever and ever, **Amen.**