

Scripture: Isaiah 51: 1-8 / Matthew 7: 24-28

Text: *Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn*

(Isaiah 51: 1)

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

It is a great privilege for the Church of Scotland delegation to join you in worship this morning and to do so as you celebrate your congregation's 250th anniversary.

As I understand it, founded in 1767, this is the 3rd site for the Brick Church in New York City.

You have a long list of gifted and distinguished pastors and preachers, you have a proud record of Christian education, discipleship, and as the four of us saw on Friday with some of the homeless ministry you support, you continue to exercise a very active mission to the wider community.

One thing surprised me, however, and that was to discover some years ago the Lyon Court in Edinburgh granted Brick Presbyterian a Coat of Arms.

Here is something we share in common because the Moderator of the Church of Scotland also has a Coat of Arms.

So, as Moderator, it is indeed an honour to be with you in this anniversary year, and as a fellow proud bearer of a Coat of Arms, to bring the greetings, prayers and good wishes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Of course, as your website rightly notes, a church is not simply a building but a community of human beings who follow Jesus Christ.

Neither is a congregation simply the sum of its history but a present and living reality.

And yet is it not also true that whether as individual women and men or as congregations, our roots are important because for better or worse our past has indeed shaped our present?

And so to the extent to which that is true, what are we to make of Isaiah's advice that if we are to pursue righteousness and seek the Lord, then we ought to look to the rock from which we were cut and the quarry from which we were hewn?

For those of us in the Presbyterian tradition, that quarry is of course the Reformation and by a happy providence, this is Reformation Sunday.

The Reformation came late to Scotland.

In 1517 John Knox, the man identified as the principle theologian and architect of the Scottish Reformation, was but a two year old child when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door in the German town of Wittenburg.

John Calvin, whose remarkable ministry in Geneva provided Knox with much of his inspiration, was aged fifty when the Reformation took place in Scotland.

And by the time the Scottish Parliament met in Edinburgh in 1560, some of the Reformation's most notable achievements had been realised in Luther's Germany, in the Switzerland of Calvin, Zwingli and Bucer, and in England under Henry VIII and Edward VI.

Criticisms of the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church had grown steadily in Scotland during the regime of Cardinal Beaton.

The brutal executions in St Andrews of Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart and Walter Myn fuelled popular sentiment.

Such discontentment as existed gathered around popular Reforming preachers during the 1550's, and it sparked into flame in May 1559 when John Knox preached at St John's Church in Perth.

With Knox denouncing the Roman Catholic mass as an abomination, the congregation was roused to a mixture of fervour and fury and following the church service riots broke out and there was considerable public disorder.

The history of what followed has been well documented, suffice to say that parts of Scotland were soon mired in a low grade civil war as the French Regent, Mary of Guise, struggled to retain control of

the situation while Knox and his colleagues, supported in increasing numbers by the Scottish nobility (the Lords of the Congregation) sought to further their cause.

If the important religious development in the summer of 1559 was the arrival of Knox in Edinburgh where he was appointed minister at the High Kirk of St Giles, the important political development was the decision of the young English Queen, Elizabeth I, guided by her principle advisor, Henry Cecil, to support the Scots over and against the French.

By December 1559 an English naval fleet was patrolling the waters off the east coast of Scotland, gales wrecked French reinforcements, and early in 1560 Elizabeth's army laid siege to the French troops at Leith on the outskirts of Edinburgh while Mary of Guise lay dying in Edinburgh castle.

Mary's death in May 1560 ended French resistance, something confirmed later in July when the Treaty of Edinburgh was signed in which the French agreed to withdraw completely from Scotland *AND* agreed that the Scots could settle their religion as they wished.

If the Treaty was a triumph for England and Elizabeth, it cleared the way for the meeting of the Scottish Parliament a few weeks later, August 1560, the Reformation Parliament, which legislated to make Scotland a Protestant country.

Critical to the Parliament was a document called the Scots Confession, drawn up by Knox and five other men all with the Christian name John, Douglas, Row, Spottiswoode, Willock and Winram.

Catholic mass was banned, the authority of the Pope repudiated, and the Church of Scotland was established under the governance of a democratically elected General Assembly.

Needless to say things didn't change overnight.

Indeed within a year of the Reformation Parliament, the formidable figure of Mary Stuart, Mary Queen of Scots, returned to her native land to become a focal point for those who longed for a Catholic restoration in both Scotland and England.

However it is from the second key document produced by the six Johns, the First Book of Discipline, that we begin to recognise some of the characteristics of the Reformed church that remain in Scotland to this day, characteristics which you might also recognise.

Ministers were to be elected by their congregations, not appointed by the landowner or crown.

Each congregation was to have a Kirk Session to assist the minister in the spiritual oversight of the congregation and local community or parish with deacons elected annually to administer finance.

A system of poor relief was to be introduced on a scale virtually unknown elsewhere in Europe, and a school was to be established in every parish with schoolteachers appointed and supervised by the Session.

Detailed proposals were also put forward to reform the universities at St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen with medicine being introduced to the curriculum.

Initially the funding for these reforms was raised from the land rents of the old church, as well as from Sunday collections and fines levied by Kirk Sessions.

Inevitably, perhaps, much of the money and property of the old church found its way into other hands and soon Knox felt frustrated in his attempts to reform both church and society.

Although a supply of properly trained ministers was one of the challenges facing the new church, it was as early as 1568 that Thomas Scott was appointed the first Reformed minister at Cramond Kirk, the congregation in Edinburgh where I am the minister.

So what would be different for the Cramond congregation?

Beyond choosing their minister, people were now expected to participate in the life and worship of their congregation as never before.

With the Reformed conviction in Jesus Christ as the King and Head of the Church, each person had direct access to God.

You no longer needed a priest or the church to pray or worship on your behalf; you could do so for yourself.

Upheld by the Reformers as the supreme rule of faith and life, and the irreplaceable witness to God's presence, purpose and promise in all creation, the Bible became central to the life and worship of the

Reformed church and the reading and preaching of God's Word were firmly established within the Reformed tradition.

And because the church stands under the Bible, not the Bible under the church, baptism and communion were established as the two sacraments as these are the only two with Biblical authority.

Yes, there is much about the church of the Reformation we would find unattractive.

It could be harsh, intolerant and joyless while its suspicion of artistic beauty and its preoccupation with the sins of the flesh over and against the more subtle sins of the spirit would not find favour now.

Yet in its reverence for the authority of scripture, its desire to include everyone in the life and worship of the congregation, and in its concern for both poor relief and education there is much about the Reformation not just to command our respect but our continuing commitment.

Of course a church is its people not its building, neither is it the sum of its history but a living entity, and yet as you celebrate your 250th anniversary can I suggest it would be wise, as you think about the opportunities and challenges in ministry today, to pay heed to Isaiah and his prophetic insight that those who pursue righteousness and seek the Lord should look to the rock from which they were cut and the quarry from which they were hewn.

For whether you belong to the Church of Scotland or the PCUSA this much is surely true; the church to which we belong is not only Reformed, it is always reforming.

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen