

Commemoration of 500 years of Protestant Reformation, October 31st 2017

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Cardiff's Roman Catholic cathedral church of St David stands just over the road from the Quaker Meeting House. The bells were ringing, reminding me that once, while we were making tea in the *Churches Together* tent at the eisteddfod, its former bishop had told me that in his day one of the reasons they had stopped the Sunday morning bells was out of respect for Friends meeting in silence, just yards away. But this was a special day and it felt remarkable and good that it was being marked in that cathedral, of all places, and with bells.

October 31st 1517 had been when the Augustinian friar and university teacher Martin Luther attached to the church door at Wittenberg the so-called '95 theses'. These were propositions to be debated, in challenge to some of the practices of the contemporary Roman Catholic church. The rest, as they say, is history, a Protestant history alongside that of the various catholic traditions. Without such Reformation Quakers would not be here; German language and culture, so much linked with Luther's translation of the New Testament into German, would doubtless have been different; martyrs on both sides of the divide would not have been and some wars would not have been fought: 'We lament that even good actions of reform and renewal had often unintended negative consequences. Kyrie eleison.'

Pope Francis had set the tone for commemoration last year (the substantial Order of Service book told us), in his homily at the World Lutheran Federation, as 'the opportunity to mend a critical moment of our history by moving beyond the controversies and disagreements that have often prevented us from understanding one another.' Catholic churches opened their doors to host it and a warm and welcoming experience it was: 'There are no strangers in churches'; 'What unites us is greater than what divides us'; 'Luther's extraordinary contribution...'; 'The unity of reconciled diversity', now that's a phrase which might echo for some Quakers.

The great and the good of denominations were there: two archbishops (RC and Church in Wales); the CEO and the Chair of Cytûn; the Moderator of the Free Church Council, the representative of the Synod of German-Speaking Lutherans and many others, including our Friend Deborah Rowlands. She read one of the intercessions. The children who lit candles were refugee children and this was a commemoration in three languages, Welsh, English and German. Each prayed the prayers and made the responses in his or her own tongue. *Calon lân, Nun danket alle Gott* and *Love divine all loves excelling* were part of it. In the afternoon Denis Morgan, a professor of theology and a Baptist, gave a lecture on 'The Catholicity of Protestantism: the inheritance of the Reformation in the twenty-first century.' Luther had opened up 'the theological faultline in European civilisation' he noted but for both sides in the 21st century 'the feel of the faith is much the same.'

Historians still mull over Luther and his legacy. Everyone knows he was a man of his time and affirmed some values we would not affirm any longer. Even the famous facts about Luther may be less than certain, we are told – he probably didn't *nail* his propositions to the door; it may be he never said 'Here I stand, I can do no other' and he wasn't the first of the reformers. On October 31st, though, it seemed to me that the fact of all sides being together in the way they were was worth a celebration in itself.