

## **Thomas Helwys Commemoration Day**

**12 March 2016, The Well, Retford Baptist Church**

Thomas Helwys, of Broxtowe Hall Nottingham, and Gainsborough near here, is granted but a footnote in English history – if he is lucky. His was a voice from the margins, but like many such voices before and since, it had and still has the ring of the prophet.

For at least two reasons we should remember him with thanksgiving and salute his faith and courage. He was the founder of the first Baptist Church in England and indeed in the world. And secondly those historians that do mention him agree that he was the first to publish in the English language a plea for religious freedom for all. And for those reasons, and because I am Baptist whose present role takes me to places where religious freedom is restricted or denied, I am delighted to be sharing in this commemoration and to pay my own tribute to Thomas Helwys.

We don't know exactly when he was born, possibly sometime in the 1570s. And despite been gathered here today we cannot be exactly sure of the date of his death, but probably around 1615 or 1616 in Newgate prison in London.

But some things we do know. We know that he had a young gentleman's education at Grays Inn in London. We know that in the early 1600s Broxtowe Hall where he lived became a meeting place for Puritan clergy, wanting to reform and 'purify' the Church of England. At about the same time Helwys met Puritan preacher John Smyth and later both moved beyond Church of England puritanism to Separatism, separating themselves from the established churches and establishing the Separatist congregation at Gainsborough under the leadership of John Smyth. These congregations were subjects to hefty fines from the authorities, and their leaders liable to imprisonment.

In 1608 Helwys and Smyth led their congregation to Amsterdam, then a free city with at least a degree of toleration to nonconformist ideas. The group met in Mennonite Jan Munter's bakehouse on the Singel. In a remarkably short time they developed what we would recognise today as the core elements of the Baptist way of being the church. The most well known of these is the conviction that baptism should be reserved for those who have come to a conscious faith as believers.

So Thomas Helwys is rightly regarded as the pioneer Baptist leader. This week I returned from meetings at the headquarters of the Baptist World Alliance in Washington DC. Today the global community of Baptists numbers around 100 million found in every continent and almost every country in the world. A community that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced evangelist Billy Graham and also that passionate advocate of civil rights and freedom for the oppressed, Martin Luther King. And one core value of Baptist identity all over the world has remained as a Baptist contribution to building a peaceful and tolerant society.

That is a commitment to religious freedom for all, not just for ourselves. We owe that to the legacy of Thomas Helwys, even if we have not always lived up to the full extent of his vision.

For in exile in Amsterdam from 1608, and despite it being such a formative experience for him, Helwys began to feel that it was wrong to have fled persecution in England. Having split with John Smyth, (yes the first Baptist church split took place in the first Baptist church!) in the year 1612 Helwys felt compelled to return with his fledgling Baptist community. He started the first Baptist church in England in Spitalfields in London. But before he left he had completed his book, "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity".

With all the religious and political ferment that Helwys had experienced he felt himself and his generation to be living at the end times. In many ways his book calls out a pure church to be ready for the final apocalypse. It may seem strange to us today that he does this by attacking every other church in England, and identifies these churches with the various beasts described in the Book of Revelation. He works his way through the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the puritan reformers in the Anglican Church and even the very Separatists out of which he himself had come. To be honest this is not a book that appeals to our modern sensibilities for its literary grace or its ecumenical sensitivity. In that sense Thomas Helwys does not come across as a very tolerant man.

But in the middle of all this polemic is a pure diamond. For despite his criticisms heaped every other form of Christianity in England at the time for how far it has fallen short of the Church God intended, Helwys in the most famous passage in the book, maintained that there should be religious freedom, freedom of conscience, freedom of worship for all of them. And more than that, there should be freedom for those of other faiths to worship and practise in freedom, and even toleration of those he terms 'heretics'. This is what he wrote

For our Lord the King is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king in earthly causes. And if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws, our lord the king can require no more. For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the King judge between God and men. Let them be heretics, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.

Where did Helwys himself encounter this conviction of religious freedom for all? My own recent research convinces me that it was indeed the result to Helwys' interaction in Amsterdam with Dutch Anabaptists, Mennonites. Anabaptists were the radicals of the Reformation whose teaching embraced universal religious freedom.

Nobody was putting forward such a bold vision at that time in England. Fast forward 30 years to the time of Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans, and Helwys' ideas found a more ready audience. In fact we can trace a direct line, from the ideas of Thomas Helwys to Roger Williams, a key figure in the story of religious freedom. Williams would go to the New World to found a colony at Providence,

Rhode Island, based on religious freedom for all, and eventually those ideas were to have a decisive influence on the American Constitution.

Helwys addressed his book to the King, King James 1 of England and VI of Scotland. This was a King, who in keeping with many European rulers at that time, took it upon himself to determine the religion of his subjects. Some had expected James, coming as he did from Scotland, to favour Presbyterians. But political expediency won the day and James reasserted that conformity with the Church of England was the only religious option. Anything else placed you outside the law and subject to persecution, fines and imprisonment

So sending the King a tract about religious freedom for all may look like something of a tactical error. In the copy of the book in the Bodleian Library in Oxford we find the preface addressed directly to James. It begins:

Hear O king, and despise not the counsel of the poor, and let their complaints come before thee.

And then Helwys launches straight into his theme

‘The King is a mortal man and not God. Therefore he has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them and set spiritual lords [bishops] over them. If the king has authority to make spiritual Lord and laws, then he is an immortal god and not a mortal man

After that he probably felt the need to end his preface with the words ‘God save the King!’ Whether or not the high and mighty King James read the book, somebody did, and Helwys was shortly arrested and imprisoned in Newgate, where we believe he died a few years later.

It is important to note that Thomas Helwys goes out of his way to stress his loyalty to the king in everything *except* the individual conscience regarding religion and spiritual matters. In his book, for instance, he urges nonconformists like himself to be prepared to fight in battle for the king if the nation is threatened.

And his argument for religious freedom for all is not the later one about inalienable rights of human beings, that would give rise to the French and American Revolutions. Helwys’ conviction was rooted in his Christian faith; that if Jesus Christ is King and Lord, then he is especially Lord of the spirit and the conscience and there can be no other kings, no other lords that get in the way of the free response of faith on the part of the individual. In the realm of the spirit, the earthly King cannot play God, though he is to be obeyed in everything else.

Baptists later developed a phrase to describe this. They began to talk about the ‘Crown Rights of the Redeemer’, the Redeemer being Jesus Christ and rights that properly belong to him being granted to no other.

But it is also important to notice that even if he was not aware of it, Thomas Helwys was articulating a bold vision of a plural society that values and protects

its minorities at a time when everyone was religious and atheism was almost unheard of. It was a blueprint for a very different kind of society a long way from the reality of its time.

But it has a contemporary resonance in our society today. Listen to a contemporary Baptist, Professor, (now Sir) Malcolm Evans, in a lecture given at a place where Thomas Helwys would certainly not have been welcome, at Lambeth Palace a few years ago.

What should Christians – and indeed those of other faiths and none – do to further the freedom of religion or belief? As people of faith it is up to us to champion the cause of others rather than ourselves... As a Christian myself, I suggest that when Christ commanded us to love our neighbour as ourselves, he meant us to do exactly that..... along with all people of goodwill. For if religious believers will not stand up for the right of other believers, irrespective of their faith, why in heaven's name should anyone else?

So the legacy of Thomas Helwys, richly nurtured in the fertile spiritual soil here on the borders of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, lives on in a very different English society but one that still faces urgent questions about how those with different faith convictions and none are to live together in peace. May his bold vision continue to inspire us too.

Tony Peck  
General Secretary  
European Baptist Federation

12 March 2016