

Sermon on Servetus, Glasgow 29 July 2012, by Barbara Clifford

My interest in the topic for today's sermon is related to a visit to Barcelona and Montserrat in Spain in 2005. This was when my husband, John, was the Executive Secretary of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists and we were attending the biennial Council Meeting. Part of the conference programme was a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Michael Servetus, as we say his name in English. Having had a recent operation we decided with great regret that the day long coach ride would be too much for me so we stayed at the conference centre and looked forward to hearing the details from the returning pilgrims, who included Revs Jopie and Dick Boeke, Cliff Reed, and John and Celia Midgley. Commemorative medallions were handed out to the participants and Jopie Boeke kindly gave hers to us. Cliff Reed later described the pilgrimage in the 2011 GA Service to commemorate 500 years since Servetus's birth as a procession consisting of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists held in the small Spanish town of Villanueva de Sijenes, to a statue of Miguel Servet (as he is known in Spanish). The statue portrayed Servetus as a scholarly looking man with a beard, it could have been a distinguished mayor or a local politician, but this man had died a brutal death in a foreign city, he was burned to death at the stake in Calvin's Geneva for his beliefs. Lighted candles were left on the statue, speeches were made, and a plaque was unveiled at the nearby house where Servetus spent his early years. The candle decorated statue is on the front cover of Dick Boeke's booklet which you can look at after the service.

Servetus was only 42 years old when he died. He was born in 1511, a time of great religious intolerance. It was a time of verbally and physically violent conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. It was the time of the Spanish Inquisition, of torture, execution, and the sort of fear that is just imaginable. Less than 20 years before he was born, following the final conquest of Granada by the armies of Queen

Isabella and King Phillip, all of the Moors and Jews in Spain were faced with the choice of converting to Christianity (i.e. Catholicism) or of leaving Spain and their homes. Those who did change their religion from Islam or Judaism to Catholicism were still seen as unreliable converts and often threatened with false accusations and death.

Servetus grew up in Villanueva (which means New Town) in Aragon, some 60 miles north of Zaragoza. At the age of 14 he entered the service of Juan Quintana, a scholarly Franciscan monk. Servetus was struck by the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity was a serious obstacle to the conversion of the Moors and Jews. He read the Bible while studying at the University of Toulouse in France and found that the Trinity was not mentioned, much less defined, in the sacred book. After two years at the University, Servetus was recalled to the Service of Quintana. This was late 1529 and Quintana had by this time been appointed Confessor to Emperor Charles V. Servetus was to accompany Quintana as he travelled with the Imperial party to the Coronation of the Emperor in Bologna, Italy. In Italy, Servetus was appalled by the riches of the Church, the adoration shown to the Pope, and the worldliness of the priesthood.

Sometime in 1530 Servetus dropped out of the Emperor's entourage and made his way to the city of Basel in Switzerland, where he met with Protestants. He stayed some months in the household of the local pastor, a local Reform leader. However, due to his differences over theological issues, he was made unwelcome, hence he moved to Strassburg. While in Strassburg he published his first book, "On the Errors of the Trinity". He apparently meant this to be a positive contribution to Protestant thought in rethinking the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, but unfortunately his ideas did not have the positive effect on the Protestants he had hoped for or perhaps even expected. His keen biblical scholarship was enhanced by reason and rational argument. He continued to write on his ideas and after publication of his two volume

work, "Dialogues of the Trinity", his books were confiscated and he was warned out of several Protestant towns. One of his themes, besides the difficulties with the Trinity, was that the church comprised those who repented of their sins and were able to be born again in Christ. This meant that infant baptism was not valid since children didn't have the development to repent. Denial of the validity of infant baptism was supported by Anabaptists but persecuted by most Protestants and Catholics as a grievous heresy.

Meantime, in 1532, the Supreme Council of the Inquisition in Spain began proceedings to summon him, or to apprehend him to return to Spain for questioning. He was terrified. At a later time when he reflected on this period, he wrote, "I was sought up and down to be snatched to my death". So he did what I guess most of us would do in his situation -- he fled and changed his name.

He went to Paris and changed his name to Michel de Villeneuve (i.e. Michael of Villanueva). He made a new life for himself, attending college to study mathematics and medicine. Paris at this time was no peaceful haven, but a centre of religious ferment. The University Rector was forced to flee Paris after an inaugural address deemed to be too Protestant. At the same time, an acquaintance of Servetus, Jean Calvin, who may even have written the address, also had to leave the city and go into hiding for a year. Servetus was briefly detained by the Inquisition but escaped while they sought evidence as to his identity. His stock of books and his effigy were publicly burnt by the Catholic authorities, which is one reason so few copies of his writings are now extant.

Servetus appears to be one of those clever people that manage to succeed at whatever they attempt. He spoke several languages, he was a biblical scholar, he made important medical discoveries including being the first European to describe pulmonary circulation, and he wrote books on geography. His personality is mostly

described by his adversaries as stubborn and cantankerous and he may have been the kind of person we wouldn't really welcome in our congregation, always seeking to show other people how they were wrong. He conducted correspondence on Biblical matters with many leaders, including Calvin, who finally seems to have taken the harsh criticism of his ideas personally.

For reasons not fully understood, Servetus was in Geneva en route to another Swiss city on a Sunday and decided to attend worship at Calvin's church. Calvin recognised him and arranged for him to be arrested at the end of the service. The civic authorities in Geneva didn't know what to do so they asked other Protestant city councils for advice. Most responses were in support of trying him for heresy. Interestingly this was not an offence that warranted death so their advice should not be taken as suggesting Servetus be killed. Only one voice was raised against judicial punishment of any kind, a Dutch Anabaptist then resident in Basel advised them to "admonish him in a friendly way and at most banish him from the city, if he will not give up his obstinacy and stop disturbing the peace by his teaching".

In the trial, Servetus correspondence with Calvin played a part and was twisted to imply not just that Servetus was a heretic but a blasphemer. In the event, he was found guilty and sentenced to being burnt at the stake surrounded by his books, a sentence carried out on 27 October 1553. So Servetus was burnt in effigy by the Catholics and in body by the Protestants. It is said that it took him half an hour to die and his dying words were, "O Jesus, son of the eternal God, have pity on me!" and one commentator pointed out that if he had called upon "Jesus, the Eternal Son" he might have been saved.

The reaction against this cruel punishment was strong and wasn't helped by Calvin's attempt to whitewash his part in the affair. It proved to be a turning point in Protestant attitudes as they developed to how to deal with differences in theology

although tolerance of difference was quite patchy. The Unitarian-inspired Edict of Torda in 1568 which established a framework for recognising and protecting religious differences was not generally copied for several generations, but seeds were sown, particularly by the writings of the Catholic Sebastian Castellio. Castellio's book circulated only in manuscript copies for many years from 1554 and were finally published in the Netherlands in 1612.

Do Unitarians today agree with Servetus? Not just his theological arguments but with his obstinant integrity that refused to back down even in the face of cruel death. There are those who argue that modern Unitarians are closer to Servetus's ideas than 16th Century Unitarians, who were more closely tied to the Bible than either Servetus or us, but the importance of Servetus isn't as much with his ideas or even his personality. It is with his integrity and our proclaimed goal of personally searching for the truth and following it even against tradition and authority.

So I close by returning to the question in the Inquirer put by Kate McKenna and read by Barry: would we today sacrifice our lives over an idea, however firmly held? Do we think that ideas are more important than lives? Is being a Seeker and being committed to The Search incompatible with having Beliefs? Do we even have clearly and deeply held convictions or do we see our religion as a place to escape those who define their lives by being Believers? John told me this week about an Australian Unitarian newsletter from some years ago that asked a question on its front page: "If you were accused of being a Unitarian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

One of the reasons to remember Servetus is that his life puts these important questions to us and gives us a chance to reflect.

Amen