Homily, St. Andrew's
Sunday, September 14, 2014 - Holy Cross Day

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Did you stop and look at them on your way in today? Luther was frustrated with aspects of the church of his day and he wanted to start a discussion with a view towards reform. And so he wrote his theses as a kind of list of "discussion questions". The presenting issue that had him riled up and so insistent on reform was that of indulgences. The system of indulgences was a system whereby people could essentially buy salvation through the church. Absolution for sin was granted through financial payment, even by family members of people who had died. It was this system that Luther rails against because it had become one of corruption, power and greed. His act of nailing a summary of his ideas to the door of the church set off a firestorm that eventually led to the break-up of the Western Christian church into 2 broad categories: Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Martin Luther was, of course, neither the first nor the last reformer. John Wycliffe, for instance, was a British theologian and reformer in the 14th century, almost 200 years before Martin Luther, who questioned the church doctrine of transubstantiation, argued that the Bible was the sole standard of Christian doctrine and that the authority of the pope was not well-grounded in scripture. His work inspired followers to translate the Bible into English though that it wouldn't be widely distributed until the 16th century. His ideas, however never really left and finally came to much broader discussion and debate across Europe as the 16th century opened. In Switzerland, Zwingli was the most well-known reformer around the same time as Luther. John Calvin made his mark first in France and then fled to Geneva in the face of persecution in the mid-16th century, making Geneva ground zero for the most extensive reforms. And finally as the century moved along, John Knox established Calvin's ideas as the underpinning for the national church in Scotland. It was a century of conflict, upheaval, and diversity as Christianity grew and changed and spread in all kinds of new directions.

The interaction of political and religious leadership can hardly be overstated in how the Protestant Reformation developed in various places. Indeed, the idea of the separation of church and state is a modern one that didn't take hold until centuries later. In Germany and Scandinavia, there was less political centralization and so it was individual princes who more or less chose to change their area to protestant forms of church organization, or to remain faithful to the Pope's authority in Rome. England, however, has a different story. King Henry VIII reigned through the first half of the 16th century and was faithful to traditional church beliefs and authority in the early part of the century. Pope Leo even named him "Defender of the Faith" in 1521 for refuting some of Martin Luther's ideas.

But then nothing stays the same, and as with many powerful leaders of nations, politics and desire create change. King Henry eventually finds himself at odds with the Pope over the issue of marriage and with so many new religious ideas fermenting, it isn't too hard for him to find church reformers ready and willing to help. And so one aspect of the history of the Anglican Church is written by a series of political decisions that clarify where the final authority lies: bishoprics will now granted by the crown, not the pope; it ceases to be heretical to deny papal supremacy; and finally in 1534, King Henry declares himself to be the "supreme head of the

English Church on earth" through a law called the "Act of Supremacy." So ended a centuries long debate about the place and power of the pope, at least in England. While the Church IN England pre-dated considerably the 16th century, the Church OF England came into being as the question of authority was answered. And despite the wildly varying religious beliefs of King Henry's successors, none of them repealed the Act of Supremacy.

From there, King Henry began to dismantle some of the power of the local church infrastructure by slowly closing monasteries and religious houses and transferring the money to the crown. His concern was political, economic and dynastic, shoring up the power and wealth of the crown for the future. Even so, it would be a mistake to think, as many say, that the Anglican Church simply came into being because Henry wanted a divorce, or that it was purely about so-called secular considerations. How societies organize always matters, but the change in the structure of authority also meant that church leaders influenced by new theological ideas had greater opportunity to make an impact. As Paul Avis wrote: "A radical alteration of the structure of authority in Henry's reign - the uniting of spiritual and temporal sovereignty, canon and statute law, under the Crown - prepared the way for liturgical and doctrinal innovation under Edward VI." (4) Few average church-goers in King Henry's time would have seen much difference with the King at the top rather than the Pope. Until, that is, the decades following King Henry's death when great swings in policy and practice became more evident and the true impact of the change of the seat of authority settled in.

Following King Henry's death, the short reign of the boy King, Edward VI, had the reformers within the Church in England winning the day. The most notable event being the passing of the First Act of Uniformity in 1549 that made the English Book of Common Prayer the official book of worship. The reforms were short-lived, however, because with Edward's untimely death, his older sister Mary took the throne. Queen Mary was Roman Catholic, very loyal to her Spanish mother and her short reign meant a complete 180 degree turn in religious policy. In her 6 years on the throne, she acquired the nickname "Bloody Mary" for the number of reformers she killed. When her sister Elizabeth finally took power in 1559, her main concern had to be to establish some stability after so many years of chaos. Queen Elizabeth had a Kingdom to hold together and so outward conformity to the nationally sanctioned religion became the order of the day. It was undoubtedly a welcome relief for many, and palpable for most because the nationally sanctioned religion found a moderate, middle way through reform and tradition.

Finding "the middle way" and the importance of outward conformity regardless of an individual's beliefs are probably the 2 most enduring legacies of the Elizabethan settlement in the second half of the 16th century. Both reflect, I think, something of British culture and one of the enduring questions in the Anglican Communion in the past decades has been whether a person needs to be British, or a reasonable facsimile of British, to really be Anglican.

More broadly, some people remain uncomfortable with talk of politics and economics and their role in our beliefs and practices as Christian people. Indeed some people believe that we must reject all forms of "human tradition" in religion to be pure or somehow turn our back on the pedantic realities of human life to be faithful. That was part of the protestant reformation, though how it was lived out in various places differed widely. Still, it is a belief that continues to be strong in some Protestant churches. That we as a church never went to the extremes of trying to dismantle British society, or the Catholic form of the church as it existed in Britain prior to the Reformation, points to one of the most defining doctrines in Anglican Christianity… that of the Incarnation. Our fundamental belief that in Jesus Christ, God joined humanity in an unprecedented way, colours and impacts everything about how we live out our Christian journey.

Luther expressed it in the first of his 95 Theses as his starting point: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said “repent”, He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” English theologians and Divines who come later express the importance of Incarnation in their own ways and for their own purposes, beyond Luther’s argument against indulgences.

Along with focussing on one part of our history today, we also commemorate Holy Cross Day along with the rest of the Anglican world and beyond. In the book “For All the Saints,” the shift in meaning of the cross with the shift in season is made overt: “On Good Friday we recalled [the cross’] planting at the seedtime of the new creation; and now, on the verge of autumn, we look for Christ, the true Vine which the Cross supported, to bear the fruit of justice and mercy not only in our own lives but also in the dealings of the world.” (278) And so not only does our church calendar recognize the tragedy of the cross and new beginning of Resurrection, but also the fruit that comes as that new life transitions into a season of reaping the results of what was sown.

Looking back into our history, whether it was last year or 500 years ago, offers us the opportunity to harvest what has grown from seeds sown in our past. May our study be a prayerful discernment of this fruit. And may we honour our ancestors of the faith and learn from them how we can be ever more faithful today.