

SERMON: "FRANCIS DAVID AND THE EDICT OF TORDA"

Francis David (Ferencz David) was born at Klausenburg in Kolozsvar, the capital of Transylvania, in 1510. He was the son of a shoemaker and of a deeply religious mother descended from a noble family.

He was first educated at a local Franciscan school, then at Gyulafehervar, a Catholic seminary. His high intellectual ability led him to the University of Wittenburg, where he completed his education 1545-1548 (then in his thirties). He developed the ability to debate fluently in Hungarian, German and Latin.

His years of study fall in the exciting period of the Reformation. Although he must have been aware of and perhaps influenced by the debates of the time, his first position was that of rector of a Catholic school in Beszterce.

He studied Luther's writings and became a Protestant. Lutheranism had spread rapidly in Transylvania during his absence and he joined the new movement on his return, becoming pastor of a Lutheran church in Peterfalva. He took part in theological debates, proving himself a gifted and powerful orator and a clear thinker. His fame spread, and he was elected as a Superintendent or Bishop of the Lutheran Church.

The Calvinist or Reformed movement was at the same time spreading across Transylvania, and Francis David studied its teachings. Its main difference from Lutheranism lay in its symbolical interpretation of the Lord's Supper. Gradually convinced, he resigned his Lutheran bishopric in 1559 and joined the Calvinists as an ordinary minister.

Again, his intellectual ability and his gifts of oratory bore him to leadership and he was elected Bishop of the Reformed Church of Transylvania.

Giorgio Biandrata was a Piedmontese scholar of both medicine and theology (like Michael Servetus) who had lived and studied amongst the Socinians of Poland, with whose teachings David was familiar. About 1563, Biandrata went to Transylvania as court-physician to its ruler, John Sigismund (about whom more later).

Biandrata soon came to exercise considerable power at the court, and when Francis Davis came under his notice he had him appointed court preacher about 1566.

Biandrata's own theological views were advanced and he introduced David to the works of Servetus, who had been burnt to death on 27 October 1553 in Geneva, at the instigation of Calvin.

When we look at the history of the church and the state in the West, we find that freedom of religion has only rarely been granted or practised. It is therefore remarkable that religious freedom should have been proclaimed nearly four and a half centuries ago by a young monarch in a small country such as Transylvania, whose main contribution to history (or to popular awareness of its history) seems to have been its position as the home of Dracula.

In the early 16th century, Transylvania was a small state in area and formed part of the buffer zone or battle-ground between the Emperors of the West, such as Ferdinand, and the Sultans of the East, such as Suleiman the Magnificent.

It was common at that time for church and state to be closely intertwined, and the religion of the ruler usually was the religion of the state (or vice versa). Despite the Reformation and the great revolutions taking place in Europe over religion, there was little place for tolerance.

Michael Servetus was burnt to death in 1553, and other heretics were cruelly persecuted and killed well into the 17th century.

The books of Luther were being read in Transylvania as early as 1520, and the reformation power of Lutheranism was soon strong in that country. The Calvinists who came later overtook the Lutherans in power and influence, particularly around the time of Francis David's participation in the theological debates.

In 1540 John Sigismund became King of Hungary and Prince of Transylvania, and ruled until 1571. Although the word "Unitarian" was not applied as a name until some years later, John Sigismund holds an honoured place in the history of the Unitarian Church as the only Unitarian Monarch. He came to the throne from the orthodox Trinitarian Catholic tradition, but was himself a humane and tolerant thinker who was committed to the principle of religious freedom.

There are two good reasons for proclaiming tolerance and religious freedom. These are convenience and principle. When there is conflict among various sects, the ruler may consider tolerance to be necessary to hamper controversy and restrict bloodshed. This is the tolerance of convenience and, while it may create a suitable climate for religious freedom, its motives are primarily practical.

To place the necessity of tolerance on the level of principle is another matter and requires a nobleness and greatness of character that goes beyond the pragmatism of convenience. John Sigismund had that nobleness and greatness of character, and in 1557 and 1563 he issued two decrees affirming the freedom of the adherents of the various religious groups in the country.

It was after these two decrees that Francis David was appointed court-preacher. He had shaken off the bonds of ecclesiastical authority and tasted the waters of freedom in his move from Catholicism through Lutheranism and Calvinism, and allowed no obstacle to stand in his way on his pilgrimage to Truth. His enquiries into the Scriptures led him first to question the doctrine of the Trinity and then to be among the first people to declare the lack of evidence in the New Testament for the deity of Christ.

He was soon openly teaching the unity of God, so that he aroused the anger of the trinitarians, who tried to persuade the king to condemn him to death for his heresy.

John Sigismund was upset by the bitterness of the debates which were disturbing his small country.

When Francis David asked for full freedom for both sides (the trinitarians and the anti-trinitarians) to put forward their cases, the king summoned the Diet (Parliament) of Torda and invited representatives of the four religions of the land - Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and the as-yet-unnamed Unitarianism - to present their points of view

Each representative of the three Trinitarian churches, claiming his own church to be the one true church, argued for the establishment of his church as the only faith and advocated the repression of the other faiths, because of their doctrinal "errors" and their "heresies".

Francis David did not demand that the religion which he represented should be the only recognised religion of the land. Instead, he pleaded eloquently for toleration and for religious freedom for all, maintaining that "Faith is the gift of God, and not of men".

A portrait of David addressing the Diet is still to be seen in the town hall at Torda. He is shown as a man of kindly and impressive appearance, dressed in a black ministerial gown, in the centre of the picture with his hand raised. John Sigismund is seated on his throne, with Giorgio Biandrata seated at his feet.

David's powers of oratory were so considerable that he was sometimes called "the visitant from hell and heaven". John Sigismund was deeply impressed, not simply by David's impassioned oratory, but also by the way he stood alone in advocating general religious freedom instead of the persecution of his opponents, as they had done.

At the conclusion of the Diet, the king declared himself convinced by the arguments of David and issued the proclamation which has become known as the Edict of Torda. In confirming his previous decrees, John Sigismund declared:

"In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel, each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well; if not, no one shall compel them, for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall annoy or abuse the preachers on account of their religion, according to the previous constitutions, or allow any to be imprisoned or punished by removal from his post on account of this teaching, for faith is the gift of God. This comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Less than two months later, on 3 March 1568, John Sigismund convened a great synod of the churches of Transylvania. The four groups met to debate theological ideas before the king so that some semblance of unity could be established among the people. The disputation was held in the great hall of the castle at Gyulafehérvár, starting at five o'clock in the morning, and continued for ten days. One historian summed up the debate by saying that "the disputation began with heat, lasted not too temperately for ten days, and closed without any profit accruing to the Church of Christ."

That laconic summary may or may not be true, but the important thing about that synod is that it had become a possibility for the various faiths to argue with all vigour but without violence. At the end of it there was no persecution, no ex-communication, and no definition of heresy, but a re-affirmation of the content of the Edict of Torda.

Francis David took part in all the debate at the Synod of Gyulafehérvár, and the debating honours seem to have gone to him and his group. It was regarded as a signal victory for their religious position, and on his return to Klausenburg in Kolozsvár Francis David was met by crowds of people who made him expound the principles of his faith.

He did so, standing on a large boulder which I believe is still preserved as a tourist attraction, and perhaps something of a religious shrine.

It was probably the most famous sermon of his career. It was so moving that the people in their enthusiasm took him on their shoulders, carried him into the cathedral and declared themselves his disciples. The town was converted to Unitarianism; that cathedral continued to be a Unitarian church for a century and a half, until the persecutions of 1716; the town of Klausenburg became known as "the Jerusalem of the Unitarians" and remains the seat of their bishop and of their chief college. Ornate altars in many churches were replaced by pulpits, and below the pulpits worshippers gathered at round tables to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Trinitarian slogans were removed and replaced by the Hungarian affirmation "Egy az Isten" "God is One".

Within ten years nearly four hundred Unitarian congregations were established, and they elected Francis David as their first Bishop in 1576.

In 1569, the year after the Edict of Torda and the Synod of Gyulafehervar, another great debate took place between the Calvinists and the anti-trinitarians led by David.

Again, John Sigismund indicated his principle of tolerance by cautioning the debaters that he would not accept any persecution "since we demand that in our dominions there shall be freedom of conscience".

He instructed the leader of the Calvinists, named Melius, not to play Pope, not to burn books, not to remove ministers from their posts, and not to force anyone to accept the creed that Melius preached.

John Sigismund's final known confirmation of his insistence on religious freedom occurred three years after the Edict of Torda, at the Diet of Marosvasarhely, shortly before his death in 1571.

By John Sigismund's nobleness of character and his refusal to accept persecution in the name of religion, the four main religions of Transylvania were bound to tolerate one another in an atmosphere of religious freedom. The freedom that he established was affirmed as a matter of principle rather than of convenience because even when the religion to which he himself adhered was in power, he remained steadfast in his demand that the others have full tolerance.

The historian Earl Morse Wilbur made this clear in his summing up of the history of the Unitarian movement in Transylvania:

"It was in its advocacy and its practice of the principle of perfect toleration in religion that Unitarianism in Transylvania first and most strikingly distinguished itself. David eloquently pleaded for this principle before the Diet, and his followers embodied it in legislation; and at a time when the power of the government might in the interest of what was then the ruling confession have oppressed its rivals, it practised equal toleration for all. Of no contribution to religious history have Transylvanians been more proud than of this."

On the King's death in 1571, Stephen Bathory, a Catholic, defeated Gaspar Bekes, a Unitarian and close adviser of John Sigismund, at the customary election of the successor.

There is some difference of opinion about whether Stephen Bathory "vigorously opposed Unitarianism, dismissing Unitarians from the court and public office, including Francis David", or whether he "showed himself to be impartial toward the four religions."

However, in the first year of his rule it seems clear that, although the freedom of the four faiths was assured, Stephen insisted that the reformation should not be extended through any "innovation".

The different churches were allowed to have their own synods for debate and clarification of their theological doctrines, but they were not allowed to change the content in any substance.

In 1576, the year that David became the Superintendent of the Unitarian churches which were now developing a formal organisation, Giorgio Biandrata, who had retained his high position at the court, was the successful negotiator for Stephen Bathory in the election to the throne of Poland. With Stephen installed as King of Poland, the Transylvanian rule was continued by his older brother, Christopher.

Christopher took active steps against Unitarianism, culminating in his invitation to the Jesuits to restore the Catholic Church's power, as they had so ruthlessly done in Poland in the recent past. It was under his rule that David was martyred.

David had come to believe that, if Jesus were indeed not God, then there was no scriptural sanction for praying to him. Instead, people should pray only and directly to the Father who was the one God. He wrote a book on the subject (*De Falsa et Vera Unius Dei Patris, Filii, et spiritus sancti Cognitione, Libri Duo*) and dedicated it, curiously, to Queen Elizabeth of England.

This was an innovation which was viewed as dangerous and lacking in prudence, because "innovations" had been disallowed by Stephen. Giorgio Biandrata urged David to keep silent, lest Unitarianism be entirely suppressed, but David resolutely refused.

Biandrata sent for Faustus Socinus, the leader of the Polish anti-trinitarians, to come and discuss the worship of Christ with David. In his monumental work, *Fausto Socino*, published in 1952, Professor Giovanni Pioli summarised the interminable, involved, pathetic and ultimately tragic course of these discussions, based on the account published by Socinus.

Professor Pioli admits the inconsistency of Socinus in recognising the "justification" of the worship of Christ but rejecting that of Mary the Mother as insufficient.

"But David," he continued, "being more coherent and recognizing no sufficient 'justification' for any particular being, did not allow worship or prayer or invocation to be directed to any creature, not even Christ himself - which he regarded as reprehensible as the worship of Mary."

Biandrata now turned against David and became his enemy.

He may have been angered that David had ignored his advice to keep silent; he may have feared a new wave of oppression and persecution against Unitarians which might have lost him his court position: whatever his reasons, he accused David before Prince Christopher, who seized the opportunity and brought David to trial in 1579.

In court at Gyulafehervar David admitted his doctrines and was convicted, and the Prince condemned him to imprisonment in the castle of Deva where he died of illness later the same year, on 15 November 1579.

The end of a man, however, was not the end of religious freedom. The faiths continued in their essential freedoms throughout the four centuries following David's death. Despite the difficulties which followed under the rule of various princes and other states, the assertions of the Diet of Torda of 1568 persisted and still stand today.

David died a martyr's death. Although he died in bed, that bed was in a prison to which he had been condemned for his religious faith. Just before his arrest, he declared: "I am ready to endure all things for the sake of the truth I profess, but I do not cling obstinately to my opinions, and if any one teaches what is more

correct on the basis of Scripture I will gladly give way."

Far beyond his age in his religious understanding, he carried to their logical conclusion the ideas of Michael Servetus and Faustus Socinus. His great work has been recognised even by those who do not share his religious outlook, and the Calvinist bishop, Dr Revesz, called David "the greatest and most original Hungarian genius of all ages."

Francis David was married three times: his first wife died; his second wife divorced him; his third wife seems to have survived him. We know few other details of his personal life. But his place in the history of Unitarianism is assured. He is often called the "first Unitarian" but in fact he was simply the leader of the first group of people and churches to bear that name, although it does not appear in records until 1600, 21 years after his death, and was not applied officially until 50 years after his death.

Earl Morse Wilbur wrote of him:

"Francis David deserves to stand along with Servetus as one of the two greatest martyrs in Unitarian history. Neither bribes nor threats could move him from faithfulness to the truth as he saw it; and his example of unswerving fidelity to his faith,

even unto death, has continued to inspire his followers in Transylvania during three hundred and fifty years, of which few have been free from some sort of religious persecution. In his beliefs and teachings he was far in advance of Socinus and of his own time; and he was the only one of the earlier Unitarian leaders in any country who would feel spiritually much at home among Unitarians of the twentieth century."

Dr Wilbur's three characteristics of Unitarianism - freedom, reason and tolerance (the Unitarian Trinity) - would have been very acceptable to Francis David. It is obvious that he recognised that these alone made discussion possible, but he certainly would not make reason an end in itself. Like all thinkers in the Unitarian tradition, he would recognise that reason is limited, but is extended by our experience and knowledge of the world. This extension is what Unitarians call "faith", and they regard it as a quality of mind which must be present in every field of activity in which human personality may explore.

Francis David sought to embrace a faith that is not easy, a faith that makes demands upon the individual. History shows that this faith, this attitude of mind, is a pre-requisite of any attempt to arrive at truth and a richer knowledge and experience of God.