

# “Servetus on Trial”

(Rev. Peter Hughes & the Toronto First Players)

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

1 March 2015

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

We all like to think of ourselves, being Unitarians, as persons who stand for freedom of thought, and against intolerance. But we should not witness the drama of Servetus just in order to pride ourselves that we are not like the inquisition or like Calvin. We ought to ask ourselves, as often as possible, could it be that we have unknowingly slipped into some intolerant way? Are we, without being aware of it, working to exclude some kinds of thought? In the face of the possibility of a natural human tendency to be intolerant, we must ever be vigilant—and also humble.

We also like to think that people like Servetus are our religious ancestors, and people like Calvin are not. But the fact is that we have only adopted Servetus as our ancestor; our Unitarian Church is actually descended from Calvinist ones. Therefore we are the children of Calvin at least as much as we are descended from Servetus. And Calvin actually encouraged tolerance. After Servetus was burned, Sebastian Castellio, in his book on how heretics ought to be treated, quoted Calvin’s own words against what Calvin had allowed to be done. Calvin’s failing is a blot on his memory, because his followers recognize, whether they admit it or not, that, in the case of Servetus, he failed to live up to his own principles. May his lapse remind us to take care to live up to our own values and ideals.

The 16th century Roman Catholics also pursued Servetus, and, frustrated of executing him themselves, burned him in effigy. But many modern Catholics, notably in Servetus’s native Spain, love and honour him. When we were in the village that Servetus grew up in, Villanueva, my wife, Lynn, and I attended a special ceremony. There is a large statue of Servetus there, next to the church, and once a year, in the evening, the people gather, villagers and visitors together, to bring candles to place in front of the statue. I was greatly moved by this simple ceremony.

That is why I wanted our candles today to be after the event. Let our joys and concerns, especially if we are thinking about those in trouble or those who are oppressed, or those whose lives bring joy and new things in the world, join together with a sense of memorial. In this memorial we may remember those who stood for right and triumphed, or suffered for their stand; we may remember all those who lived, and made the world better for their life; and those whose lives were prematurely extinguished, perhaps not knowing the sparks of light they left as a lasting joy and a beacon to us. In that spirit, please come forward and light your candles of joy, of concern, and of sacred memory.

# Servetus on Trial

(a play by Rev. Peter Hughes)

## Part 1 (Vienne)

NARRATOR: In 1546 Michel de Villeneuve, a respected physician in the town of Vienne in the eastern part of France, began to get impatient. He had been secretly working on a theological manuscript for years and was anxious to have his views published for all the world to see. Working late at night, he wrote:

SERVETUS: If you look into the matter carefully, and pay close attention, you will find that your Trinity is a kind of tumult of false images in your imagination, which holds you in a state of delirium. I believe all Trinitarians are actually atheists. For what does it mean to be without God, other than not being able to think about God? As a confused jumble of three beings is constantly looming before our minds and hampering our understanding, it drives us crazy whenever we try to think about God.

NARRATOR: This physician was, in fact, the arch-heretic Michael Servetus, author of *On the Errors of the Trinity*, living under an assumed name. Because it was too dangerous for him to discuss his ideas with his Roman Catholic friends, he wrote to the Protestant reformer in Geneva, John Calvin, whom he had known when they were both students in Paris, some twelve years previously.

CALVIN: Servetus wrote me recently, and sent me a long manuscript volume of his delirious writings. He said he would like to come here to talk with me. But I am unwilling to give him a safe-conduct. If he were to come here, if I have any authority in this place, I shall never permit him to leave alive.

NARRATOR: Servetus had his book printed in 1553. In Geneva Calvin saw a copy before the book could be sent to book fairs. He supplied incriminating evidence to a friend of his, who, in turn, wrote to a Catholic relative living across the border in France:

GILLAUME DE TRIE: Dear cousin, you allow a heretic to live among you. He is a man who should be condemned by you as much as by us. He says that the Trinity is a monster of hell. I ask you, Why do you esteem him so highly? He is a Spaniard named Michael Servetus. That is his real name. But he goes at present under the name of Villeneuve and practices medicine.

NARRATOR: Soon this information was given to Matthieu Ory, the Grand Inquisitor of France. He told the archbishop and others about the heretic in their midst. A bailiff was sent to a house where Villeneuve was making a doctor visit.

BAILIFF: We have a number of sick and wounded prisoners at the palace. Would you come and look at them?

SERVETUS: By my profession as a physician I am obliged to do such good works. But I am also persuaded by my own good will to go with you.

NARRATOR: They went then into the royal prisons and while Servetus made his visit to the sick, the bailiff sent to ask the Grand-Vicar to come and join him. When he arrived they told Servetus that there were certain charges against him, and that he was now to be considered a prisoner in the palace until he had answered those charges. Soon after, the Inquisitor arrived and presented himself to the archbishop. After they had dined, they began interrogating their prisoner.

BAILIFF: Do you swear upon the Holy Gospel to tell the truth?

SERVETUS: I do.

BAILIFF: What is your name?

SERVETUS: Michel de Villeneuve. I am a doctor of medicine, forty-two years old. I was born in Tudela in the Kingdom of Navarre. At present I live in Vienne, where I have been a resident for twelve years.

NARRATOR: In that short statement Servetus has already told three lies. But how much truth would you tell the Holy Inquisition?

BAILIFF: Where have you lived since you left your native land?

SERVETUS: Around 27 years ago I entered the service of Juan de Quintana, the Confessor of the Emperor Charles V. I was only 14 years old. I travelled with the Confessor and the Emperor to Italy, where I witnessed the Emperor's coronation. I then went with Quintana and the imperial party to Germany. I spent a year there. After Quintana died I went to Paris and studied mathematics. Then I went to Lyons, where I met my Lord Archbishop. I came with him to Vienne where I have lived until the present day.

BAILIFF: Have you published any books?

SERVETUS: In Paris I published a book on syrups and a defence of astrology and I made some annotations on Ptolemy's Geography. Other than that I have written no books myself, though I have edited several.

INQUISITOR: Here is a page from a printed book with your notations written in the margin.

SERVETUS: I cannot tell if it is my handwriting or not. If it is, I must have written this a long time ago.

INQUISITOR: We know this is your handwriting.

SERVETUS: Looking at it more closely, I see that it is my handwriting. If anything here is found to be contrary to faith, I submit to the judgment of the Holy Mother Church, from which I never wish to depart.

INQUISITOR: We have another document.

BAILIFF: Here it is, your grace.

INQUISITOR: Here is a letter you have written to John Calvin on the subject of free will. Please read it and explain it to us.

SERVETUS: Messieurs, I wish to tell you the truth. When I was in Germany, about 25 years ago, a book was published in Germany by a Spaniard named Servetus. I was very young, not much more than 15 years old. It seemed to me then that Servetus wrote well. However, I left this book behind in Germany. When I came to France, I wished only to study medicine and mathematics, as I have done ever since. However, when I heard about Calvin, prodded by curiosity, I wrote to him, asking to inquire about doctrine, and hoping to refute him. Seeing that my questions were those that Servetus had already raised, he answered that I was Servetus. I said that although I was not Servetus, to debate with him I was happy to take on the *persona* of Servetus and to answer him just like Servetus would. On these terms we sent letters to each other until we saw that we could not agree. It has been ten years since we have exchanged any letters. I swear before God and you, sirs, that I never wished to support anything in all this which could be found to be against the church or the Christian religion.

INQUISITOR: If that is so, how do you interpret what you say in this other letter? Have a look at it.

SERVETUS: I do remember this one. I was, as I said, pretending to be Servetus. I did not believe in what I said about the Trinity, but only wanted to see what Calvin would say against it.

INQUISITOR: And here are fourteen more letters.

SERVETUS: My answer is the same. I held these opinions only as a matter of debate. And it was a long time ago.

BAILIFF: Please initial the documents. And our transcript as well.

NARRATOR: In the prison there was a garden with a platform which looked out on the courtyard of the Palace. Although the garden was always carefully locked, prisoners were sometimes allowed to enter, to have a walk or for other necessities. Servetus got up at four in the morning and asked for the key from the jailer. This good man, seeing him in his nightcap and robe, did not suspect that underneath he was all dressed. He gave him the key. Servetus left his cap and robe at the foot of a tree, jumped from the terrace onto the roof and reached the courtyard without any mishap. Two hours went by before anyone noticed that he had escaped.

## Part 2 (Geneva)

NARRATOR: A few months after his escape, Servetus arrived in Geneva.

SERVETUS: I came to Geneva to cross the mountains on my way to the Kingdom of Naples, to live among the Spaniards there by practicing medicine. I lodged at an inn called “The Rose,” and negotiated with the innkeeper to have a boat take me up the lake so that I could find the road to Zurich. While here I stayed hidden as much as I could so that I would not be recognized. But it was a Sunday, and I would have called unwanted attention upon myself had I not gone to the local church.

NARRATOR: When he was attentively listening to a minister’s sermon—although he was disguised in a cloak and cap and standing in the shadows in the back of the church, he was recognized by several people. On that same day he was arrested and imprisoned. Preparations were made for a trial before the Council of Geneva. The first phase of the legal proceedings was handled by the chief prosecutor.

PROSECUTOR: In your book *The Restoration of Christianity* you blasphemed against the Trinity. You wrote that to believe that there are three distinct persons in the single essence of God is to create four phantoms—phantoms about which you claim it is impossible even to think.

SERVETUS: I wrote on the Trinity, following the first teachers after Jesus Christ. I believe in the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—three persons in God.

PROSECUTOR: You claimed that to make a distinction in the essence of God is to make a God divided into three parts, which you call a devil with three heads like Cerberus, which ancient poets called the monstrous hound of hell. Do you think that the Trinity is three devils and a Cerberus?

SERVETUS: No, I never talked in this way.

PROSECUTOR: You called the Trinity dreams of St. Augustine, an invention of the devil, and those who believe in the Trinity you call tritheists.

SERVETUS: I do not call tritheists those who believe in the Trinity, because I believe it myself. I gave the name tritheists only to those who describe the Trinity as other than it is, those who make a real distinction in the divine essence—by dividing God, by removing unity. The word “person” has a different meaning to me than to them. I define the word “person” as the earliest teachers of the church understood it.

NARRATOR: At this stage Calvin was allowed to confront Servetus personally:

CALVIN: Did not the ancient teachers use the word Trinity?

SERVETUS: The word Trinity was used only after the Council of Nicaea. The earlier teachers never used it.

CALVIN: Here is Justin Martyr who referred to the Trinity *before* the Council of Nicaea. (*brandishes the book*) It was printed in Paris two years ago. Have you not seen it?

SERVETUS: No I have not.

CALVIN: The passage right here (*opens the book and points to a passage*) is one that you have neglected to read.

SERVETUS: May I see the passage? (*Calvin hands him the book. Servetus examines it.*) Let me see. (*reads very slowly*) “The One is perceived in the Triad”—Triad? “And the Triad is known as the One.” This passage seems to me somewhat unclear. Can I study a Latin translation?

CALVIN: Behold this learned man, Servetus, who would instruct us all and who prides himself on his linguistic skill! He reads Greek no better than a small child can recite his ABC. What does this mean, sir? This book has not yet been translated into Latin, and it appears that you cannot read Greek. Yet you pretend that you are familiar with the works of Justin! Tell me, if you cannot read the Greek in which it is written, where did you find the quotations that you produce in your book?

SERVETUS: I made only one quotation. Justin is quoted in Latin in . . .

CALVIN: (*cuts off Servetus in mid-sentence*) A second-hand quotation! Rumors of Justin! We no longer have to rely on rumors. (*Calvin snatches the book from Servetus and taps its cover.*) Here is Justin himself. What does he say in his book?

SERVETUS: He does appear to name a three. This may signify the Trinity.

CALVIN: As wrong as you have been about Justin Martyr, so you are mistaken about all the church fathers. How can you now say that the name of the Trinity was invented at the Council of Nicaea?

SERVETUS: The real Trinity was made public at Nicaea. Before Nicaea, Tertullian and the other church fathers only talked about the Trinity as the ways that God shows himself or acts in the world.

CALVIN: How dare you abuse the writings of Tertullian to deny a real distinction?

SERVETUS: If Simon the Magician had not closed your eyes, you would see that nothing is ever said in the early Fathers about any real distinction in the Trinity.

CALVIN: Simon the Magician!

SERVETUS: I believe that you are a follower of that sorcerer. Your accusations are false. Furthermore, matters of doctrine should not be subject to criminal prosecution.

JUDGE: (*stands*) We will be the judge of the law. (*pauses.*) Having witnessed the trial conducted before us against you, Michael Servetus de Villeneuve, having seen your voluntary confessions before us, and your books, we judge that you, Servetus, have for a long time promulgated false and heretical doctrine by which many souls have been ruined and lost. You have had neither shame nor horror of setting yourself against the divine Majesty and the Holy Trinity and you have obstinately tried to infect the world with your stinking heretical poison. Desiring to purge the Church of God of such infection, speaking in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we now give final sentence and condemn you, Michael Servetus, to be bound and taken to Champel and there attached to a stake and burned with your book to ashes.

SERVETUS: (*sighs, then moans, then beats his breast*) Misericordia! Misericordia!

CALVIN: Ask for mercy and pardon from the God whom you have wronged and blasphemed, the three persons in one essence—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with a real distinction.

NARRATOR: Bound to the stake, as the flames rose around him, Servetus cried out:

SERVETUS: O Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!

GUILLAUME FAREL: He should have said, “O Jesus Eternal Son of God.” Had he shifted the position of the adjective he might have been saved.

CALVIN: It is of no use. This heretic is self-condemned.

NARRATOR: The following year Sebastian Castellio, in his critique of Calvin and the execution of Servetus, wrote: To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine. It is to kill a man.