

# Michael Servetus

1511 – 1553

A worship resource to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the birth of Michael Servetus



*To kill a man is not to  
protect a doctrine, but it is to  
kill a man.*

Compiled by Reverend Cliff Reed

(and edited by the Worship Panel)

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## **MICHAEL SERVETUS (1511-1553)**

### **A QUINCENTENARY SERVICE**

**Compiled by the Rev. Cliff Reed**

#### **CHALICE-LIGHTING:**

*THE CREATOR'S LIGHT....based on words by Michael Servetus*

“There is no creature that does not reflect the Creator,  
and in which the Creator’s light does not shine.”

We kindle this flame as a symbol of the Divine Light  
in ourselves and in all Creation.

#### **OPENING WORDS:**

*SHADOW AND TRUTH....based on words by Michael Servetus*

“There is among us a new and heavenly kingdom.”

In our worship and our fellowship let us dispel  
the shadow that conceals it –  
and realise its truth.

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

If you travel to the small Spanish town of Villanueva de Sijena, about sixty miles north of Zaragoza, you will find a statue in front of the modest parish church portraying a seated, scholarly-looking and bearded man. Some local worthy, you might think – a distinguished mayor or local politician, perhaps. Well, he was a ‘local worthy’, I suppose; someone in whom his home town and his country now take great pride, but he lived most of his life abroad and died a brutal death in a foreign city.

Miguel Serveto Conesa, alias Reves, was born into a respectably orthodox Roman Catholic family in Villanueva in 1511 and baptised in the local parish church. But he grew up to challenge the very foundations of the doctrines taught there. And it wasn’t only the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church that he was to challenge, it was also those of the 16<sup>th</sup> century’s mainstream Protestant Reformers. One of them was to conspire with the Inquisition to put an end to this dangerous heretic, as they believed him to be.

If you had been in Villanueva one November evening in 2005 you would have seen a candlelit procession winding its way to the statue from a house a few streets away. It was composed of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists from many countries. At the statue they – or, rather, we – held an act of worship to commemorate the man it portrays. The house was his birthplace and his home, until he left Spain to carve out a career as a biblical scholar, physician and Renaissance man. Miguel Serveto became known to English-speakers by the Latinised form of his name, Michael Servetus.

That evening concluded a visit to his birthplace by members of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU). He is honoured in our faith tradition as a pioneer and as a martyr, because it was for his faith that Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva in October 1553.

This doesn't mean that we would necessarily agree with all of his theology or identify with all of his beliefs, of course! And even some of his near contemporaries who we also regard as forebears, rather went out of their way to distance themselves from him! Their problem with Servetus was his willingness to look beyond the Bible to help form and support his ideas.

But although this was a problem for people like Faustus Socinus and Francis David, it is not a problem for today's Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists – quite the contrary in fact! And so we might actually find more reason to appreciate Servetus than some of our predecessors would have done.

This service marks and celebrates the five-hundredth anniversary year of his birth.

**HYMN:** Hymns for Living No.78 *We will honour Michael*

**PRAYER AND REFLECTION:**

*WITH EVERY BREATH...*

O God, who is the mystery around us,  
the spirit within us, and the love between us,  
help us to know you with every breath we take,  
with every pulse of our blood's circulation,  
with every glimpse of your essence,  
as the essence of all things.

We give thanks today for every questing mind  
that has sought out some secret of your universe,  
for every courageous soul who declared the truth they found,  
even in the face of ignorance and bigotry.

*Short silence....then continuing...*

And we express our sorrow and our shame at the pyres,  
stoked with malice and arrogance, on which the martyrs burned.

Help us to honour the truth-seekers and the truth-tellers in our own time,  
and never to suppose that we will ever serve you by trying to silence them.

May it be so.

**News, notices & collection**

**READINGS:**

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9

John 16: 1-7

Gospel of Thomas, 77

Jesus said, 'It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the All.  
From me did the All come forth, and unto me did the All extend. Split a piece of  
wood, and I am there, lift up the stone, and you will find me there.'

**HYMN:** Hymns for Living No. 46 *Breathe on me, Breath of God*

## READINGS:

The following extracts are from, '*Christianismo Restitutio*', by Michael Servetus (Translated by Christopher A. Hoffman and Marian Hillar, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007; excerpts reproduced by permission of the publisher.)

God dwells in the spirit, and God is the spirit;  
God dwells in fire, and God is fire.  
God dwells in the light, and God is light.  
God is in the mind, inhabits the mind, and God is the mind itself.

Our soul is a certain lamp of God. It is like a spark of God's Spirit, and image of God's wisdom; created, to be sure, but most like that spiritual wisdom and placed within it, having an inborn luminescence of divinity, a spark of that primary wisdom, and the very spirit of divinity. The spirit of divinity is placed within man, even after Adam's sin, so testifies God himself...

In the very fruits of the earth, in animals, stones, pearls, metals, treasures, springs, rivers, wells, rain, clouds, thunder and lightning, and winds, Christ's mystery was figured. In the food of Paradise, in the manna, in Aaron's staff, in the wooden tabernacle, in the bronze serpent, in the ark of the covenant, in the vessels of gold, silver or whatever other materials; in the stone that produces water, in the stone temple, in the angular stone, in the lion, the eagle, the turtle dove, the calf, the lamb, and all other things, Christ was adumbrated.

The son of God shares his own relationship with us... But he calls us brothers because he is a human being. As a human being he is 'the first born of the dead.' Thus he is the first born human being, and having been born a human being, he is a son.

In the book, *On the Teaching of Mohammed*, Christ is called the word, spirit, and power of God. Mohammed called Christ, 'Rohalla', which means, 'Spirit of God', since he was born from the very breath of God. Finally, although he attributes practically everything to Christ, he does not recognise that he is the son of God...Indeed, Mohammed is offended by the notion of three divine incorporeal entities or three invisible, yet equal and distinct entities that exist in one God. Because of the misguided teaching of the Trinitarians, he dissented from Christianity, which was truly an unfortunate tragedy for the world.

Single is the basis, single the light of the Word;  
pantomorphous is the light, as it is the head of everything;  
Jesus Christ, our Lord, is the basis of God's creatures.

## PRAYER AND REFLECTION:

### *WHY REMEMBER?*

Why should we remember them, these men and women,  
remote from us in time or place  
or even in the details of belief?  
Why should we call them martyrs for *our* faith?

Some died because they said, each in their own way,  
that God is One and Jesus was our brother:  
like Katharine Weigel, burned in Krakow;  
like Michael Servetus, burned in Geneva;  
like John Biddle, turned out from Newgate's noisome filth to die.

Some died because they stood for freedom, justice, and humanity:  
like Norbert Capek, who defied Nazi tyranny and paid the price in Dachau;  
like James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, answering King's call to Selma  
to march for Civil Rights;  
like Toribio Quimada, standing with his people in the Philippines  
and murdered by their oppressors.

Why should we remember them, the named and the unnamed?  
Because of their loyalty to conscience;  
because of their courage in the face of violence and death;  
because of the faith that gave them strength;  
and because, although persecuted, they persecuted no one.

They could all have taken the easy path but, like Jesus,  
they didn't shirk the hard one.  
In love, we remember them and, in our weakness,  
ask that we may be spared the test they faced. Amen.

**HYMN:** Sing Your Faith No. 134, *Praise God for Michael*

**ADDRESS:** 'Celebrating Servetus' (*See below*)

**MUSIC:**

**HYMN:** Sing Your Faith No.164, *The secret pulse of freedom throbs*

**CLOSING WORDS:**

*SEEING DIVINITY...Based on words by Michael Servetus*

O God, whose Divinity in a stone is stone,  
whose Divinity in gold is gold,  
and whose Divinity in wood is wood,  
open our eyes to see your Divinity in the fruits of the earth  
as their essence, their fruitfulness and their goodness.

And help us to know that your Divinity in the human  
is our humanity, in the human spirit, our spirits.

So may we come to see your Divinity in all creation and in all people,  
knowing our oneness with you, and open to your loving Spirit.

**DISMISSAL:**

*VESSELS OF YOUR LIGHT*

One and Undivided God,  
who is the Creative Word,  
the compassion of Christ,  
and the Spirit that leads us  
into all truth; bless us  
as we go out to be the  
vessels of your light.

## CELEBRATING SERVETUS

While aspects of Michael Servetus's Unitarian theology will strike chords with some 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, much, if not all, of it may seem obscure, alien and irrelevant to others. It isn't easy to think ourselves back into the worldview of an idiosyncratic Spanish theologian in the tumultuous years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But if the theology of Michael Servetus seems incomprehensible today, can there be any other reason to commemorate him? I think there is.

Servetus may have been, as his enemies portrayed him, a stubborn and cantankerous man, but, far more importantly, he was a man of conscience and of courage. He held strong religious beliefs that in the end, he was prepared to die for. That in itself may not have been remarkable at the time, when martyrdom was the fate of all too many. But what made Servetus more deserving of our recognition than some was this: that while, in the end, he was prepared to die for his faith, he was not prepared to kill for it. He thought it, "a serious matter" to kill someone simply because of their religious beliefs and opinions.

While he was almost too ready (for his own good!) to lock horns in theological debate and argument, and even though he could be very acerbic (to put it mildly!) in the expression of his views, he did not propose burning his opponents at the stake. They, whether Catholic or Protestant, took a less charitable view of him. The story of his arrest, imprisonment, trial and execution illustrates all too well the bigotry, fanaticism and intolerance of the times. But Michael Servetus's fate became something of a *cause celebre* and was a watershed in attitudes to religious toleration.

His exceptionally cruel death at the stake in Geneva was not wholly down to John Calvin, although he certainly cannot escape the blame for it either. It was the civil authorities who tried and executed Servetus, and his prosecution, at least, had the support of the other Protestant cities in Switzerland. Only one voice had been raised in his defence, that of the Dutch Anabaptist, David Joris, then resident in Basel. In a letter to the Council of Geneva, Joris had written:

*"...if...Servetus is a heretic or a sectary before God...we should inflict on him no harm in any of his members, but 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... Condemn no man that ye be not condemned. Shed no blood and do no violence, my dear Lords."* (Hillar & Allen, 'Michael Servetus', p. 174)

Although this appeal was in vain, opinion later began to swing against Calvin. In his own nauseatingly self-justifying account of the affair, published the following year, Calvin tried to shift the blame on to Servetus. He presented himself as the voice of sweet reason whose "good and saintly admonishing" had been thrown back in his face by Servetus, who Calvin portrays as an obstinate and deranged fanatic. (*'Defensio orthodoxae fidei'*, Hillar & Allen, 'Michael Servetus', p. 183)

But Calvin's record was not so easily whitewashed. The affair was raising serious doubts in some people's minds, not only about him but about the whole nature and tenor of religious debate. Seeds were being planted that, in time, would see the growth of more tolerant and humane attitudes as Europe moved slowly from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century's religious wars and persecution into the Enlightenment and the recognition of human rights. These rights would include freedom of expression, liberty of conscience, and freedom of religious belief and practice.

Among those in Geneva at the time of Servetus's death was the Italian Reformer, Laelius Socinus, the uncle of Faustus Socinus. Laelius was no supporter of Servetus's theology but

he did disagree with the treatment meted out to him. He claimed to have, "...expressed regret at the hasty execution of Servetus", whilst in Geneva, and declared that, "...because I reject his depraved teaching I should have preferred to see him freed from it than to see it burned in him." (Hillar & Allen, 'Michael Servetus', p.189)

Other Italians with anti-Trinitarian ideas also protested, including the Sicilian poet, Camillo Renato, who wrote to Calvin in 1554:

*"Your cruelty, Calvin, is not worthy of ferocious beasts. Don't you realise that the error subsists and spreads when one exterminates a heretic? Neither God nor his spirit have counselled such an action."* (Hillar & Allen, 'Michael Servetus', pp. 189-90)

But the most influential protest about Servetus's death, and the first to present a coherent argument for the principle of religious toleration was that of Sebastian Castellio, a Frenchman who had himself been forced to flee Calvin's Geneva and take refuge in Basel. Castellio didn't share Servetus's beliefs but he was horrified at what had happened to him. His response was to write a book, 'Contra libellum Calvini'. Although written in 1554, it circulated only in manuscript for many years, for fear of Calvin and his supporters. It was finally published in the Netherlands in 1612 as part of the liberal Arminian struggle against 'orthodox' Calvinism.

In this book, Castellio condemns Calvin for his treatment of Servetus and makes the celebrated case religious for religious toleration that begins:

*"To kill a man is not to protect a doctrine, but it is to kill a man. When the Genevans killed Servetus, they did not defend a doctrine, they killed a man."* (Hillar & Allen, 'Michael Servetus', p. 219)

In time, Calvin's own successors in the mainstream Reformed Protestant tradition came to regard the death of Servetus as a stain on the record and reputation of John Calvin. On the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Servetus's martyrdom, the Reformed Church erected a monument in Geneva overlooking the site of his execution. They put this inscription on the memorial:

*"Respectful and grateful sons of Calvin, our great Reformer, but condemning an error which was made in his time, and being firmly committed to liberty of conscience according to the true principles of the Reformation and of the Gospel, we have raised this expiatory monument."*

It is dated 27<sup>th</sup> October 1903. When, exactly a hundred years later, representatives of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists gathered at the monument to hold a service in memory of Michael Servetus, we were joined by senior members of the Protestant Church in Geneva. Together, we remembered him in an act of reconciliation and goodwill.

In celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Michael Servetus, we should indeed remember his contribution to theology and to medicine, but maybe it is what his story teaches us about courage, toleration and the struggle to win the rights of conscience that mean most to us. That lesson is not just of historical interest, it speaks to our world today. There is still a need to remember this martyr for our faith tradition, and to repeat the words of Castellio about his death, "To kill a man is not to protect a doctrine, but it is to kill a man."

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<p><b>NOTE:</b> This worship pack is also available on the GA web site together with additional resources on Michael Servetus. <a href="http://www.unitarian.org.uk">www.unitarian.org.uk</a></p>
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