

Five Talks

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The 500th Anniversary
of the
European Reformation

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Talk One: Setting the Scene

Certain dates come to be seen as having symbolic significance. Not only are they the occasion of important events those events seem to represent something important and bigger than the event itself. The recent Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump, for example, are widely being seen as marking a significant change in attitudes in their respective countries.

On October 31, 1517 in Wittenberg, a relatively obscure town in Germany, a monk who lectured in the University 'nailed' 95 theses in Latin to the Church door inviting people to debate them with him. At least, this is how the story came to be told. Scholars, in fact, are not sure whether he nailed them, posted them, or just had them printed. In whatever way the monk issued them, they were to have seismic consequences.

The monk was Martin Luther. The theses themselves were in many ways innocuous. The cause of them was a Papal Fundraising Scheme. The Pope wanted to build a magnificent Cathedral in Rome. To pay for it, he issued indulgences, which were sold throughout Europe. These indulgences granted the purchaser the power to get a loved one out of purgatory. They were, understandably, very popular.

Luther, however, was opposed to them and his theses challenged their sale. His protest went viral as one would say today. And it was not long before the argument became about much more than 'indulgences'. Implicit in his opposition was a challenge to the authority of the Pope. Western Christianity, which had been united around the authority of the Pope, disintegrated and the Church became extremely fragmented. Many more joined the protest and it spread to other countries. The word 'protestant' came into being.

However, while the Protestants could agree on what they were against, they found it much harder to agree on what they were for. And rather than there being one protestant Church, many different

Churches came into existence sometimes hating each other as much as they hated the Church of Rome.

In England, things were even more complicated. Initially, the King, Henry VIII, opposed the protestant movement earning himself the title of Defender of the Faith, that is, the Roman Catholic version of the faith. However, Henry then decided he wanted a divorce and the Pope for political rather than religious reasons refused. Thus setting in motion the English Reformation and the creation of the Church of England and eventually the world-wide Anglican Church, the Church to which I belong here in Hong Kong. I find it highly ironic that I am only here in Hong Kong today because the King of England wanted to marry his mistress!

I realize that this is a very general and all too simple summary of what by any account was anything but simple. But I think it is accurate enough. What is beyond dispute is that as a result of the Protestant Reformation division between Christians became the norm and the different Christian protestant groups formed their own denominations: Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, and so on. Having got a taste for division there was to be no stopping Christians and since the Reformation many different denominations have come into existence.

I dwell on this today because this year is the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Many events are being organized to commemorate it. We are certainly going to hear a lot more about it in the weeks and months ahead. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed to his Father that those who were to believe in him after his death would be one even as he and the Father were one. People continue to believe in Jesus and the Church is still here, but it remains deeply divided and fragmented.

The reality is that structural unity between Christians is not going to happen any time soon, although, ironically, some of the closest friendships I personally have are with people from different denominations to myself. Maybe, however, reflecting on the Reformation in this anniversary year may help us as Christians to

overcome our divisions and begin to answer Jesus' dying wish and prayer.

Talk Two: Grace

This year is the 500th anniversary of the European Reformation. On October 31, 1517, a monk in Germany by the name of Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the local church calling for an academic debate on them. At least, that is how the story came to be told.

What is clear is that Luther's challenge to the system of indulgences went 'viral'. Luther challenged the idea that the Pope had the authority or ability to release people from 'purgatory'. This meant that buying bits of paper to get friends and relatives released early was a complete waste of time and money. Ultimately, the Reformation wasn't about abstract theological ideas: it was about authority.

But behind the challenge to authority were theological ideas and, in the coming years, Luther was to spell them out. These ideas, at least as far as Luther was concerned, were anything but abstract. They came from intense personal experience.

Luther had been destined to become a lawyer. This was what his father had planned for him. Then one day, on a journey, he was caught in a storm and feared for his life. He promised St Anne that if she were to save him, he would become a monk. He did live and he honoured his promise.

Being a monk, however, did not make him happy. He took the whole business seriously – some, including his confessor, thought too seriously. He wanted to please God, but never felt good enough or that he could do enough to please God. When he came across the phrase the 'righteousness of God', it only served to remind him of how unrighteous he was.

Then while preparing lectures on St Paul's Letter to the Romans, he came to see that the righteousness of God wasn't about condemning sinners, but offering them the opportunity to be forgiven for their sins freely, without having to do anything except have faith and trust in Christ. In other words, he discovered the grace of God: while God might be angry with our sin, in Christ he loved us freely and undeservedly. The discovery changed his life and was to change Europe and the world. It wasn't, though, simply Luther's discovery of grace, that is God's undeserved love for us, that was to make the difference, but the conclusions Luther drew from it.

There was, he concluded, no need then for pilgrimages, confessions, religious acts and devotions, good works, penances and all the other things that were part of medieval religion and which he saw as being done to earn God's love and forgiveness.

It is a message that others were to take up. Whatever we may think of the conclusions Luther drew from it, the message of God's grace has itself brought freedom and liberation to many. It is celebrated in many of the hymns we love and sing. Take, for example, the great hymn by the former slave-trader, John Newton: 'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.'

Nowadays there is no argument over it. What may have once been a source of division between Catholics and Protestants is so no longer. If you were, for example, to put a Catholic, Lutheran, and an Anglican in a room together and get them to discuss the grace of God, there would be little disagreement between them when it came to the big picture. Yes, there are differences about how we respond to the grace of God and what role the human will has to play in our experience of God's grace, but the differences are present as much within the different Churches as they are between them.

I have to admit to having problems with the idea of celebrating something that has resulted in so much pain and which has been a cause of such division between Christians. I have, however, no

problem with celebrating some of the ideas that came out of the Reformation, particularly those that we can celebrate together.

Many of us live broken and difficult lives. It seems that nothing we do can put us back together again and help us to overcome the difficulties we constantly experience. However, as Luther discovered, God doesn't expect us to do anything: he has already done it for us. What we are offered in Christ is the love of God. The Bible tells us that God doesn't just give us this love, he lavishes it on us. Discovering it has the potential to change all our lives.

Talk Three: Justification by Faith, Judgement by Works

For the past few weeks at this time, I have been thinking about the European Reformation, the 500th anniversary of which is this year. I discussed last week how some issues that divided the Church 500 years ago are ones that we have now come much closer to one another over. All Christians would celebrate the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ, and we would all celebrate it, not as something to which we are entitled, but something we receive as a gift from God. St Paul said that is by 'grace that we are saved through faith'. This is known as the doctrine of justification by faith. In popular imagination, this is a doctrine that, as a result of the Reformation, divides Christians with some thinking that we are justified by what we do rather than simply by faith in what God has done for us.

Whatever was true 500 years ago, it is simply not true today. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses it in paragraph 1996:

'Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.'

Indeed, I would argue that a radical version of justification by faith is the present message of all the Churches. What we preach is that Jesus

is an inclusive, welcoming, forgiving, and accepting Saviour. It doesn't matter who you are, where you have come from, or what you have done, Jesus loves, welcomes and accepts you – just as you are. In some versions of the message, we even drop the whole 'Saviour forgiving sins' bit. After all, Jesus is not the sort of person to condemn us for what we have done: after all, who is to say what is right or wrong?

Now I don't want to spoil the party, and I like the idea that I don't have to worry about what I have done as much as anyone. And clearly, as Luther discovered, the New Testament does tell us that God forgives us our sins and that it is all about his grace made available to us freely through faith.

Luther discovered the doctrine of justification by faith while studying St Paul's Letter to the Romans. The problem, however, is that while Romans undoubtedly teaches justification by faith, it also teaches judgment by works. In Romans, God is a God who gets angry with sin and while he forgives those who turn to him by faith in Christ, he punishes those who do not. And on the day of judgement he suggests it will be our works and not our faith that God will judge. He writes, for example, 'For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life ...' (Romans 2: 6-10)

It is perhaps not surprising then that these verses and others like them in Romans cause huge problems for those seeking to write commentaries on the letter. We know that human works do not count. The trouble is that there are many passages both in Romans in the New Testament where it seems that they do.

This is a message we prefer nowadays to ignore or to see as a minor part of the New Testament. However, the idea that we will all be judged according to our works, on how we have lived our lives, is central, not peripheral, to our Lord's teaching while he was on earth. The Reformation message of justification by faith challenged the Church in its day. But the Gospel challenges us in new ways in each

generation and we commemorate the Reformation best by listening anew to what the Gospel has to say to us. Perhaps we need to hear the message of judgement by works in the way that the Church 500 years ago needed to hear the message of justification by faith! The truth, of course, is that we need to hold together justification by faith and judgement by works. It's easy to see why we prefer one to the other, but that doesn't make it right.

One of my favourite TV programmes is the BBC programme, Dr Who. One of the sayings of the Doctor is: 'We are all stories in the end. Just make it a good one'. It's not how Jesus puts it, but I don't think he would disagree with it. All good stories have ups and downs, high and low points, happy and sad moments. The doctrine of justification by faith reassures us when we mess up, make mistakes and get it wrong that it is not about us, but about the Lord we have faith and trust in. It reassures us that we won't be judged on the individual chapters and that the story isn't over until it is over.

This is why one of my favourite prayers is one that comes from the Anglican funeral service:

'Lord, give us grace to use aright the time that is left to us here on earth. Lead us to repent of our sins, the evil we have done and the good we have not done; and strengthen us to follow the steps of your Son, in the way that leads to the fullness of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

Talk Four: Unity

My own Church is on Waterloo Road in Kowloon. If you walk down Waterloo Road, you will see church after church all belonging to different denominations and mostly not talking to each other in any meaningful way. For the past few weeks at this time, I have been talking about the Reformation, the 500th anniversary of which is this year. What began as a movement calling for the reform of the Church ended up dividing it. Some regretted this, but saw it as necessary,

many had no regrets and even seemed to relish it. One of the arguments used to justify division, and which you still hear people using today, is that truth must always come before unity.

The Church at Corinth had been founded by St Paul. Many had been converted and the Church was lively and successful. It attracted some of the celebrities of the early Church, people like Apollos and the Apostle Peter, and others not so familiar to us today.

The Corinthians seem to have been very pleased with themselves and started discussing which of the various Christian leaders they preferred. Some argued for St Paul, others for Peter, others for Apollos, and they were beginning to form into groups depending which they preferred.

St Paul was horrified not because some preferred other leaders to himself, but that they were prepared to divide the Church. 'Is Christ divided?' he asked. 'Did St Paul die for you?' He goes on to tell them that they are the Church, the body of Christ. They're God's temple. And says St Paul, 'anyone who destroys God's temple, God will destroy.'

So what would St Paul have said about the Reformation? Some argue that St Paul himself was prepared to cause division for the sake of the truth. They point to Galatians and how St Paul reacted to people he believed to be preaching a false Gospel. He even openly and publicly challenged St Peter when he believed Peter to be in the wrong.

Of course, they argue, St Paul would have supported Luther, and others like him, who stood as he did for the truth of the Gospel. Personally, I am not so sure, or rather I think he would have agreed with many of the things the reformers said, whether he would have been prepared to welcome the division of the Church, I am not so sure.

The reality is we just do not know. What we do know is that Paul thought the Church should be united and do what it could to avoid

disunity. So, when writing to Rome and knowing that there were different groups within the Church each taking a different position on a variety of issues, he tells them to accept one another and to live with the differences. Unity, in other words, does not mean uniformity. We can have diversity without disunity and division.

The reality is that many of our divisions are not over key doctrines of the Christian faith, but over matters where it is of little real consequence. This is especially true within individual Churches.

Frankly, I hold out very little hope of the Church reuniting. When it comes, therefore, to the different denominations, my own approach is to be 'denomination lite'. I do not think that the Anglican Church is the one true Church. I do think that there are many good even outstanding Christians within other Churches.

So being denomination lite means rather than working to keep my denomination apart from other denominations, I try, where and when I can, to work with Christians of other Churches without letting denominational backgrounds get in the way. Furthermore, while we may not be in a position to bring about denominational unity, we certainly are in a position to affect unity within our own individual Churches. And this is something all Christians are called to work for.

As I have said, Christians sometimes say that the truth of the Gospel must come before unity. But unity is not a consequence of the Gospel message, it is at the centre of the Gospel's message. St Paul writes that God has made known his will for the fullness of time which is to 'unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.'

Unity in the first place is between each one of us and God, but, as the New Testament makes clear, our union with God in Christ should result in peace and unity between God's people. The best way to commemorate and even celebrate the Reformation this year is for Christians to commit themselves to the Gospel message of unity in Christ and then sharing it with a divided world.

Talk Five: Authority

The popular image of Martin Luther is that of a monk singlehandedly taking on the might of an authoritarian and, in Protestant mythology, totally corrupt medieval Church. Two famous stories play into this narrative. The first is of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses, protesting at the sale of indulgences, to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. The second is of an event in April 1521. Luther had been invited to appear before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms ('diet' meaning a formal meeting; Worms being a city south of Frankfurt). Luther was asked to recant his views. His response was:

'Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason - for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves - I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand I can do no other. God help me. Amen.'

The phrase, 'Here I stand I can do no other' is often taken to symbolize Luther's brave and defiant position against overwhelming odds, in the way that his nailing of the 95 theses symbolizes the inauguration of the Reformation. Ironically, Luther probably did not nail his theses to the church door and he also probably did not say, 'Here I stand I can do no other.' Nevertheless, these two apocryphal stories express what many want to be true: the protestant Reformation succeeding because one brave man dare to put the authority of the Word of God and his conscience before the authority of the Pope and tradition.

However, things are not quite so simple. Luther was not alone: others in the Church were also calling for reform, and Luther's theological position was articulated against a background of social and intellectual change in Europe with the so-called discovery of the new

world, scientific advances, and technological innovation such as the invention of the printing press. This particular invention was going to have as big an impact on society in the sixteenth century as computers have had in our own.

It is, however, certainly true that Luther was to give shape and direction to the Reformation and that without him it would have, undoubtedly, been very different. Whether this was a good or bad thing, I will let others judge, but perhaps one of the most significant consequences of Luther's protest was the way it changed how authority came to be viewed.

No more was the Bible to be interpreted by the Church, now every man and (eventually woman) was to be their own Pope, interpreting the Bible for themselves according to their own conscience. It took some time for the consequences fully to work themselves out and, paradoxically, Luther himself did not approve of anyone who didn't interpret the Bible the way he did, which resulted in serious division amongst the protesters.

It wasn't though to take so long before interpreting the Bible according to one's own conscience turned into rejecting the Bible according to one's own conscience. The triumph of the Reformation ironically has been the triumph of the individual. This is why Luther has been a hero to many who do not in any way share his faith.

This is not for one moment to reject the many achievements and insights of the Reformation. It is, though, to ask as we commemorate its 500th anniversary whether we need a new Reformation in the Churches that will undo some of the unforeseen and unintended consequences of the first.

We are where we are. The problems facing the Church and world are not what they were 500 years ago. The godless secularism and arrogant individualism of much of the developed world, for which all Churches must take their share of the blame, has resulted in a darkness every bit as real as that as was thought to exist at the time of

Reformation. Despair, emptiness, loneliness, and hopelessness affect so many in our society so much so that even our young people are turning to suicide as the only way out.

What people need, quite simply, is God and the Church needs to move together beyond the divisions of the past and humbly, but, confidently, announce the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Last year on the occasion of the 499th anniversary of the Reformation, Pope Francis spoke the following words in the Lutheran Cathedral in Lund, Sweden:

'As Lutherans and Catholics, we pray together in this Cathedral, conscious that without God we can do nothing. We ask his help, so that we can be living members, abiding in him, ever in need of his grace, so that together we may bring his word to the world, which so greatly needs his tender love and mercy.'