

Do we need another Reformation?

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Romans 3:19-28 ESV)

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-36 ESV)

We approach another Reformation observance with the same sense, I suspect, of the cricketer at 98 runs – just a little a more and then the champagne corks can pop! Of course, we'd all like to be at 98 runs, that's impressive, but a big moment is coming and so this moment is a little muted in its shadow. My analogy doesn't fully hold for the 498th anniversary of the posting of the 95 Theses by Martin Luther in Wittenberg for it is more a matter of time passing rather than run getting that is happening. Nevertheless the two main players – the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church – haven't been idle over these past centuries – and that's not to mention all the other players – the other church bodies – who have come onto the field.

The world is very different now to how it was in those first decades of the 16th century. I could talk about the politics of the time – Empires and provinces and the divine right of kings as opposed to nation states and liberal democracy – I could mention food and clothing, medicine and technology – communications in particular, or the ascent of science, or industrialisation in both industry and warfare – but for this moment I think the biggest difference between then and now was in the world view people of life and reality – in that for people of Europe (including the British Isles) they all accepted the same big picture of earth, heaven, and hell – the church and priests and obedience to them and to God. Today, we not only have a proliferation of cultures and languages but more significantly a variety of world views about reality, morality, and cosmology.

Luther's theses were a call to reform the church not to lead into separate church groups. Today separate church groups – and I might add in all religions – is par for the course. In Christianity, I think it has really only been since Vatican II – the Roman Catholic Council in the 1960s – that there has been much movement or dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church – prior to that both sides – Protestants and Catholics – viewed each other along a spectrum from enemies through to separated brethren. Today there are probably about 1.2 billion Roman Catholics and maybe 75-80 million Lutherans in the world – the Roman Catholic Church is still a single voiced entity – while Lutheran groups are found all over the world – clumped together in two international bodies – the Lutheran World Federation and the International Lutheran Council. Both talk with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. But the international scene doesn't always speak for the national or local scenes – for both Lutherans and Roman Catholics have either rejected or criticised the then much publicised 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. This declaration was just one product of decades of talking – just as these booklets¹ from

¹ Sacrament and Sacrifice (1985), Pastor and Priest (1989), Communion and Mission (1995), Justification (1998), and Ministry and Oversight (2007)

Australia show the dialogue that has happened between the Roman Catholics in Australia and the Lutheran Church of Australia – where there is agreement and where there are still issues to work on. Yes, this ecclesial and religious landscape is very different to 1517 in Europe.

But there are still differences for what the Reformation did do was to conduct a forensic – almost genetic – analysis not of persons or of organisations but of words – God’s words to us through the Bible and our words in reply – our believing words, our teaching words, our defending words, our singing words, the words we turn to for strength and for comfort, the words we want to hear as final words. Lutherans would come to describe them as Law and Gospel – messages from God that declare our rebellion and the consequences and God’s standards for behaviour and also what God has done about our rebellion since all of us are not righteous – that he has declared us righteous not magically or because he changed his mind about sin but because of Jesus’ perfect sacrifice for us – for our atonement where Jesus is one with us in our sins and the punishment we deserve so that we can have his righteousness. This declaration by God because of Jesus – this justification – remember they’re just all words – even when surrounded with water or given with bread and wine – are received by faith – that trust in the words, the promises of God. That’s why we hear Paul in his letter to the Roman congregation – his theological introduction to them for he wanted them to support him when he went to do mission work westwards in Spain – and this letter provides so much Christian teaching outlining the centrality of God’s action in Jesus and this justification by grace through faith – which is why we hear it today. When the world had only one world view and the words even in the name of Jesus point to ourselves – individually or organisationally – then God is not active but we are – justifying ourselves while condemning others – and the Reformation event brought people essentially to the cross – which was always there! – and rather than saying, ‘Look what you did, now try harder so you can be saved’ instead said ‘For you – he did it for you’ – and that what we, by nature, interpret as God’s commands to be holy, to be righteous, to be merciful are first rather his gifts to us of holiness (baptism), righteousness (absolution), and mercy (holy communion)!

The rapprochement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans is a good thing – there is a lot of agreement after all – think baptism just for starters and the person of God as Trinity – but the divisions are still there only more subtle and it is still fundamentally about this action of God’s justification of sinners. For Roman Catholics the idea of simul justus et peccator – that we are both saint and sinner in this world – challenges, to their ears, God’s actions for if he has made us righteous, then we are righteous and are to live this way and it is the lifestyle, the deeds, the action that then gives support of one’s righteousness when trials come for a Christian sins but is not a sinner. For Lutheran ears, this is still leaving the comfort and guarantee of salvation with us and not with Jesus and his cross and so we maintain the tension that we are both Christian and sinner at the same time – this actually squares with our experience of living – and we don’t look within ourselves for comfort or for the experience of God’s presence but keep going outside of ourselves to words, water, bread and wine to hear them, receive them, and grow in them – even as we are the last to see any growth in us. These words hold us and we in turn cling to them.

There have been lots of words said for the last 498 years about the Reformation and for nearly 450 of those years a lot of the words between Lutherans and Roman Catholics have been dispute and vitriol. It is interesting that in 2017 both Lutherans and Roman Catholics are planning to commemorate the event and there is a document produced in 2013 from the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity called ‘From Conflict to Communion’ – which is acknowledging that for centuries we had condemned each other but we can be challenged by ‘Luther’s reforming agenda’ to learn to speak together. I think that is a task and challenge for all Christians and it returns us to our daily lives and the words we surround ourselves with – the words we cling to that define us – that get us up in the morning – that give us hope no matter what the world is doing to us. And so we read the Bible and listen for Jesus and his unconditional and free gift of forgiveness and life with him. These words from outside of us – guaranteed by a cross and empty tomb – free us from this world’s words and our own excuses and self justifications – not to continue to sin but instead to take up our cross and follow Jesus into every relationship, circumstance, situation and moment we have.

We don’t need another Reformation. We just need to live this one! And it always starts by receiving God’s gifts which come in the person of Jesus. He, not Martin or anyone else, is the one we want to hear.