

Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-28

John 17:20-26

'O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts. Amen.'

First I would like to thank the churches who are here today for the invitation to speak, and the Dean for kindly agreeing to that. Thank you, Mr Dean.

The gift that came through Martin Luther was first a moment of hope, then of controversy, then of politics and finally of war. Yet in the providence and grace of God it brought afresh to every Christian disciple the possibility of saying, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation."

Through the Reformation we learned that we are saved entirely, confidently and unfailingly by grace alone, through faith, and not by our own works. From the poorest to the richest all will come at the end to stand before God, only with the words of the hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling."

Through the Reformation the church found itself again confronted with its need to be weak and powerless; to come with nothing to the Cross and to admit that, in the words of the Collect in the Book of Common Prayer for the 19th Sunday after Trinity, "without thee we are not able to please thee".

Through the Reformation the church found again a love for the scriptures, and seizing the opportunity of printing, gave them afresh to the world – telling every person that they themselves should read them and seek the wisdom of God to understand them. In doing so the church released not only reformation but revolution, as confidence grew amongst the poor and oppressed that they too were the recipients of the promise of God of freedom and hope.

Through the Reformation the vast mass of people across Europe and then around the world were drawn to receive the fruits of a missionary movement that did not indefinitely suffer tyranny, and that would not unquestioningly bow the knee to authorities and hierarchies.

Through the Reformation the world changed; the gospel spread; counter-reformation renewed the places that the reformation had not reached; there was a competitive drive in missionary endeavour. What is not to celebrate?

Well, said Eeyore to Tigger, or the historian to the enthusiast. For each of the things that came through the Reformation – good as they are, precious beyond compare even – for each there is also a dark side.

With new vigour came conflict.

With individual understanding of grace came individualism and division.

With the knowledge that “without thee we are not able to please thee” came, through our sin and weakness, what so often we add under our breath: “But actually, I’m a lot more able to please thee than those heretics over there.”

With literacy and freedom came new ways of cruelty refined by science.

With missionaries bearing the faith came soldiers bearing the flag.

We could go on batting the ball to and fro, as historians and theologians have done for centuries. The point is that the Reformation reopened to the whole church eternal truths that are indispensable, and to which we must all continue to hold, and not only to hold but to present afresh addressing the life of today.

In this very pulpit in November 2015, at the opening service for the General Synod of the Church of England, the preacher to the Papal household, Fr de Cantalamessa, said:

“Justification by faith, for example, ought to be preached by the whole Church – and with more vigour than ever. Not in opposition to good works – the issue is already settled – but rather in opposition to the claim of people today that they can save themselves thanks to their science, technology or their man-made spirituality, without the need for a redeemer coming from outside humanity. Self-justification! I am convinced that if they were alive today this is the way Martin Luther and Thomas Cranmer would preach justification through faith!”

De Cantalamessa was wisely not making points about the rights and wrongs of the Reformation, which is the temptation at times like this. His key point is that in every age the church lives its experience of the current work of God in a historical context. We live amidst political pressures, diverted by the heat of argument and the ferocity of sinful power-seeking and gathering. That was true 500 years ago as the 95 Theses spread across Europe – as did Luther’s bible – at a speed impossible before printing, and feeding on the fuel of the intellectual ferment of the Renaissance.

The good news of Jesus, the gospel, so beautifully and powerfully renewed in the Reformation, is eternal. But its application, as Cantalamessa says, is different at different times. The gospel always speaks to the needs of our times; it is always the word of God. It always speaks prophetically to human pride and sinfulness, of Popes and Archbishops and emperors in the 16th century. Today the gospel speaks to the inequalities of a 21st century world of inequality: of refugees and human trafficking; human arrogance and materialism; in the use of technology as a saviour, rather than as a gift. Our speaking and living of the gospel must, like Martin Luther, be speaking to our world as it is.

The gospel always says that we can add nothing to the work of Christ, and that in Christ God has spoken definitively. That the scriptures witness reliably to the word God has spoken, and that when liberated and trusted they bring human flourishing. At the same time our witness is impeded by our divisions – especially as we live in a world of ever-present competing philosophies, faiths, and approaches to faith or rejections of faith.

So what's the problem? The problem, as in every age, is us.

In John 17 Jesus prays for unity among the people of God so that the world may know he came from the Father. The gospel is not an idea: it is life, love and transformation – and if the bearers of good news are not transformed into a united and loving life, then they will be unable to convince anyone else that what they say is true. Luther set the gospel free, and as human beings we seek continually to imprison it behind ritual and authority – or to make it serve politics or causes. When we seek to use the gospel for our own ends, rather than to proclaim it as the word of God, then the gospel is not preached and the church divides.

We are called to be united. In our cultures the realities of difference of self-identity formation, of politics, of language, of our history as both oppressors and oppressed, all drive us, today, into self-reinforcing bubbles of mutual indignation and antagonism. Unity is a witness that, through grace received by faith alone, the cosmos has truly changed, because Jesus came from the Father, and because all has changed that we may as human beings find unity and purpose.

The Reformation was a gift of God, not only in itself but as a sign of the faithfulness of God to His work of revealing the good news of Jesus to a world in need, and the faithfulness of God in using His church despite our failings.

What do we do with the gift today? Will we be willing ourselves to be reformed again and always, setting aside our differences because we are caught up in the grace that is found through faith?

Will we find from God alone the strength and grace to be a united blessing to His world, so that our witness of unity in diversity overcomes our fears of each other?

Will we seize afresh in confidence the hope that God who never abandons His church will again reform us, so that the world may see that Jesus came from the Father?

It is already happening in so many ways, and so much has been accomplished. But we have not yet allowed ourselves sufficiently to be captured by the radicality of the gospel that we may bless the world as we should. As we surrender to the God who rescues us sinners, we will most surely find our vocation as the messengers of good news to the world.

“O GOD, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.”

Amen.

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