

The Chaplain writes...*about Martin Luther*

It would be very difficult to escape noticing that we are in the midst of commemorating the 500th anniversary of what is generally referred to as the beginning of the Reformation. Whether that is strictly true, is another matter because reformation should always be a part of the life of the Church (as Luther would have agreed) and although parts of the Church that Luther addressed 500 years ago were desperately corrupt and in need of serious reform, others were not. Some of the religious orders, for example, had repeatedly taken steps to purge, to reform and to renew their lives. A process which continues to the present day.

I find it hard to know how to describe this year's anniversary other than with the word *commemoration*. And Christian leaders on all sides of the divide agree that *celebration* is most definitely *not* the right term to use. How can one *celebrate* the beginning of the splitting of the Western Church? It is quite impossible to see God's will or purpose in the splitting up of Christians in this way. We know that one of the last prayers recorded on the lips of Jesus before his crucifixion was for the unity of his people – *Father, may they be one – one as you and I are one*. In the face of this prayer, it is sacrilegious to think of *celebrating* a Reformation which left the Church split – first in two and now in many fragments.

Of course the rot had set in earlier. In 1054 came the Great Schism between Western and Eastern Christians. The reasons for this were also complex, but *power* certainly came into the equation, and maybe that is *always* at the root of what divides Christian people. Luther, an absolute *giant* of a theologian, invested Holy Scripture with a *power* that it cannot contain. Luther's foundational principle was the sufficiency of God's Word in Scripture as the sole standard for Christian life and salvation. But Holy Scripture is only sacred because, as Rowan Williams has recently written, it needs to be read again and again, it needs to be 'translated' into today's terms, through a robust and thorough understanding of its origins. There is an *impossibility* of reading any part of Holy Scripture for the last time or in a definitive interpretation, but rather we are to discover as we read and re-read the intention of God to communicate to us and with

us. A means by which we hear God's invitation to us to discover new life through the way declared in Jesus. As such, this means that the primary place where scripture is to be *heard* is in the celebration of the Eucharist, where the invitation is first heard through scripture and made real as we sit with Jesus around his table of transformation into the life we are invited to share. Sadly, the Reformers frequently destroyed this link.

So yes, holy scripture has a power, an *authority* which must be recognised. But it has that authority only within a particular context. One from which Luther's *followers* rapidly removed Holy Scripture, placing it within a realm ultimately of individual interpretation. Only a few years after Luther's 95 theses, even in Wittenberg people were disagreeing with Luther about what the Bible meant and how it should be applied. Luther's watchword of *sola scriptura* had unwittingly unleashed an atomistic force rather than a reforming power. The cohesive power of shared religious belief had been destroyed, arguably for centuries. Christian solidarity had been replaced by Christian disagreement and discord, and sister and brothers rapidly became archenemies.

Power is a very dangerous thing! In the wrong place or wrong hands it is a devastating force. But the problem of power was not one-sided. Clearly the Catholic Church was in need of reform in 1517 just as at all times. There is never a 'pure' Church, and we should be extremely suspicious of any claims along these lines from any part of the whole body. We know that the religious orders were frequently in the forefront of moves of reform, even though equally they could find themselves immersed in the mire.

So what is Luther's legacy, five hundred years on from his 95 theses-protest to the Archbishop of Mainz? It is, I believe, true to say that if he were to return today, Luther would find many of his reforms have been adopted by the Catholic Church. Although the Council of Trent which followed on rapidly after the Protestant Reformation was in many ways a reactionary response, it did attempt to bring renewal in its own way, a measure of reform and a deepened understanding of Christian truth. Though it was not until the Second Vatican Council that a dialogue between Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Church was re-established, and 453 years after

Luther's death, in 1999, the joint Catholic-Lutheran talks produced an agreed statement on the Doctrine of Justification, laying to rest at last an old controversy – hopefully for ever, since both sides having at the time condemned each other have now discovered agreement that God's grace makes us righteous, and that such grace comes through faith in Christ.

The power, or *authority*, of Holy Scripture, however, remains for all Christians a continuing controversy, though it is not beyond our abilities to address it. We know that before Luther's day, there were strong movements to enable the reading of the sacred texts in the vernacular tongue. We know that Holy Scripture has a real power, an *authority* by the power of the Holy Spirit, to make Christ's words contemporary, to utter God's invitation to humanity again and again. As such, the Bible has great *power* but it is one that needs to be approached with prayerful diligence, reverence and care. In the wrong hands, the Bible – or any other holy book – can become a destructive and divisive weapon.

So as we commemorate 500 years since Luther's decisive action, how should we approach this anniversary? Another very recent Catholic-Lutheran Joint Statement reminds its readers that *what happened in the past cannot be changed, but what is remembered of the past and how it is remembered can, with the passage of time, indeed change. Remembrance makes the past present. While the past itself is unalterable, the presence of the past in the present is alterable. In view of 2017, the point is not to tell a different history, but to tell that history differently.*

This is the first centennial celebration to be held in the 'Ecumenical Era', since in 1917, the First World War was raging and the commemorations focussed on Luther as a great German hero. What might our focus today then be?

First, to *rejoice* – not in divisions, but in the Gospel of Christ which transcends our differences, and in which at last and with God's patience, we are finding healing.

Second, to *remember* – yes, what actually happened, but to tell that history *differently*. For with the benefit of 500 years in between, we

can see stubbornness, hurt, pain, and misunderstanding. Remembering all that should help us deal with some of the difficulties that we sometimes feel are insuperable today as we ask ourselves how they might look in 500 years from now!

Third, to be ready to *reform* – our attitudes, and our church life. The Reformation did not begin with Martin Luther – it has been an authentic aspect of Church life since the time of Jesus Christ. But it is easy to suppress the need to be *semper reformanda* – easy to become blind to our failings and inability to live the Gospel, the Good News of Christ. This anniversary should remind us of that perpetual need of *reformation*.

Fourth, to *repent*. A splintered and broken Church cannot be in accord with God's ultimate purpose and will. It is one thing to see the marks of Christ's wounds in the life of the Church, it is another to allow those wounds to fester. Although progress towards an organic Church unity has been painfully slow, when I see how far things have moved 'on the ground' as opposed to at the hierarchical levels, there is much to be thankful for. It comes about as we *all* let go of our prejudices and deliberate unwillingness to see Christ in one another.

Fifth, to work actively at *reconciliation*. It is so much easier to see differences rather than agreement. It is also easy just to walk away, rather than continue in dialogue. Of course differences matter – sometimes, alas, they *are* irreconcilable. But we don't reach that decision lightly, or without considerable effort towards mutual understanding in a spirit of love. God knows what benefits this ultimately brings.

Perhaps it is with regard to that last matter, *reconciliation*, that we discover Martin Luther's great legacy. He repeatedly refused what he described as the *theologia gloriae* – a theology of glory, by which he meant the carefully worked out theories of grace current in the Church of his day – everything neat and tidy. He argued for a *theologia crucis* – a theology of the Cross. One that was *untidy* – not afraid of paradox, and particularly the paradox that we see in the dying and rising of Jesus, the Son of God. Yet here is the very means of our reconciliation. For in Christ's

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dying and rising, the walls that separate us, however we discover them, are just blown apart.