

Reformation Day
24/10/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 51:1-8
Romans 1:16-17
John 8:31-36

The truth will set you free...

Today is Reformation Day and it is the first anniversary of our worship in this Hall, otherwise we would be looking at our Rose window with its faces of four Reformers of the church. In 2007 we began a project of preaching on each face, commencing with Alexander Henderson. Today we come to the last face in the window, which was really the first: Martin Luther, (10 November 1483 – 18 February 1543). He was an Augustinian monk and the Reformation began as a movement of sincere Catholics like Luther who wanted to reform their church. When in 1517 Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church he intended to provoke a debate, but lit a fire that burned more fiercely and spread more widely than he ever imagined.

From Luther onwards the key idea was to privilege the witness to Christ in Scripture as the guiding source of the Church's life, and on that basis to challenge anything deemed to distort the apostolic faith. The heightened place given to Scripture led some Reformers to relocate the pulpit above the altar to reduce the liturgy. The church that followed Luther elevated pulpits but it retained the liturgy and the symbolism of the Mass, which was translated into German. So long as the central ideas about faith were right Luther did not argue about secondary issues such as vestments and gestures, and was accused by some of retaining too much of "popery" [Bainton p 266]. He also introduced the reception of communion in both kinds, expanded congregational singing and translated the Bible and the Liturgy into German. And he did not remain a monk, but married and had a family.

Martin Luther's path to becoming a Reformer began in 1505. As a student he feared being struck by lightning during a storm and prayed to St Anne for help, and promised to become a monk. The terror of the experience that brought him into religious life remained significant. The church of the day traded on the fear of hell and judgement, in order to drive people to seek help in the sacraments. And for Luther himself the terror aroused by the storm was transferred to holy fear in the presence of Christ the judge, a figure so graphically depicted in the art of the time. As a monk and priest he trembled at the thought of the Bread and Wine being changed into the body and blood of Christ in his hands.

Luther's obsessive fear focussed around the sacrament of confession. He believed the only way a priest could be at ease in the presence of Christ was to have confessed all his sins. So troubled was he in conscience he sometime confessed for 6 hours per day. He ransacked his soul for every fault, and then, on returning to his room, would remember something he had not mentioned. This defeated him and wore out his superiors who, hoping he might work out his own salvation, made him a teacher of biblical studies. Luther began to wrestle with scripture. As a result of pondering at great length over the concept of justification in Paul's letter to the Romans he underwent a complete liberation from his condition. The key passage for him was Romans 1:16-17:

I am not ashamed of the gospel it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed, through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith”.

Luther referred to the “righteousness of God” as “the justice of God”. He wrote:

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but the one expression “the justice of God”. I took it to mean that justice whereby God punished the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner, troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to St Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is “God’s way of righting wrong”, through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the justice of God filled me with hate, now ...this passage from Paul became... a gate to heaven... [Bainton p 49-50]

After this Luther did not live in fear of an avenging God. He came to understand that the Justice of God stands for *what God does to bring us back into right relationship with himself through faith, despite the fact that we are sinners and fall short of God’s gifts*. This insight revolutionised his life. He became a much more cheerful soul. The emphasis on “the works of the law” or merit, that is our virtuous living and our efforts to secure a place with God, as in his confessions, was replaced by life lived as a glad response to God’s acceptance of us before we ask. On this basis discipleship no longer served as a means of self-justification but took the form of glad and willing service of a merciful and gracious God.

Luther’s experience of a plagued conscience dominated the tradition of interpretation that followed him, leading some to quip that Paul himself was really a Lutheran! This came about because in the Protestant tradition Luther’s experience was linked to the psychologising of *Romans 7:19* “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do”. However this tradition in Western Christianity arose, not with Paul but with Augustine. It passed through Luther to Bultmann and reached its secular equivalent in the work of Sigmund Freud. [Stendahl, *Final Account*: p 4]

Compared with his other letters in *Romans* Paul does not offer advice to assist with pastoral problems. And he certainly did not write on justification [1:17] to solve the stereotypical Lutheran problem of how to be sure of grace when faced with a plagued conscience. In *Romans* Paul’s uses justification as a building block in his theology of mission created to explain how his work among the Gentiles fits into God’s total mission to the world. Paul’s mission banner is: “If God is for us, who can be against us” [Romans 8:31 – 40]. Such lofty and expansive thoughts reach out to embrace the mending of creation, the redemption of Israel and the gathering in of the Gentiles, who also share in the promises of God. In *Romans* Paul is dealing with genuine Jews and Gentiles, not the Judaizing Christians of Galatia, [Stendahl, p 13] and when he refers to justification - the righteousness of God - he is intending to cut through all

pretentious self-serving schemes through which we think we have something to bring to God. The aim of doing this was to show that Jews and Gentiles stand on the same ground and become part of God's scheme of salvation for all people. The rationale comes in *Romans* 4 where Paul refers to Genesis 12 and 15, to show that Abraham believed God and was judged "righteous" *before* the giving of the Law. This demonstrated that if faith and righteousness came to Abraham *before* the giving of the law, those without the law stand on equal ground before God by faith. This is God's gift, and nothing we can do can win the love of God. We are called only to receive God's gift to us in faith. In *Romans* justification is the key Paul uses to open the way for all to have a place alongside Israel in the Messianic community.

Faith in the justification of God also means understanding that there is no end to the ways humans seek to secure their own position before God, but none of it counts for anything. We even use what God has given us against God, as Good Friday shows. Easter morning is the sign that the righteousness of God continues to work for us. We discover ourselves acquitted and brought into fellowship with God when no such thing seemed reasonable or possible.

The gift Martin Luther gave the church was to uncover this truth. A renewed understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought life and refreshment to many in his day, and has continued until now. In a world where it becomes harder and harder to recognize and name true sanctity, in Martin Luther's life fear surrendered to peace with God; merriment replaced guilt and a sour spirit, and distrust of our human nature was replaced with acceptance and respect. We can celebrate today and be glad, for in Martin Luther there was one whom the truth did indeed set free. Thanks be to God.
