

Evensong, Trinity Sunday in Luther Year
11/6/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 1:1-2.4a
Ephesians 4:1-6, 17-32

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben
The joint congregations of St Mary's and Mark the Evangelist Uniting

Martin Luther is notorious for *nailing* 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on All Saints' Eve 1517. This is the act which has given this year its universal theme. It does capture Martin's pugnacity, as does the hymn¹ we have sung, but it's fifty years since the historians showed that it never happened; in fact, Luther rather boldly sent 95 theses to his superiors, and the rest is indeed history.²

These days, he would have tweeted them; all 95 are quite brief, single sentences (with semicolons), many of them under 140 characters. So, I was interested to discover that one of the younger Uniting Church theologians, Dr Ben Myers of Sydney, has recently published 65 tweets - on the doctrine of the Trinity.³ Here's #1:

#1. Start by abolishing Trinity Sunday, that fateful day on which preachers think they have to explain the Trinity.

The Uniting Church is a curious combination. Congregationalism and Presbyterianism, the two closely-associated traditions of British Nonconformity, both derive from Calvin. Even more curiously, the third party in that fateful legislation, the 1662 Act of Uniformity, the Anglicans also shared much of Calvin. And tonight's liturgy is from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, the very book which created the non-conformity which produced Presbyterians and Congregationalists.⁴ It is a tragedy that that division remains with us in the 21st century when different choices are open to us.

So many of the theological and spiritual treasures produced in English during that chaotic period are now read with joy by all of us – well, at least by those who still read books. Lancelot Andrewes, Jeremy Taylor, John Donne, George Herbert – and Daniel Defoe, Richard Baxter, John Milton and John Bunyan. In 1662, the Church of England ejected its Puritans under the name of Nonconformity. And 'we' lost episcopacy, and a *Book of Common Prayer* and feared their recovery every since. We kept the monarch. In the 21st C, we can share the treasures, and we are able to revisit old disputes and divisions – but few

¹ *Ein Feste Burg*, (see TiS 103) words and music by Martin Luther, to a translation by Stephen Orchard of the United Reformed Church, UK.

² Dr Erwin Iserloh, professor of church history at Trier, first opened this question in 1961; it was well-known in Cambridge in the mid-1960s and generally acknowledged by scholars today. Luther wrote to his superiors on 31st October 1517, enclosing a copy of the theses. If he had hung his theses on the church door, as was the custom, they may never have been noticed; Luther ensured that his criticisms were known.

³ His blog is at <http://www.faith-theology.com/>. See 'Tweeting the trinity: because heresy is meh', posted 1st June 2017.

⁴ Its liturgies were imposed by law on all citizens: non-compliance led to fines and imprisonment. More than 2000 priests lost their livings after the Commonwealth, because they could not swear that every word of the BCP was 'conformable to the Word of God' For them, it was clear that the book was a human construct – and the Bible was not.

are willing to act with the requisite courage and vision. We have, I regret to say, a long way to go in Anglican-Uniting relationships in Australia.

Tweet #5 The doctrine is not a mystery. It is simple and precise. The reality it points to is the mystery.

John Wesley was *not* a Calvinistic Anglican. His chief theological *dispute* was with predestination, which was sad because it was not Calvin's best work. Calvin is a theologian of grace and joy. Above all, however, John Wesley owed a debt to *Luther*. Sitting with a group of German Christians in London just before Pentecost in 1738, he listened to someone reading from Luther's Preface to his commentary on Romans, probably in German. He famously wrote in his diary,

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁵

In short, Luther's great doctrine of justification by grace through faith, and all that it implied, hit him in an instant, and it brought him confidence and deep happiness. Within weeks, he had gone to what is now the Czech Republic, to sit with the original Moravian community at Herrnhut. There he experienced a kind of evangelical monasticism, for singles and families, small groups set up to promote spiritual life, hymn-singing, the love feast and a strong sense of mission. With a rekindled faith, and a good deal of Lutheran piety (which he shares with J. S. Bach), John Wesley began to create Methodism, as an Anglican society for the pursuit of holiness.

Tweet #54 The doctrine doesn't have any adequate words for talking about God. But it's a procedure for speaking faithfully and truly with inadequate words.

The battle-cry of the European Reformation was: *Justification by faith*. It runs through every nation and state in which the cry was taken up, in every language. It applies to what used to be the 'mainstream Protestant' churches of every hue, and it is there among the burgeoning new churches of Africa and Latin America, the Pentecostals and the new evangelicals.

And, perhaps most remarkably, that part of the Church which we call Roman Catholic, the other protagonist in the revolution of those centuries, is now able to say with Luther – and indeed with St Paul – Justification by faith is catholic doctrine. The Vatican set its signature

⁵ From his journal, written and published afterwards. This experience (its meaning has been much disputed) gives rise to an annual commemoration across world Methodism and in the Uniting Church (see *Uniting in Worship-2*, 2005, 121ff) called Aldersgate Day. The meeting took place in a home in Aldersgate, inside London's city walls. His 'strangely warmed' was not primarily about emotion: the journal goes on to describe coldness of heart within 24 hours, and Wesley thinks through the role of feelings: that God sometimes give, sometimes withholds them, but our faith assures us of salvation.

to a Joint Document⁶ with the Lutherans, saying so; and I presided at the liturgy in Seoul in 2006 when the World Methodist Council co-signed it.⁷

The Anglican Consultative Council, endorsed it last year in Zambia.⁸ The World Communion of Reformed Churches is meeting in Leipzig next month to do so.⁹ Each has added insights from its own tradition, enriching the doctrine for the whole church.

A little run of trinitarian tweets: an affirmation followed by three clarifications:

#31 The revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is an unveiling of the incomparable and unknowable uniqueness of the one God.

#32 The ‘oneness’ of God is not a number. It refers to God’s incomparable mystery. This is mysteriously revealed (not contradicted) by the ‘threeness’.

#33 The ‘threeness’ is not a number. It refers to the incomparable fullness of the life of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

#34 So the words ‘one’ and ‘three’ have to be abstracted away from their ordinary numerical meaning, and from any image of three things. The doctrine is not a mathematical puzzle.

The Church has made a mess of most of its doctrines. Sinful humankind continues to use doctrines as weapons of war. But I believe that that is changing, and I especially want to honour the people involved in theological dialogues, national and international, for decades of serious scholarly work, re-opening closed debates, and rediscovering the unity of the one faith in the one Lord. The problem has always been getting the results to the congregations – and indeed the actual reports would probably not help. (They need translation.) Our institutional inertia is a major obstacle. The fallacy that ‘unity means uniformity’ still sits in the pit of our stomachs. Unity in diversity is possible.¹⁰ Ecumenism is all about seeking *acceptable diversity*. Finally,

#63. Liturgical afterword: A fitting communal response is not ‘Trinity Sunday’, but the whole church year as a symbolic participation in the economy of God’s saving work as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Perhaps that’s why the *Book of Common Prayer* named the next Sundays as ‘Sundays after Trinity’.

The connection between our two themes, Luther and the reformation, and the Holy Trinity, is this: true reformation calls the church regularly back to its roots. Glance at a page of

⁶ See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html

⁷ The Methodist codicil, largely about the relationship of justification to sanctification, can be seen at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/meth-council-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20060723_text-association_en.html

⁸ See <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/anglicans-affirm-lutheran-catholic-agreement-endorse-reformation-anniversary>. See also ACC-16 Resolution 16-16 (Reformation) and 16-17 (JDDJ) at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/structures/instruments-of-communion/acc/acc-16/resolutions.aspx#s17>.

⁹ See <http://wcrch.org/jddj>. In recent years there has been a concordat between Lutherans and Reformed Churches on full communion, following differences inherited from the European Reformation. See <http://wcrch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Communion-OnBeingTheChurch.pdf>

¹⁰ See the Second Lesson, Ephesians 4:11-16.

Luther, Calvin or Wesley's writings, or any of the great Anglican divines, and you will find the fruit of their study of the theologians of the early Church. The so-called 'New Reformation' of the 1960s too often began, and continues, with the passing fashions of contemporary culture, that is, with the world. Trinity Sunday reminds us that the Creator of everything, who is Father, *and* Son *and* Holy Spirit, is thereby on a different plane than anything else we can know or imagine,¹¹ a true Mystery – before Whom there is only one response: worship. That is what our hymns and prayers today have been about – and must always be.

This sacrifice of praise is the highest of our human callings, and from that flows the work of love in the world. From our prayer in common, like tonight's, comes the gift and the fruit of Christian unity.

¹¹ Tweet #20, and the First Lesson, Genesis 1-2:4 and Ephesians 4:4-6.