

A sermon delivered at Duddington Church for the Benefice Service on Reformation Sunday 2017 by The Archdeacon Emeritus of Blackburn.

500 years ago on 31st October 1517 – the Reverend Professor Doctor Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the University church door in Wittenberg, Germany - and the shape of Europe was to be changed for ever – the Protestant Reformation had begun. It was not Luther's intention to either split the Church nor re-shape Europe. He simply wanted the Church to rediscover the simple Gospel – the Good News that Jesus Christ had originally brought.

But as Luther debated the rotten state of the Roman Catholic Church – independent Kings and Princes took advantage of the split to create their own nation states independent of the Papacy in Rome.

Luther's challenge to the Roman Catholic church led to his excommunication four years later in 1521 – after which it took another 15 years before the Church of England was born.

Luther was a humble man – and yet a brilliant scholar, philosopher, linguist (he translated the New Testament) and a Biblical Theologian. He was deeply committed to the Christian Faith as an Augustinian Monk and Prior – and as such sought the reality of God in his life and searched for Biblical Truth.

Much of today's German language – the singing of hymns in congregational worship, even the freedom of choice we have to decide for ourselves – and the use of books for ordinary people are all due in some way to what Luther began - he changed the face of society.

At that time – the Roman Catholic Church was bankrupt financially, morally and theologically.

Medieval Scholasticism had erected a religion of automatic forgiveness and salvation as long as an ordained priest said the right words over you. It was not a matter of the heart or of your personal belief – but about priestly formulas and sacramental magic.

One abuse that really stands out – was to make money to help keep the Pope and the catholic clergy in luxury, and to raise money to build St Peter's Basilica in Rome. It was the selling of indulgences.

According to catholic teaching at the time – when a person died – they would go to the waiting place of Purgatory to atone for their sins in life. Priests had been paid to say Mass for rich family members who had died, and to earn merit to release the dead from time in Purgatory (this happened in Chantry Chapels you see in Cathedrals and big churches and on the Bridge Chantry Chapels in Wakefield and Rotherham) – but to make more money the selling of indulgences was created.

The Dominican Friar Johannes Tetzel was the architect of these indulgences:

Tetzel preached that the dead in purgatory are crying out in their agony – `you can hear them` – and he said - `The dead cry – Pity us! Pity us ! - we are in dire torment

which you can release us from with a pittance – don't leave us here in the flames – for as soon as the coin in the coffer rings – the soul from purgatory springs !`

Luther was appalled at such abuse and wanted the whole issue debated, and that's what the 95 theses were about. Such abuses needed challenging and Luther was the man to do it with the 95 theses – mainly against indulgences – nailed to the university church door – meant that he wanted to debate seriously these issues.

But – we can see that Luther's desire to change the church had begun long before 1517 – because of his own search for the reality of God over many years.

As an Augustinian Monk – he had lived a highly disciplined and devoted life – but whatever disciplines and fastings and flagellations he put himself through – the reality of God and God`s love was distant to him.

In 1513 – as the new Professor of Biblical Studies he began preparing for his lectures at the University of Wittenberg on Genesis, the Psalms and the Epistle to the Romans – he began as Jesus says – to `Search the Scriptures` about discovering the reality of God in his own life. It was the study of scripture that saved Luther from the despair of a bankrupt church and a bankrupt spirituality.

It was this particular verse in Romans 1:17 that made all the difference to Luther:

“In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last – as it is written - `the righteous will live by faith` “

Luther realised here was a God of mercy and forgiveness who was reaching out to we – human beings who could never find God themselves – nor work their way to God....and because human beings cannot reach God themselves – instead God in Christ reached out to human beings in love and mercy – a salvation and righteousness that was to be received by faith – by believing all that Jesus did in his life and death and resurrection is true.

As it says in John 3:16 – *`For God so loved that he gave...that whosoever believes...has eternal life`*. A generous God giving salvation to us as a gift.

Luther says: *`When I had realised this I felt myself renewed and born again. The gates of paradise had been flung open and I entered. There and then the whole of scripture took on another look to me...`* - and so he was enabled to love God with all his being.

All that Luther had done was to restore the truth of the Gospel after eradicating the corruptions and unnecessary additions from years of medieval scholasticism. Luther did not create anything new – but rediscovered the heart of the Christian Faith again – that God's love and forgiveness are received by the working of God's grace and mercy and then by our own personal faith response to what God has given.

This personal discovery gave Luther the personal assurance he needed – but it also set a hare running – which unknowingly at first would challenge the whole

establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe and the Pope's authority as the supreme leader of it.

Various German Princes – including our own Henry VIII – realised that to back Protestantism meant that they could become more independent of the Papacy – and so the Protestant Reformation became a convenient political and financial tool in many parts of Northern Europe for the creation of national wealth and national independence.

But do not be sidetracked by the popular debates about Henry VIII and his divorce issues. Luther's main concern was: How does a person discover the reality of God? Luther went to the Bible – and said:

` I simply preached God's Word and nothing else, and it was God's Word that weakened the authority of the Pope. I did nothing. God's Word did it all. Had I desired to create trouble, I could easily have done so, but that's a mugs game – No! - I left it for God's Word to speak.`

As St Paul says:

`All have sinned – all fall short of the Glory of God` – none of us have the capacity to know God by our own efforts alone – no – we are justified by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

We are justified by faith, and therefore we can have and know the peace of God – the reality of God which is a gift from God in Jesus Christ – which we receive by faith.

This is the rediscovered truth that Luther has left for us – because he needed to find God for himself – and shares that vital truth with you and me.

The Venerable John Hawley