

Rom 1:1-17

Luther

*Tim Anderson 3/9/17*

It's the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this year.  
Hopefully you picked that up last week,  
as Rhys Bezzant introduced us to the Reformation.  
Today, I'm going to be speaking about Martin Luther.  
Of course Rhys did that last week.  
Because you can't have a general talk on the reformation,  
without mentioning Luther.  
But today I want us to look at Luther's light bulb moment.  
His conversion.  
And a couple of other incidents from his life.  
But we'll start with his conversion.  
The time when he rediscovered the gospel.  
And I want us to do it not because it's an interesting story.  
But to make us aware of how precious that gospel is.  
Before his conversions,  
Luther was a man with a tormented soul.  
After his conversion, he revelled in the freedom of the gospel.

Luther was a man with a very tender conscience.  
He grew up in an age full of superstition.  
As a boy, he thought that the spirits of witches  
lived on top of a hill near his family home.  
And they would come and get him if they could.  
And his belief about God was not that much different.  
For Luther, God was righteous and holy,  
and his main occupation  
was finding out the wrong things that people did,  
and judging them for their sins.  
And Luther lived in terrible fear of that judgement.  
He never did anything that we would consider particularly evil  
or anything that could have got him a reputation as a notorious sinner.  
But still he lived in fear of Gods judgement.

And that wasn't merely a psychological peculiarity on his part.  
That was what he was taught from the youngest age.  
Just Luther took it to heart more than most of his contemporaries.

As a young man, he was training to be a lawyer.  
His father, Hans, had sacrificed much to give him an education.  
But one day when he was walking home in a thunderstorm,  
there was a flash of lightning and a clap of thunder.  
Luther was convinced that this was the judgement of God  
about to fall on him.

So Luther cried out to God.

"Lord, if you let me get home safely,  
I will give up being a lawyer,  
and go and become a monk."

He got home safely.

And he went and joined a monastery -  
much to his Father's disgust.

There was no Happy Father's day for Hans Luther that year.  
And admittedly Father's Day wasn't invented for centuries yet.

So Martin Luther joined an order of Augustinian Monks.

Now we might miss the significance of this.

To us, a monk sounds pretty much like a priest.

But the priests looked after the local churches.

And most of them had basically no education.

They didn't usually preach sermons,  
and if they did,

they read one from a book of authorised sermons.

But the monks were educated.

So Martin Luther was trained to study the Bible,

Theology and Philosophy,

so that he could lecture at a University.

Now one day he was working on Romans 1:17.

"In the gospel a righteousness of God is revealed."

And he could feel the terror rising up inside of him.

He knew all about the righteousness of God.  
God is holy and righteous,  
and his righteousness is revealed when he judges us for our sin.  
He reveals his righteousness  
by his utter intolerance of anything and everything  
that doesn't measure up to his righteous standards.  
The righteousness of God means God's wrath  
poured out to cleanse the world of unrighteousness.

And then Martin Luther read the second half of the verse.  
"A righteousness that is by faith from first to last,  
just as it is written:  
"The righteous will live by faith.""  
Hold on a second.  
That doesn't sound like God's holy judgement on sin.  
In fact,  
this is not God's righteousness being displayed in judgement at all.  
This is God's righteousness being given to people.  
People get to claim God's righteousness as their own.  
How do people get God's righteousness?  
By faith.  
It says, "The righteous will live by faith."

And so Martin Luther turned  
from someone who was tormented by guilt,  
to someone who knew that he could receive free forgiveness.  
And that was a first.  
It was the first time in centuries  
that this verse of the Bible had been read that way.  
Martin Luther had recaptured the good news of the gospel.  
The gospel is actually good news.  
It's not bad news of trying to dodge God's judgement,  
by doing enough penance.  
It's good news of free forgiveness being made available by God,  
through Jesus' sacrificial death.  
Here are Luther's own words about this discovery.

"Then I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith ...

Here I felt I was altogether born again

and had entered paradise itself through open gates ...

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God'.

Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise."

So what did Luther do when he made this discovery?

Did he start the Reformation?

No. He went on teaching his students at the University.

And when lecturing, he told them about the discovery he had made.

The good news of the gospel of forgiveness of sins by grace through faith.

And the rest of the world went on as it had before.

So how did the reformation come about?

What happened 500 years ago?

To understand that we need to understand the practice of indulgences.

Hundreds of years before Luther, in the year 855,

pope Leo IV promised Christians in a crusade

who died fighting Muslims,

that they would go to heaven.

Why did he do that?

Because Muhammed promised Muslims who died fighting Christians

that they would go to heaven.

And pope Leo IV wanted his soldiers to have the same incentives.

Over the years the practice broadened out.

The popes had trouble raising the cash

to fund their armies to fight the Muslims.

So by the year 1145, Christians who gave money to fund the crusades

were also promised they would have their sins forgiven.

Well the crusades stopped in the 12th century,

but the popes recognised that selling forgiveness of sins

was still a very good way of making money.  
It was however a rather tiresome thing  
for these important church leaders,  
with weighty spiritual matters to attend to,  
to have all the hassle of selling the indulgences.  
So they engaged in some sub contracting.  
The pope hired out a bank,  
in Germany it was Fuggers bank of Augsburg.  
And the bank sold the indulgences on the Pope's behalf,  
and kept half of the proceeds for their efforts.  
These indulgences weren't available all the time,  
but only when there was a special reason.  
People don't value things enough if they can always get them.  
Well it turned out that a certain Prince Albert of Brandenburg  
got himself elected as bishop of not one but three places in 1513.  
There was only one problem.  
The ambitious young man was only 23.  
And the church's canon law  
said that you had to be 30 to be made a bishop.  
So Pope Leo X decided  
that he could only overlook such a significant break  
in the church's rules,  
if Albert paid the church a very large sum of money.  
Let's say in today's money \$10M.  
However the pope agreed that for Albert to recoup his money,  
he could sell an indulgence in Germany for the next 8 years.  
Well this didn't just create a stir amongst theologians like Luther.  
The rulers of the regions of Germany were outraged  
that funds would be flowing out of their regions to Rome  
and they would be missing out on taxes.  
So everyone was upset.  
Which was good for Luther  
because it meant that when he started to protest about the theology,  
he had some powerful backers who would protect him from the church.

What did Luther do?

In 1517, 500 years ago this year,  
he nailed 95 sentences to a church door  
in the town where he lived and lectured at University,  
stating that you can't buy and sell God's forgiveness.  
In words of our reading,  
"In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed -  
a righteousness that is by faith from first to last."  
You can imagine that once Luther had discovered  
that God's righteousness was available to the Christian freely by faith,  
it particularly irked him  
that some people tried to profit  
from selling a certificate of forgiveness  
to people who had never been taught the truth.  
So he nailed these 95 sentences to the church door  
as the customary way of signalling  
that there would be a debate on the subject.  
And people were welcome to come along and listen.

But it started a furore.  
Luther was declared a heretic.  
It's one thing to teach a novel doctrine like  
"you're saved by faith" in the cloisters of a university.  
It's completely another thing to say that the consequence of this  
is that the church can no longer extort money from the flock.  
That attracts attention.  
Especially if you make your case forcefully and colourfully  
like Luther did.  
One of the things that helped him get the message out  
was the invention of the printing press in 1450.  
Up until then, if someone had views to promote,  
their writings had to be copied by hand.  
A long and laborious process.  
But Luther wrote pamphlets.  
They were published in bulk lots and read widely.  
There was "The Babylonian Captivity of the church"  
where he painted the picture of the church

in exile in Babylon  
just like the people of Israel under Nebuchadnezzar.  
But this time it was the Pope who held them captive not a pagan ruler.  
"The freedom of the Christian" where he sought to defend his teaching  
as pure exposition of the word of God.  
"Address to the Christian nobility" where he told the secular rulers  
that if the church would not reform itself,  
then God had given them the job of reforming the church.

Well the cat was really among the pigeons now.  
Luther was put on trial  
and ordered to face none less than the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.  
He was given a pile of his books  
and told to recant his writings.  
Luther refused.  
"I am bound to the texts of the Bible,  
my conscience is captive to the word of God.  
I neither can or will recant anything,  
since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience.  
God help me. Amen"

In order to get Luther to appear at the trial,  
he had been granted safe passage.  
But the prince of his region of Germany was concerned  
this would not be honoured.  
Jan Huss, a theologian from modern day Czech republic  
had been granted safe passage to appear at a trial 100 years earlier.  
And he had been executed.  
So the prince had Luther kidnapped  
and taken to a castle where nobody would know his whereabouts.  
Luther used this time to translate the Bible into German.  
He was convinced  
that for people to grow in their relationship with God,  
they needed to hear the Scriptures in their own language.  
What is the day of Pentecost for  
if it doesn't show us that God speaks to people in their own language?

Well there's plenty more that could be said about Luther.  
And some of it shows his weaknesses.  
Luther definitely had some slip ups along the way.  
When people disagreed with him,  
they often got the full force of his brutal tongue.  
And many times that was people  
who he should have regarded as friends!  
Luther's best friend was Philip Melanchthon.  
This is what Melanchthon said at Luther's funeral.  
"Some by no means evil minded persons, however,  
express a suspicion that Luther manifested too much asperity.  
I will not affirm the reverse,  
but only quote the language of Erasmus.  
"God has sent into this latter age a violent physician  
on account of the magnitude of the existing disorders.""  
Or in other words, even Luther's best friend speaking at his funeral  
was happy to call Luther a grumpy old man.  
And yet this grumpy old man was without doubt used mightily by God.

So how do we honour the legacy of Luther today?  
The first thing we need to do is recognise that Luther is not Jesus.  
It's all too easy to give Luther a dish plate above his head  
and stick him in a stained glass window.  
That would be the opposite of what Luther would have wanted.  
Luther pointed people to Jesus.  
And in particular, Luther pointed people to the gospel of Jesus.  
To the gospel where God's righteousness  
is given to those whose faith is in Jesus.  
If we honour Luther,  
then there's no better way  
than by making sure that gospel is front and centre  
in the ministry of our church.

It's become very common today,  
for churches to run all kinds of ministries  
where Jesus barely gets a mention.



People might say,  
"We're showing the love of Jesus by our actions  
so we don't need to use words."  
But the gospel is a message that needs words to express it.  
How can someone know that the way to have their sins forgiven  
is by putting their faith in Jesus, unless we tell them?  
When someone is nice to you,  
you don't from that assume that you need to put your faith in their Lord.  
You assume that they are a nice person.  
We need to tell people the gospel.  
In our reading Paul says,  
"I am not ashamed of the gospel."  
Deciding that "we're showing the love of Jesus by our actions  
so we don't need to use words"  
is a way of being ashamed of the gospel.  
Jesus himself communicated his message to people with words.  
As with Martin Luther, some people rejected Jesus' words.  
But Jesus didn't stop using words.  
He didn't say, "OK then, they don't like my message.  
I'll just show them loving actions."  
No. Jesus continued to explain in words to people  
that they needed to repent and believe the gospel.  
We need to trust that the gospel message  
'is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes'.  
God doesn't save people  
because of the power of our magnetic personalities.  
He saves them through the power of the gospel message.  
If Luther relied on the power of a magnetic personality  
to spread the gospel,  
he wouldn't have got far.  
But he was convinced that the gospel is the power of God  
that brings salvation to everyone who believes.  
We honour Luther when we hold fast to the gospel he preached.

We also honour Luther  
when we are prepared to follow the logic of the gospel

where ever it leads.

Luther didn't only tell people about his wonderful discovery,  
that the righteousness of God is available  
to those faith is in the Lord Jesus.

He also told them the implication.

That the church can't sell the forgiveness of sins.

He had the temerity to get between a bunch of bishops  
and a bucket of money.

It was this second action rather than the first  
that lead to massive reform in the church.

That's why the reformation is celebrated this year,  
the 500th anniversary of his nailing to the church door the 95 sentences  
against the practice of selling the forgiveness of sins.

Well you think about today.

There are plenty of issues that the gospel speaks into  
that are considered a bit hot to touch.

God's word speaks about it very clearly.

But for us to do so would risk getting our community off side.

Well this is not a call to be sanctimonious or condemning.

It's not a call to alienate people by the way we communicate.

It's not a call to stop loving people with kind actions.

But it is a call to refuse to be silenced.

Very often every other group is shouting at the top of their voice  
and Christians have collectively lost their voice.

Do we actually care for children enough  
to tell them the truth about gender and sexuality?

Or are we going to let society force feed them a message  
that will be profoundly damaging for them  
without putting an alternative viewpoint out there?

We honour Luther when we are prepared to speak up when it is costly.

It cost Luther a lot to speak up.

Though of course it cost the Lord Jesus even more.

How about Luther's efforts to translate the Bible  
into the language of the common people?

How can we honour that today?  
Well we could support people  
who translate the Bible into the languages of people  
who don't have the Bible in their heart language.  
There's a group called Wycliffe Bible translators.  
They are named after the man  
who first put the Bible into English not German.  
There's a good way you can support them.  
If someone you love dies,  
ask for Bethel funerals to be your funeral director.  
They give the profit from their funeral business to Wycliffe.  
That way instead of supporting a business person to get wealthy,  
you are supporting people having the Bible in their own language.  
But let's be honest,  
we don't face the same struggles today getting the Bible today,  
that were faced by the people of Luther's Day.  
You can download the Bible for free onto your phone.  
I admit I'm a troglodyte and I still like a paper copy.  
But you can get the Bible for free.  
So how do we honour the effort of Luther and Wycliffe and others?  
Well we read it.  
You know the Bible is not a book that you say,  
"I've read it now, I know what it says."  
Once you've read it once, you read it again.  
Because even if you know what it says,  
you can still trust God to speak to you in a new and fresh way  
every time you read it.  
Luther didn't get his revelation  
that the righteousness of God is given as a free gift  
to those whose faith is in Jesus,  
the first time he read Rom 1:17.  
He'd been a monk for some years.  
He spent hours every day reading the Bible.  
He would have read it many times.  
But one day God showed him something new and important.  
And God will do that for you too.