

Reflection at St Margaret's Uniting Church

29th October 2017 – Rev Dr Barry T Brown

The Reformation – Commemoration 500 years

[These notes are in précis form rather than verbatim. Prepared in advance as 'notes for preaching', they may not reflect exactly what was preached. Preaching is peculiar speech, a dynamic form of communication that needs to be open to the leading of God's Spirit, faithful to the Biblical text, and mindful of the hearer's attention].

Introductory Explanations provided before the Service:

On 31st October 1517, just days before his 34th birthday, Dr Martin Luther attached a list of *95 theses* to the door of the Castle Church in the university town of Wittenberg, Germany. The *95 theses* were intended as an invitation to fellow academics to debate topics relating to *indulgences*. However, at the hands of the new media of the day (using the new Gutenberg printing press), Luther's *95 theses* went public; not just in Wittenberg, but throughout Germany and as far afield as papal Rome. Within a few years Luther's writings were banned by Rome and Dr Martin Luther (Augustinian monk, Catholic priest and Professor of Scripture) was excommunicated. He remained in mortal danger for the rest of his life.

During the middle ages the papacy introduced a range of practices that gave the Church considerable religious and secular powers. The role of the clergy in the Church's penitential system was significant and powerful. Human sin could only be forgiven following certain acts of penance, which were prescribed only by the clergy. Part of the system of penance introduced by Rome were ***Indulgences***. These were, essentially, certificates of remission (or partial remission) from the punishment of sin. Indulgences rested on belief in purgatory, a place in the next life, where sinners waited before entry to heaven or hell. This papal construct was seen as another opportunity to achieve remission of sin. Means tested *Indulgences* could be purchased to shorten time in *purgatory* for oneself, and for other deceased family members. The particular *Indulgences* that were the trigger for Luther's protest had been introduced to raise funds for the lavish rebuilding of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome – the memorial to the martyred Apostle Peter

THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER is celebrated this morning as a reminder that the Eucharist, in the form we are familiar with, has its roots in Luther's reforms – in which the liturgy is in the language of the people (the vernacular) and both bread and wine are shared by the people. The *Eucharistic Prayer* used today is in the form first used in 2012 following a Uniting Church - Lutheran Church dialogue. It was formed especially for those occasions when members of both traditions share communion together. The parts of the liturgy said and sung by the people are the same. *The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (The Eucharistic Prayer)* has been re-worked.

HYMNS SELECTED FOR TODAY

Salvation now to us has come... by Paul Speratus (aka Paul Hoffer or Offer) who was a close associate of Martin Luther. He assisted Luther in the publication of his earliest book of German hymns in 1523/24. We have omitted some of the more archaic verses for our service.

A mighty fortress is our God... by Martin Luther was known by Methodist & Presbyterian members as *A safe stronghold our God is still*. It is a paraphrase of Psalm 46 “*God is our refuge and strength*” (NRSV). That is, God is with us in the most difficult of times. This first appeared in a German hymn book in 1529. Luther scholars tell us it was written by Martin Luther in 1527 – a year of deep anguish, anxiety and depression.

We all believe in God who made... This hymn, which we will say together, is Martin Luther’s re-working and expansion of a mediaeval hymn based on the Nicene Creed. The original hymn was used in both Latin and German and first appeared in 1417. Luther’s hymn was first published in German in 1524 and was also included in his *Mass* in German in 1526.

What shall we offer our good Lord? This hymn by August Gottlieb Spangenberg is a translation from the German by John Wesley. Spangenberg had been a Lutheran, but joined a Moravian community at Herrnhut. The German speaking Moravians traced their roots to the Hussites, a reformed movement going back to 15th century Bohemia. Jan Hus was a religious leader who was burned at the stake for his attempts at reform in 1417 – 600 years ago this year. Both John and Charles Wesley were highly influenced by the Moravians during their time in the North America.

Feed us now, Bread of life... and *Father bless us as we go*. Our two communion hymns this morning are both the work of Robin Mann, an Australian Lutheran freelance song-writer and worship leader. His hymns are widely used ecumenically and are highly valued in the Uniting Church.

LAMENT. Prior to celebrating the Lord’s Supper this morning we will spend some quiet time lamenting the schism (splitting) of the Western Church, and the hostilities that have resulted from the Reformation and Protestant movements – affecting nations, Christian denominations, communities and families.

TODAY’S REFLECTION:

Words are important. Ordinarily I prefer my sermon to be titled **Proclamation of the Word**. This indicates two things: First, that the sermon is primarily about Jesus Christ, the living Word; Second, that the sermon is aimed at connecting the Biblical

text with the context of our lives as Christians. Today, I have moved to the title, **Occasional Address**. This indicates that my starting point is the commemoration of the beginning of the Reformation at the hands of Martin Luther. However, the Bible readings will determine the themes I will attend to, and will also frame my address.

Another word that probably needs attention is **Commemoration**. The UCA has a Calendar of Commemorations, which we attend to from time to time. The intention of commemorating particular people or events is to preserve the memory of these people or events in order that we may honour them and learn from them how God chooses to work among us. Today, as we reflect upon Martin Luther and the beginning of the Reformation, we do not just *celebrate*; we also *lament* some of the consequences of the Protestant Reformation – Schism, wars, divisions, hostilities, prejudices, hatred. And our desire it to learn alike from the good things, and from the bad.

The Bible readings heard today are not from the Revised Common Lectionary, which we normally follow. Rather, they are passages recommended by the Lutheran Church for this commemorative occasion. The readings have been chosen because they reflect some of the key themes that Martin Luther highlighted in his work. We shall consider these themes, but will not go into extensive detail concerning the Biblical contexts from which they come.

Jeremiah 31:31 – 39. The New Covenant – new beginning. This is a very familiar passage from the Old Testament and its message is echoed in the New Testament. Indeed, it also features in our communion service as it speaks of Jesus referring to the ‘new covenant in my blood’. This passage would have been chosen because it reminds Christians that our God again and again initiates new beginnings – especially when we depart from God’s ways. The emphasis is on God’s initiative. I recall back in the late 1970s the curriculum for our Christian Education program (JBCE) had a lively catch cry:– ‘*God gives new beginning; and we learn to live a new life*’. This was a helpful reminder that God gives new beginning, not just to relieve us from the past, but that we might, with God’s help, find new ways of being faithful and engaging in worship, witness and service. We live in troubled times. Although it is difficult for us at this time to envisage the future of our Church, the Jeremiah readings reminds us that God is the one who initiates, and it is up to us to be obedient responders.

Psalm 46 – God is our strength and refuge. We have not actually read the psalm this morning. Rather, we sang a hymn by Martin Luther that paraphrases this Psalm. Those of us who were brought up as Methodists or Presbyterians would have first learned Luther’s hymn by its first line: *A safe stronghold our God is still*. More recent translation from the German provide a different first line: *A mighty fortress is our God*. It is a fact that Luther on two particular occasions was kept in

hiding in a fortified castle for his own safety. And the first of these occasions (in 1520) may have assisted his choice of the opening words of this hymn. However, there is another factor that is important. This hymn first appeared in a German hymn book in 1529. Luther scholars inform us it was written by Martin Luther in 1527 – a year of deep anguish, anxiety and depression. In many ways this hymn has become like a ‘Lutheran anthem.’ It is certainly the best-known of Luther’s hymns outside the Lutheran tradition. It was important for Luther and for his followers – because participating in change, radical change, even when it is following God’s initiative (“I can do no other”), Christians who are leaders or followers, need to draw strength from knowing that our God, known as Jesus Christ, certainly is *‘our refuge and strength – a very present help in trouble.’*

Romans 3:19 – 28. God’s free grace in Jesus Christ is the sole basis of a right relationship with God. This and other passages from the Pauline letters (especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians) are at the heart of the theological issues that triggered the Reformation. The emphasis on the grace of God (treating us ‘as though’ we are righteous’ in God’s sight) stood over and against the notion that we can only win God’s approval by our own actions. Luther and other reformers stressed the free grace of God, extended in love, as the sole basis of living in right relationship with God.

In my research concerning Luther and the Reformation I was pleased to discover many things. The Catholic Church had its own ‘reformation’ and has corrected many of the things that the Reformers like Luther railed against. In July last year, Pope Francis participated in the prayer service that commenced a year of preparation for the commemoration of the start of the Reformation through the actions of Martin Luther. In July this year there was an important gathering in Wittenberg, Germany, in which the World Communion of Reformed Churches counter-signed an agreement of the topic of ‘Justification by Grace’ that had earlier been agreed, through dialogue, between the Catholic Church and Lutheran World Federation. Present to support and witness this event were representatives of other world Christian bodies, including the World Methodist Council.

The primacy of grace, though, does not mean that Christians can then sit back, relax and do what we like. No, we are called to live a life of responsive obedience. This is well expressed in a hymn we sang to commence this service – composed by a close colleague of Martin Luther, Paul Speratus,

Salvation now to us has come by God’s free grace and favour; good works cannot avert our doom, they help and save us never. In faith we look to Christ alone, who did for all the world atone; he is our one redeemer.

To you, O Lord, in faith we cling, we love and trust you truly, and from this faith good works will spring that serve our neighbour duly. It's faith alone that justifies; the works that from such faith arise reveal that it is living.

John 8:31 – 36. God's Word brings truth, and the truth sets us free. "If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed." Christian freedom was one of the catch-cries of the Reformation under Luther. In 1520, Luther went into a writing frenzy and produced some of his most significant documents. One of these, written just weeks after officially receiving communication from Rome that he was to be excommunicated (a document he burned), Luther wrote the tract, *On the Freedom of the Christian Man*. This influential tract attended to the freedom found in Christ, a freedom that stands over and against (if need be) the power and control of those in high office and the institutions that try to control the ordinary people. It was this conviction that gave Luther and the other reformers the courage to fight for change, even if this was at their own personal cost – *Here I stand: I can do no other!*

Close: I sometimes get to watch Q & A on ABC TV on Monday nights. Last Monday there was a debate about the *Same-Sex Marriage*. Led by presenter Tony Jones, there was an interesting panel – actress Magda Szubanski; Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, the Rev Dr Glenn Davies; Karina Okotel, vice-president of the Federal and Victorian divisions of the Liberal Part and a civil lawyer working in the field of international aid; and Father Frank Brennan who is a Jesuit priest, superior of his order at Xavier House, Canberra, and CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia.

I don't mention this program because of the topic being debated. Rather, I want to refer to the nature of the debate and open conversation that took place. The audience had the opportunity to challenge the Christian churches on its faults (including those revealed by the present Royal Commission into Institutional Sexual Abuse). Respectful conversation took place between people of very different opinions and convictions. And a leading figure from the Catholic Church, Father Frank Brennan, was able to express opinions that most people would not have expected from his tradition – and which most probably was at odds with the hierarchy of that tradition. And at least three of the four panelist spoke openly about their own personal stance and religious beliefs.

Well, Australia may or may not be a Christian country. Much depends on what one means by that before such a claim can be made. But I saw in the Q & A debate some of the fruits of Luther's reform. The freedom to declare ones faith; the freedom to differ with authoritative institutions; the freedom to be respectfully at odds with other; the freedom to openly and publically take a stand for Jesus Christ.

As we reflect upon the Protestant Reformation, with all its gains and its failures, let us rejoice that: ***God gives us a new beginnings, and we learn to live a new life.***