

HOMILY FOR REFORMATION 500
ECUMENICAL SERVICE AT ST. DAVID'S CATHEDRAL
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TUESDAY 31 OCTOBER 2017

I must confess to being a little puzzled by the artwork on the cover of today's Order of Service. The striking illustration of Martin Luther is a negative, a half picture, relying on shadows to convey the reality. It is only when you get to the end of our service on page 14 that, hopefully, the darkness gives way to light and we get a clearer picture of Brother Martin. This Quincentenary commemoration, and the events relating to it, have given us a marvellous opportunity to adjust our contrast and see a more complete picture of the extraordinary contribution of this man, not just to theology and to the religious life of Europe and beyond, but also, according to some writers, one who laid the foundations of a view of the world which remains to this very day.

Today's Service, and others taking place in different parts of the world, provides us with an opportunity to bring into focus our thoughts and prayers, helps us deepen our knowledge of Martin Luther. Hopefully, it will give us a greater understanding of his driven personality, and gratitude for his theological insights. The language of polemics is over. Dynastic wars wrapped up in religious language have blotted the pages of Christian history, although 'wars of religion' are still with us today. The great 20th century writer G.K.Chesterton recognised this in his poem about the Battle of Lepanto which took place in 1571:

*And Christian killeth Christian in a narrow dusty room,
And Christian dreadeth Christ that hath a newer face of doom,
And Christian hateth Mary that God kissed in Galilee
But Don John of Austria is riding to the sea.*

At the beginning of this centenary year at the World Lutheran Federal Ecumenical Prayer Service at Lund in Sweden Pope Francis said: “.... now we have the opportunity to mend a critical moment of our history by moving beyond the controversies and disagreements that have often prevented us from understanding one another We Christians will be credible witness of mercy to the extent that forgiveness, renewal and reconciliation are daily experienced in our midst”. We live in an age when the polemics of the past mean little or nothing in a globalised, pluralistic and secularised world. “Mercy” and “The Cry of the Poor” are the hallmarks of the papacy of Pope Francis and resonate with believers and non-believers alike. The dignity of the human person lies at the heart of our faith in God who became man. “The Glory of God is humanity fully alive”. (Ireneaus. 2nd century).

What gives us that dignity and what are those things which diminish it? Created by God who breathed his life. Adopted as his children. Saved from ignorance, sin and death by the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. And what are those things which distort and diminish that dignity? The selfishness and pride which paints us as accountable to no one but ourselves. “As pride was the first sin, so it is the source and origin of all the sins that are committed”. The sinfulness which assures me that I do no wrong – yet at the same time a society becoming increasingly desensitised to those who suffer from hunger, isolation, rejection, injustice violence and war. The greater poverty of which Mother Teresa spoke when she identified poverty of spirit as being an identifying mark of western society. The conviction that there is nothing in me which needs forgiveness – whilst the “sin of the world” rages around me. The Christian vision and experience of communion is a counter sign at every level

combatting the isolation of individualism which sets each one apart from the whole.

In his struggle to find a gracious God, Martin Luther was only too well aware of the sinful nature of every person. His conviction that merely human “good works” could contribute nothing to making us “just” in the sight of God. Whatever “justification” is ours comes from the grace of God alone and no merit of ours.

What a joy to read in “From Conflict to Communion” the quotation from the Council of Trent (1545-1563) that “... *the essence of justification is not the remission of sins alone, but also the sanctification and renovation of the inner man by supernatural charity*”. Conversion of life, with all that entails, is the privileged freedom implanted in the hearts of all who believe”. The counter reformation Council of Trent affirmed that eternal life in God is a grace, not a reward. (par.82). It is this conversion of life, the recognition that the measure of God’s love for me is the measure of my need for forgiveness, which unlocks the mystery of the saving work of Jesus on the cross. The words of Jesus to the 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich ring down the ages: “What more could I have suffered for you? If I could have suffered more, I would have suffered more”. No room here for vicarious atonement! Conversion of heart, knowing that in the eyes of God, each person, including myself, is of infinite value and infinite worth is the adventure of faith, the ultimate purpose of our lives – no matter what obstacles prevent me from seeing this. Our co-operation with the grace of God’s justification lie at the heart of salvation. Our faith is not primarily affirmation of a series of theses but a relationship of love in Jesus Christ knowing that he first loves us – to the point of death and beyond.

How to translate that “Good News” into the language and customs of our own day is the challenge facing every Church and each believer. Pope Benedict put it so well when he said: “... *(For Martin Luther...) theology was no mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for oneself, which in turn was a struggle for*

and with God Who is actually concerned about this today – even among Christians? What does the question of God mean in our lives? In our preaching. Most people today ,even Christians, set out from the presupposition that God is not fundamentally interested in our sins and virtues”. (Meeting with Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, 23 September 2011).

In 1617 Martin Rinkhart became the pastor in the town of Eilenberg, a short distance away from Wittenberg. This was the beginning of the 30 Years War. Both that war, and the plague which ensued, caused him to bury no fewer than 4.500 people during his time in that parish. In the depths of this suffering he wrote a hymn which he intended to be a “Grace before Meals”. It was sung when the Treaty of Westphalia was signed ending the war. I look forward to hearing it today, sung in German, by our own choir:

Nun danket alle Gott

Now thank we all our God,

With heart and hands and voices.

Who wondrous things hath done,

In whom our world rejoices.

Who from our mother’s arms

Hath blessed us on our way

With countless gifts of love

And still is ours today.