

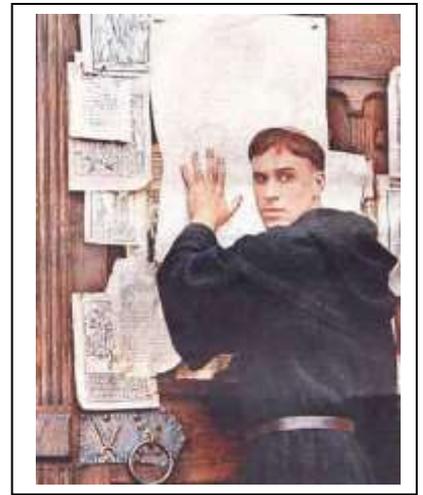
Thanks for the Reformation?

29 October 2017

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Revelation 7:9-17

Matthew 5:1-12



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

This Tuesday 31st October is traditionally called in the church All Hallows' eve, when we give thanks to God for all God's hallowed ones or saints. But this Tuesday also marks a significant occasion in the history of our churches with ramifications for the whole world since: the 500th anniversary of the monk Martin Luther nailing 95 theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany, protesting against what he perceived as corruptions in the Catholic church, particularly the practice of granting indulgences, by which payment of a monetary gift could reduce time spent in purgatory. It is important to remember that Martin Luther was a member of the very church he chose to criticise, and that he would never have envisaged the growth of Protestantism or indeed its divisions into a myriad of splinter groups over the centuries.

It's also important to note that there were also a considerable number of reformers at the same time who remained within the Catholic church such as Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross who were just as committed to the reformation of their own church and the redress of abuses. This is sometimes termed the Counter-Reformation.

But just what was it that contributed to Luther's protests going viral throughout Europe, as we might say today? It's been suggested that if Luther had been making his critiques today, he would have used Twitter, although he might not have fitted his theses into the requisite 140 characters! However Luther's call for reform coincided with the development of the printing press, and in this way his views were able to be disseminated incredibly quickly across continental Europe and across the Channel to Britain as well.

Luther's commitment to making the Scriptures available to people in their own language, rather than Latin, was part of a whole move for people to take responsibility for their own learning and decision-making, with the rise of literacy and people having access to pamphlets and books.

This in turn was part of a rise in individualism, of the autonomy of the human mind and reason seen in Renaissance thinking and the growth

of scientific knowledge. People were less willing to be told what to think by 'global' institutions of authority like the Church or Empire. Alongside this was the rise of nation states, of small states in Germany and Italy, governed by princes who took it upon themselves to decide the religious affiliation of those in their own particular fiefdom, whether they would be Catholic or Protestant, and sadly the centuries immediately following the Reformation were marked by religious wars between Protestant and Catholic states and alliances.

It is not difficult to see a trajectory from Luther's great claim that an **individual** is saved by grace alone through faith alone, along a path that leads to an ever increasing **individualism** in our Western world, with the rise of materialism, capitalism and consumerism. Even alternative ideologies such as communism have been undermined by individual corruption, greed and lust for power over others.

Five hundred years on, what is the face of Protestantism in our world? A ballpark figure often given is that there are 33,000 Protestant denominations in the world. The World Council of Churches has 348 member churches, including the Eastern Orthodox but not the Catholic church.

I must admit that when I see yet another new church advertising its launch in this city, I feel quite ambivalent about it. Yes, a new church may well attract some new adherents to the faith, and that is great, but the reality is that often there is just an increased 'circulation of the saints', redistribution of the Christians of a city as some are drawn to what may seem to be a more exciting church to be involved in.

We are very used nowadays to weighing up our own needs and wants and preferences, and to changing brand of supermarket or school or church, in a way that would be foreign to our forebears' ways of thinking.

Perhaps recent years in Christchurch have encouraged us to better appreciate the corporate nature of our faith and of the body of Christ as we have shared premises and received the hospitality of one another in ways that we might not have done otherwise. I really appreciate the opportunity to meet with my city clergy colleagues each month over lunch and to hear about each other's plans and rebuilds with their joys and sorrows. This Tuesday night we will have a service marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation here at Knox Church at 7pm, with representatives from across the churches, with the theme, From Conflict to Communion, to which all are most welcome.

One example I came across this week of the move from Conflict to Communion has been the installation of the new representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Holy See, Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi from Burundi. Our Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, went to Rome to install Archbishop Bernard in the Catholic church in Rome used by the English Catholic community, and to introduce him to Pope Francis who promptly invited both of them to lunch! While we are still officially unable to share eucharist together, it is so good that we are able to break bread together – it's a step on the journey!

I wonder what Luther would have thought of a Francophone African Anglican Archbishop being introduced to a South American Pope – such is the international fellowship of God's church in the 21st century! And yet too it is part of the fulfilment of Revelation 7: 9 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages'.

I want to conclude with 2 quotes from Archbishop Bernard, who has been involved with Burundi's own Truth & Reconciliation commission. "Reconciliation talks to the hearts of people...Christians have a responsibility to bring people together to see the other not as an evil... but as someone created by God."¹

Then on the process of reconciliation between Catholic and Anglicans: 'The journey is long, but the journey is enjoyed when you walk together with other people and not necessarily those who think like you and those who work and like and look like you, but those who are different. If you look at the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, they were really different. So that's how I see the denominations and the different churches. Let's walk together with the mission that God has given us, joining God at work, because we are not the ones initiating but we are really learning what God is doing in the world. And then [God] calls us to be his partners."²

As we give thanks today to God for all God's saints, for God's church universal, for the Catholic church and the churches of the Reformation, for our own Anglican church, both Catholic and Reformed, and for our own small place as the community of St Luke's in the City, let us give thanks for the blessings of the past and of the present, and pray that we will continue to be a blessing in this city called Christchurch. Amen.

¹ http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/06/02/pope_francois_meets_new_head_of_anglican_centre,_ab_ntahoturi/1316593

² Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi, "Portfolio for Peace" in 'Thrive', Episcopal Diocese of Chicago, Spring 2017, p15