

The Swiss Church in London

Sermon 4.11.07 (Reformation Sunday)

Romans 3,21-28

Dear friends

On Reformation Sunday we turn to Martin Luther and his reformation of the Church which is also the foundation of our own Church.

The Biblical text for today is the same Dr Yin, the Chinese preacher, used two weeks ago.

It's an important passage. In fact: it is the passage that triggered the Reformation, because it led Martin Luther to his discoveries.

So it is good to hear about it again.

Martin Luther's main cause, which became the heart of the Reformation, was the *restoration of the gospel*, the good news of God's own way of establishing personal fellowship with us.

It is what Paul calls "*God's way of putting men right with himself.*"

Luther focused his attention upon two main ideas.

First, God is God in all his sovereignty and holiness.

Second, man is man in all his incapacity to be the master of his fate.

He desperately needs God but is unable to establish contact with him.

The "true treasure of the church" is the gospel, for it brings the two together.

It takes man's hand and puts it in God's hand.

The best way to set forth the basic message of the Reformation is not to recount historical events or explain theological principles but to describe the experience by which sinful man finds God's saving grace.

It was this experience that transformed Luther from a humble monk into a heroic reformer who altered the course of history.

But the Reformation becomes meaningful to us only when we make this same discovery.

Luther became a reformer when he discovered the true meaning of the "good news."

Whether our discovery of it has an emotional or an educational pattern, whether it is sudden or gradual, early in life or late, depends on the personality of each individual.

But the content is always the same.

Paul sums it up in these words: *"All men have sinned and are far away from God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace they are all put right with him through Christ Jesus."*

"Being put right with God" is a simple way of stating the key doctrine of the Reformation, justification by faith.

How does God put men right with himself?

Is it by giving us his law so that by obeying his commandments we have a right relation to God?

"No," says the apostle, getting right with God "has nothing to do with law."

God's law demands perfection and none of us can come up to that standard.

How, then, does this “getting right with God” take place?

The answer is: "God puts men right with himself through their faith in Jesus Christ."

See how strongly the apostle drives this point through with repeated hammer blows: "Men's sins are forgiven through their faith in Christ."

"God offered Christ as sacrifice to show how he puts men right with himself."

"He puts right everyone who believes in Jesus."

"We conclude that a man is put right with God only through faith and not by doing what the Law commands."

Christ sets us free from the tyranny of the law that condemns us and from the fear of judgment and puts us into a right relation with God.

This is the heart of the gospel and the heart of the Reformation. The theology of the Reformation echoes its throbs:

sola fide, by faith alone; sola gratia, by grace alone; solus Christus, Christ alone.

When we say "***by faith alone***" the emphasis is not on our faith but on him in whom our faith is anchored.

It is not merely having an opinion about him or believing that what he taught is the truth and that his way of life is the best.

"I am the way," he says, "I am the truth," "I am the life."

And so the Apostle does not say, "I know what I have believed," but "I know in whom I have believed." Faith is total trust in him, total commitment to him.

The second of the heart-throbs of the Reformation is ***sola gratia, by grace alone***.

As Paul states it, "By the free gift of God's grace men are put right with him through Christ Jesus."

Grace is God's sovereign love which is not dependent on the worth or worthlessness of its object, which freely gives to all men everything that is necessary for fellowship with God.

Unlike all other forms of religion, the gospel does not ask us to do anything, to achieve anything, to meet any requirements.

Here is instead an insight into the heart of God and the amazing discovery that God has it in his heart to love sinners as they are.

Think of the picture of God given in the story of the prodigal son.

The father cannot wait until the boy has come to the door but runs down the road to meet him.

And the boy has no chance to speak the words of penitence which he has rehearsed at the swine trough, before the father's lips are upon his and the father's arms embrace him.

Here, says Luther, is sheer redemptive love, contrary to all law and all reason.

Or think of the thief on the cross, whose life from the moral point of view had been such a disgraceful failure that by his own admission he deserved nothing but capital punishment.

Yet his plea "Remember me" brings the response "Today you will be with me in paradise" without a word of judgment being spoken.

Grace is the supreme demonstration that God is God and that his ways are not our ways.

His grace does not seek a lovable object but creates it.

In Luther's words, "*Sinners are not loved because they are lovely, they are lovely because they are loved.*"

Fellowship between God and us is not established on God's level, to which we can never climb, but on our level, to which God descends.

A right relation to him is based not on what I do, but on what Christ has done for me.

To have faith in Christ is to respond with one's whole life to that grace.

We do not buy God's favour with our good deeds, but we do good deeds because we are grateful for his goodness to us.

We love because he first loved us.

Thus we are led to listen to the third of the heartthrobs of the Reformation, *solus Christus, Christ alone*.

Here is the heart of hearts of the gospel, for faith is faith in Christ and grace is "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

There is a radical Christ-centeredness about the authentic Christian message. "I was determined," says Paul, "to know nothing among you but Christ and him crucified."

When Luther ploughed his way through the jungle of man-made religion and rediscovered the gospel, he said, "In my heart there rules but one article of faith, Christ alone. Christ is the beginning, middle and end of all my theology."

To celebrate the Reformation, then, I ask you to lift up your eyes and see no one but Christ.

Not Luther or anyone else - only Christ.

See him as the incarnate Son of God as he enters into all our experiences of joy and of pain, as he makes God real to us, as he says, "Come to me you that labour and are heavy laden, I will give you rest."

Above all, see him as the crucified Saviour as he endures the anguish of your sins and mine and gives his life so that we might be reconciled to God.

This is the heart of the Reformation, and we listen to its throbs not only on Reformation Day but throughout the year. It is by this "good news" that the church lives. It is the dynamic center of all the church's activities.

The Reformation has achieved its purpose when you and I can say with Luther: "Jesus Christ is my Lord who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me from all sins, from death, and the power of the devil ... in order that I might be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness - even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."

Amen