

Martin Luther – Reformed Faith

1. Luther's World

- Martin Luther was born on November 10th, 1483 in Germany
- Luther's father was keen for him to get a proper education and sent him for schooling in Latin (the language in which all proper education was done) from the age of 7, followed by boarding school at the age of 13
- At 17 Luther went to university to study Liberal Arts and by 21 Luther had his Master's degree
- In 1505, at his father's insistence he began law school, and Luther's life stretched out ahead of him, just as his father had planned

- Europe in 1505 was a very different place to today
- The Roman Catholic Church wielded an enormous amount of power, not just in matters of religion, but also in politics
 - They insisted upon only one rule, God's rule through the Pope, who the Roman Church understood to be Christ's representative on earth
 - Therefore everyone was to be subject to him.

- Politically, the Pope worked hard to keep various nations and empires in check.
 - Here's a map from slightly later, 1560, but the basic layout is the same.
 - Spain and France were both keen to free themselves more and more from the absolute political power that the Pope insisted upon
 - The Swiss had always been more independent and to the east the Turks, in the shape of the Ottoman Empire, were slowly making inroads into central Europe
 - The Pope had most influence in what was known as the Holy Roman Empire which covered most of modern day Germany
 - But this was, in reality, little more than a loose federation of many cities and nation states
 - The Holy Roman Emperor was an elected position and many of the fights of the day were over which royal figure would get the title
 - In Luther's day the position was taken by members of the House of Hapsburg, who ruled in Austria and later also in Spain

- In all this politicking, one would hardly notice a 21 year law student in a German town

- And then things changed

- On the 2nd July 1505, Luther was returning to Law School from his parents' house when he was caught in a terrible storm
 - Fearing for his life he cried out to St Anne, the patron saint of miners (his father was in the mining business), for help promising her that if his life was spared he would become a monk
 - Two weeks later he entered an Augustinian order of monks, took his vows, and switched his studies from Law to Theology
 - His father was furious

- Luther was ordained a priest and celebrated his first mass in 1507 at the age of 23
 - In doing so he became part of the vast religious system that was the Roman Catholic church

- Over the next ten years, Luther would become increasingly aware of a number of abuses that were rife within the Catholic Church, including
 - A papacy that was characterised by excessive wealth, corruption, backdoor politics, immorality and greed
 - Many popes and clergy had mistresses and illegitimate children
 - Church often accepted bribes from clergy for the appointment to more profitable parishes and sees
 - Greedy priests and bishops overseeing more than one parish or see in order to be paid more
 - This meant they were often absent from their parishes and sees and therefore not ministering to the people as they should
 - Appointment of untrained clergy who didn't know Latin and therefore couldn't say the prayers, read the Bible or teach people
 - Appointment of unordained clergy who were often appointed for political reasons

- In addition to the political and immoral abuses that were rife within the Catholic Church, there were a number of issues of theology and church practice that Luther believed needed reforming

- Under Roman thinking it was the place of the Church that would give to you the grace you needed to be right with God
- This grace of God was stored up for us in what was known as the 'Treasury of Merit' which is supplied by the good works of Jesus, Mary and the Saints
- The first infusion of grace came at baptism and was meant to take away your original sin > sinful nature you were born with

- Life from then on was a constant cycle of sinning, falling short of what God had intended for us, and going back to the Church time and time again for more portions of grace for which you had to do good works to deserve
- These portions of grace were delivered through various sacraments, 7 in total, of which the main ones available to you and I were baptism, penance and the Mass – the Roman version of Holy Communion
- It was as though you were constantly in need of a wash, a wash that would make you perfect in front of God, and the Roman church owned the seven taps by which you could access the grace to clean yourself
- Those that died without having had enough grace, which was almost everybody, would then have to face purgatory, thousands of years of having our sin slowly burnt away until we're pure enough to enter God's presence
 - This was, obviously, something you wouldn't want to go through and so the church provided what were known as indulgences ... literally a piece of paper you paid for that entitled you to time off from purgatory
 - And because these indulgences were sold ... it didn't take long for them to be abused
- The issue came to a head for Luther in 1516 when the Archbishop of Mainz (in Germany) needed to buy his 'see' because he was already archbishop of two other places
 - He and the Pope agreed to a fee of 10,000 ducats (European gold coin / currency at the time) for the Pope to overlook his being bishop of three different places
 - But Albert needed to borrow this money
 - So the Pope allowed him to sell indulgences in order to raise it ... on the proviso that half the indulgence profits would go to building the St Peter's Basilica in Rome
- Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and papal commissioner for indulgences, was sent to Germany to sell the indulgences
 - In order to make enough money, they not only sold indulgences for the remission of penalties and of guilt for sin
 - But they claimed that future sins could be forgiven, the need for contrition was unnecessary and that indulgence could be bought for friends and family who had already died in order to shorten their time in purgatory

- Such a salesman was Tetzel, he was known for the famous line
 - 'as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs'
- It was a complete rort and a clear abuse of church power over the people

- Luther, by now was teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg and also priest of Wittenberg's city church
- He wrote to the Archbishops of Mainz and Magdeburg protesting against the abuses of indulgences and other false teachings of the Church
- Along with his letter he included a copy of an academic paper he had written entitled, "Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences,".
 - He also nailed the same paper on the door of the church in Wittenberg
 - That day, October 31, 1517, is to this day known as Reformation Day and the paper that Luther nailed to the door is better known as the 95 Theses
 - Little did he realise it at the time, but Luther had just started an revolution that would profoundly influence every area of life
 - To this day we still feel its effects

- Over the course of the next four years, the Catholic Church tried to suppress Luther and force him to recant
- Eventually, Luther's protest forced him to face a trial in the town of Worms in 1521
 - In the space of only 4 years what to do with Luther had become such an important issue that the council was presided over the Holy Roman Emperor - Charles V
 - At the assembly, Luther was ordered to recant to which Luther famously replied
 - *Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of Popes and Councils, for they have contradicted each other — my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.*
- The council could not demonstrate from scripture that Luther was wrong, but none-the-less, Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church and declared an outlaw
 - This displeased Frederick III, Elector of Saxony in Germany, who was a sympathiser of Luther
 - He saw it as one more example of the Pope trying to have too much power

- And in order to protect Luther from being assassinated he had Luther 'kidnapped' and hidden in Wartburg Castle
- Safe in Frederick's castle Luther got to work writing
 - From his desk he wrote papers, sermons, letters challenging the teaching of the Roman church and pointing people back to the Bible
 - Most significantly, he made a complete translation of the New Testament from the original Greek into German
 - With the help of the printing press, this enabled the people of Germany to read and study God's word for themselves, rather than relying on priests to read and interpret it for them from Latin
- Driving all of this was a firm conviction that the things that the Roman Catholic Church taught and practised was not the gospel of the Bible
 - If the Roman Church saw God's mercy as a tank of water and the church as the owner of the taps ... then Luther, as he read the Bible, saw something else
 - He saw a great ocean as far as the eye could see with the invitation of God to freely jump in and be washed of all sin
 - Rome, it seemed, was trying to put the ocean into bottles and sell them one at a time and Luther was determined to put them out of business

2. Luther's Transformation

- The big issue then, as it still is today, is what the Bible calls 'justification'
 - To be justified is to be right before God
 - There is, after all, only one properly righteous one, God Himself
 - And because He is righteous, He will not tolerate unrighteousness
- The great question of the Bible, then, is how you and I can become righteous – be justified ... so that we can once again be in a relationship with a righteous God
- The book of the Bible that deals with this question most directly is Paul's letter to the Romans
- It was reading the book of Romans that helped Luther understand how he and you and I might be justified
- Here's how Luther described that journey ...
 - *"I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one:*

"The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel" (Rom. 1:16). I hated that word, "righteousness of God".¹

- Luther hated it because he understood the words "righteousness of God" to be talking about God's holiness, his moral purity, his hatred of all evil
 - *"But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction ..."*

- As a monk he'd been taught by the church that he must be good enough to enter the presence of God ... he must be perfect to be justified
- He knew he couldn't and that his sin deserved punishment – that bit is true
- Because he didn't understand the grace of God in Jesus, he used to flagellate himself in his room at night and also lived with the dread of facing purgatory for unpunished sins
- For Luther the words of Romans 3:20 rang so true
 - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

- So what changed? Well, here's how he goes on.
 - *"I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, as it is written: 'The righteous person lives by **faith.**'"*

- Luther's great discovery was that the righteousness of God being spoken of here was not just the fact that God Himself was righteous, but that He actually gives that righteousness to people
 - That is the gospel
 - That God makes righteous those who put their trust in Christ
 - That is ... those who trust in Jesus to deal with their sin and God's wrath

- As Paul writes in Romans 3:21-22
 - *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through **faith** in Jesus Christ to all who **believe.***

¹ <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/tower.txt> "Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe. 1545" in vol. 4 of *_Luthers Werke in Auswahl_*, ed. Otto Clemen, 6th ed., (Berlin: de Gruyter. 1967). pp. 421-428.

- For Luther this was incredible news
 - The heavy chains of trying to be good enough and continually failing were broken apart
 - *All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light ... I exalted this sweetest word of mine, "the righteousness of God," with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.*
- He read on in Paul's letter to the Romans and saw the same thing again and again
 - You and I are justified before God ... not by what we do ... but by trusting God and putting our faith Christ's death for us
- It was not how good a life he lived and what he did ... it was because of what Jesus Christ had already **done** for him on the cross
- As Paul writes in Romans 3
 - ²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ²⁴ *and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* ²⁵ *God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*
- Finally Luther understood
- At the cross a spiritual transaction took place
 - God's wrath for our sin was laid on Christ > he died as a sacrifice to atone for our sin
 - And as a result, his righteousness was given to all who believe
- Luther was now able to reconcile his own sinfulness with the righteousness of God
 - He did this by the slogan 'simultaneously righteous **and** a sinner'
 - He spoke of the Christian as
 - always a sinner
 - always repenting
 - but always righteous
 - And the only way that could be true was through Christ's death and righteousness being given to undeserving sinners like you and I
- No wonder Luther called these truths "the very gates of paradise"

3. Luther's Legacy

- All of this outraged Rome
- Luther was saying
 - you didn't need the Pope and all the sacraments and good works to be justified
 - you just needed to trust what God had done in Jesus Christ
- It was an explosive idea and spread like wildfire, not least due to the invention of the printing press in the previous century
 - But more importantly because it was what God had made clear in the Bible
- Luther was not the first to point this out
 - But he was the first to have his works printed in great numbers and sent out all over continental Europe
 - As Luther's ideas spread and others began to understand the Reformation movement sprang to life
 - Men such as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin led the reformation in Switzerland
 - In fact, at the same time as Luther was standing in front of the Emperor, just 4 years after publishing the 95 Theses ... his work was being discussed in the White Horse Inn in Cambridge by men like Hugh Latimer and Thomas Cranmer who would go on to lead the reformation of the Church of England
- These reformers were not looking to start a new church
 - They just wanted to see the church reform its theology and practice
 - However, over time, it became clear that such a reformation wasn't going to happen ... and eventually new churches, independent of Rome began to spring up
 - These churches became known as the Protestants ... because they were protesting against the Catholic church
- By the time of Luther's death in 1546 there was an independent protestant church in Germany known as the Lutheran Church
- By the end of the C16th ... just a generation after Luther ...
 - Lutheran Church had spread throughout most of Germany and all over Scandinavia

- Much of Switzerland and some of France became reformed under John Calvin
- Initially the Church of England broke away from Rome under Henry VIII in order for Henry to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn ... but was still Catholic in theology and practice
 - However the Church of England was reformed under Henry's son Edward VI and Archbishop Cranmer and then later his half sister, Elizabeth I
- Church of Scotland reformed under leadership of John Knox
- The cry of the Reformers throughout this time that distinguished them from the Catholic Church was
 - Faith alone, Scripture alone, Grace alone, Christ alone
 - That is, it's the Bible alone that is the source of authority – not the Bible and traditions of the church, popes or councils
 - That faith alone was necessary to be right with God, not faith plus good works
 - That Christ alone was the head of the church, not the Pope ... and it's through Jesus death alone that a person is saved, not by participating in the sacramental system of the Catholic Church that gives access to the so called 'treasury of merit'
- While there had been others who called for reform in the C14th & C15th , they failed to gain the traction that Luther did because they focused on immorality, abuses and church practice and not the heart of the issue which was a misplaced theology and understanding of the gospel
- As people began to understand the
 - Bible alone was the authoritative source for the Christian church ... it freed them to think critically about the teachings of the church
 - And as they did, they began to see afresh the amazing grace of God who justifies sinners through faith in Christ
- In fact it was Luther who famously said "justification by faith alone is the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls" ... and all over Europe the church sprung to life because they began to understand this truth afresh
- However, Luther's impact was not just in not just in Europe
 - We here today, an Anglican church in Australia – a land not even known to those of Luther's day – trace our religious heritage back to him
- It's an enormous debt ... and one we should never forget ...

- for Luther is the man who rediscovered the great truth of the Bible that
 - we are sinners ... that we are quite incapable of being justified ourselves ... and yet God is a gracious God who justifies sinners by faith

4. Conclusion

- Justification by faith remains the doctrine on which the church ... including C@P ... stands or falls
- It must remain central in what we teach corporately and what we believe individually
- For when justification by faith is held onto as central to your belief ... you have what Luther calls "a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace"
 - You have wonderful assurance that your eternal destiny does not depend on your own fallible efforts ... but is secure in the justifying work of Christ already done for you on the cross
- When justification by faith is not central to the belief's of a church ...
 - Then life becomes like Luther's before his conversion
 - One of endlessly trying to appease God though God works
 - And all that leads to is
 - Pride and self-righteousness > as you think you are doing well and are better than others
 - Despair > as you realise you can never be righteous in God's sight
- But a reformed faith that says we're justified by faith alone ... reminds us we have an unshakeable confidence in the ocean of God's grace available in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
 - That the Christian life is one of faith alone ... from first to last ... constantly trusting in the God who justifies sinners through the cross of Christ
- Not only does this truth transform our eternal outlook, it's also the truth that transforms our lives day by day
- It's only when we understand the depth of God's grace to us in Christ will that have any effect on transforming our hearts and lives
 - We can press our wills into action for a time
 - We can listen to emotive preaching that may inspire us for a while
- But the only thing that is going bring about lasting change in your life ... is the grace of God revealed us in the justification that comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ

- When you and I get we're all sinners, but in Christ we are always righteous ... that will bring about the transformation God desires to see in your life

- They say 'we stand on the shoulders giants'
- Well the Protestant Church of today and indeed C@P stands in the shoulders of the Reformers like Martin Luther
 - For through them ... the Christian faith returned to its biblical roots
 - And in particular ... justification by faith – the doctrine on which the church stands or falls
 - And indeed, the doctrine on which our faith stands or falls

PRAY