

The Rich Young Ruler & Martin Luther. Luke 18.15ff. bn.23.10.16

One of the most significant figures in the history of the church has been Martin Luther. He's been called many things – from heretic to saint. His main claim to fame was as Father of the Reformation. Aside from Jesus himself, he has probably had the greatest influence on the Christian Church. Let me give you a potted history.

Martin Luther was born in 1483- around the same time in history as Christopher Columbus.

He was at university studying law when he had a 'Damascus Rd' experience – he was just missed by a bolt of lightning which struck the ground near him in a storm. He took that as a sign that God had spared him for a reason and decided to become a monk.

Martin Luther was a very *intense* person, and he became a very *intense* monk, becoming more and more depressed over the state of his own sinfulness. The prior of the monastery felt Martin would be better suited to an academic career, so sent him off to study theology. He was ordained in 1507 and began lecturing in theology at the University of Wittenburg. He was only 24.

For the next 10 years or so, Luther lectured on the Psalms, the books of Hebrews, Romans and Galatians. As he studied these parts of the Bible, he began to understand terms such as [penance](#) and [righteousness](#) in new ways. He became convinced that the Church had lost sight of several of the central truths of Christianity, the most important of which, for Luther, was the doctrine of [justification](#).

Justification simply means God's act of declaring a sinner righteous (or acceptable to God) — by faith alone.

Luther really upset the hierarchy by teaching that [salvation](#) or redemption - in other words, being forgiven and accepted by God - is a gift of God's [grace](#), - something God gives us that we don't deserve. And he taught that this gift can only be received through faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

The more Luther studied the Bible, the more he saw the corruption in the Church around him. He was angered by the way the hierarchy played on the simplicity and superstition of the peasants to keep them under control; and how they were able to exact funds from them through dodgy teaching.

One of the corrupt practices of the time was the selling of 'indulgences'. The hierarchy would raise funds by telling the peasants that if they purchased an 'indulgence' from the Church, that they would be guaranteed to shorten their days in Purgatory. (Purgatory being where people went after they died to pay for their sins -

even though they were supposed to have been forgiven through Christ's death on the cross) The more they paid, the more days they would get off their 'sentence'.

Peasants were so terrified of the fires of hell, they would buy an indulgence rather than feed their children! The last straw for Luther was when a Dominican friar was sent to Wittenburg by the Catholic Church in Rome to raise funds through the sale of indulgences for the rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica.

Martin was so incensed, that he sat down the same day and wrote his most famous and most concise work – his 95 Theses - slamming the theology and selling of indulgences. He then leapt up, strode into Wittenburg, and nailed them to the door of the Castle Church. Church doors then acted as public notice boards. It was this action that sparked the Protestant Reformation.

It would take too long to tell you the rest of the story (they've made a really good movie out of it!)- but suffice it to say that the hierarchy didn't take all this lying down, and Martin was ultimately excommunicated, and had to live in exile for fear of his life.

He ended up marrying a nun that he'd helped escape from one of the Catholic Church's purges, and had 6 kids! But marriage and family didn't slow him down – Martin continued to write, teach, and wage war on what he saw as heresy and corruption in the church and among other things, translated the entire Bible into the language of the people - German. He died in 1546 of a stroke, aged 62.

What prompted these reflections on Martin Luther this morning was today's Gospel reading from Luke.

The man who came to Jesus in this story was an important man – most likely an official of the council or court. He was rich, and he was young, he was deeply religious. To look at him, you'd think he had it all! But like so many on whom life has smiled, he wasn't content. There was something missing.

This ruler sought assurance that he had eternal life. Despite his religiosity, and despite his wealth – for Jews a sign of God's favour- he had doubts that he was acceptable to God. He wanted Jesus to measure and grade his qualifications and assure him “You've passed. You're in!” Or at least give him some task he could perform that he could hang his assurance on.

For this young man, getting right with God was something that happened through what he did – through “being worthy”. But so far it had given him no assurance at all. How good was good enough?

This was the key issue in the Reformation, and the heresy Martin Luther fought to set right. The Church of his day taught that acceptance by God depended on one's performance. And even then, there was still purgatory, as no one could hope to be good enough. Hence the appeal of the indulgences.

This side of the Reformation, we know better. We know the truth of Ephesians 2: 8-9, which says: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

Yet despite this central truth of the Christian faith, it's amazing how wide the perception is in our culture that acceptance by God is dependent on being 'good'. Ask most people you meet (who believe in God) if they know they're going to heaven, and they'll smile or make a joke, and say “I hope so!”

Culturally, it's drummed in to us from infancy that we have to work for anything worthwhile. That we don't get something for nothing! Like this young ruler, if our confidence about being accepted by God is based in our performance – in the things we do – we will never be sure we've done enough, and we'll only ever be able to say, “I HOPE I'll get to heaven.”

We know from the other accounts of this story that Jesus looked at this young man and loved him. He didn't condemn him – but he did need to show this man where his confidence lay. So he gave him a task. It wasn't to obey a set of rules more fervently; it wasn't to be more regular at the synagogue; it wasn't to spend more time in prayer; Jesus asked him to give up his wealth and follow him. And sadly, it was the one thing this young man could not do.

The man's wealth smoothed his life and gave him power and prestige. When Jesus told him to sell everything he owned, he was touching the man's very base for security and identity. The young man didn't understand that he would be even more secure if he followed Jesus.

Jesus doesn't always ask his followers to sell everything they have and give the money to the poor – though that may be his will for some. But because money represents power and authority and success, often it is difficult for wealthy people to realise their need and their powerlessness to save them selves.

Though Jesus may not ask us to give up our wealth, he does ask all of us to get rid of anything in our lives that has become more important to us than God.

When Jesus honed in on this truth in the young man's life, and pointed out how hard it was for a rich person to enter God's kingdom, the bystanders were astonished. **“Who then can be saved?”** For them, wealth was a sign of God's blessing – and as

far as they could see, this man must have been one of God's favourites. If he who was so rich couldn't get in to heaven, who could?

“No one can, by their own achievements” was Jesus' answer. “But God can do what men can't.” (the Message translation) or, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God”

The challenge of this reading for us, is to take stock of our own walk with God, and have the courage to ask him if there is anything in our own lives that has relegated him to second place.

Just as he spoke to the rich young ruler, so he will speak to us. The question is, are we brave enough to ask?

It is scary bringing something that we are clutching tightly to, before God, because he may well ask us to let it go! But if - and I say IF - God does challenge us about something in our lives, we need to be confident that should he ask us to let it go, he will fill us with far more than we think we might lose.

As Jesus said to his disciples, he also says to us: "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

Salvation, that is, our acceptance by God, is a gift, but in order to take his gift in our hands, we need to put down what is already in them.

If we think this is too hard, then again, Jesus words to his disciples are for us as well: **What is impossible for us is possible for God.**

May each one of us experience our own Reformation on a daily basis.

Let's pray.

