



Remembering the Reformation Martin Luther

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Genesis 15: 1–6 Romans 1: 8–17

Trinity College has its own rather special reason not just for remembering, but for celebrating the Reformation. We date our foundation to 1546, but you could argue that it was actually Martin Luther's dramatic and celebrated action of 30 years earlier, on 31 October 1517, when he is said to have nailed his 95 Theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, 500 years ago this very month, which set in train the events which led to the foundation of the College, and that without him, we would not be here.

How so? Of course, nailing theses to a church door sounds fairly dramatic, but in fact the church door served as a bulletin board for the university – so when, on that day in October 1517, a little known Augustinian friar and professor in the new university of the modest town of Wittenberg, pinned a notice to the faculty notice board, there was no reason to think much would change – even that it would lead to the founding of a Cambridge College, let alone to a religious revolution. Luther's document, written in Latin, invited all comers to participate in a disputation on the power and efficacy of indulgencies, by debating those theses. It was a very donnish thing to do; and such debates (which in this case didn't happen, by the way, and was likely to be about as exciting as a party conference) and dons, on the whole, don't cause revolutions. But through various bits of happenstance, Luther's donnish action launched a controversy, which step by step, dismantled what we might term the spiritual economy of late medieval Europe, in which monasteries and chantries had played a central part. As that economy came crashing down, those monasteries and chantries became vulnerable to the acquisitive attentions of our founder Henry VIII – who ironically, of course, had won the title 'Defender of the Faith' from a pope for his attack of 1521 on Luther. Be that as it may, 30 years after that day in October 1517 when an unknown don had pinned a rather unexciting invitation on a notice board in a very uncelebrated university, Henry found himself with a lot of loot, some which he used for us – and Trinity College was born.

So we have our own reason not just for remembering but for celebrating the beginning of the Reformation – but is there a more general reason to do so? Leaving aside the founding of Trinity, which was plainly a very good thing, what else is to be said for the Reformation, and for Martin Luther in particular?

Let's go back to 31 October 1517. If the path from putting up a notice to a religious revolution depended on many chance occurrences, the actual date on which the posting took place was not chance. The 31 of October is the Eve of All Saints – and people were gathering in Wittenberg for a special viewing of the spectacular collection of relics which had been assembled by the Elector of Saxony, Fredrick – later to be Luther's canny defender. Fredrick's collection was world class – he possessed over 19,000 fragments of saints' bones, an entire corpse of one of the holy innocents (i.e. one of the male infants killed on Herod's orders in Bethlehem), and a thorn from Christ's crown. Now this special viewing on All Saints' day was indulgenced – that is to say, that the pope had declared that anyone who turned up and viewed the relics would, in effect, receive a remittance of punishment for their sin in return for their devotion and piety. Now there was plenty of subtle theory and no shortage of nice distinctions around the granting of indulgencies, hedging the practice about with cautions and caveats – but to the man or woman in the street, or in the Castle Church in Wittenberg, what they were doing when they bought an indulgence, as they were encouraged to do in a scheme current at the time to sell indulgencies to fund the rebuilding of St Peter's in Rome, was buying remission of their sins for themselves or for their dear departed – who with enough indulgencies would immediately be transferred from purgatory to heaven.

The first thesis for debate that Martin Luther put forward in those famous 95 theses was this: 'When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent" he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance'. As a thesis for a disputation it was supposed to be suitable for debate, as if there were two sides to the question – but, of course, it expressed Luther's settled belief that repentance was supposed to involve a change of heart, whereas indulgencies involved mere cash transaction. Repentance had to engage the head, heart and spirit, not just the wallet.

But as soon became clear, there was more at stake here than mere indulgencies – indulgencies were, if you like, the thread at which Luther pulled and which unravelled a whole garment. As what was to be called the Reformation unfolded, Luther's protest aimed at indulgencies manifested itself as an objection to a bigger picture of salvation. And that picture was of salvation as something that to be earned, deserved, or merited – this is the thought on which the medieval economy of salvation depended. All of us had to pay for our salvation in one way or another, with some currency or other, whether through our own good deeds, or whether through, by prayer, drawing on the veritable piggy bank of good deeds which Christ and the saints were said to have deposited, or whether by paying the Pope for indulgencies, since the bank was said to be at his disposal. So it wasn't just the specific matter of the trade in indulgences to which Luther objected, but to the underlying thought that Christian people needed to earn their salvation.

That assumption, however – the assumption that salvation had to be earned – was the very one on which Luther had himself acted when, in 1505 at the age of 22, he became a friar – much to his father's chagrin, who, like many a parent before and since, had settled on law as a sensible and suitable career for his son. Luther had joined a monastery, so he said, 'to escape hell'. He had, in other words, taken on the demands of the religious life – not just chastity and obedience and a demanding round of prayer, but also the harsh mortifications which he added to the basic requirements – for the sake of the salvation of his soul. He had joined the friary to win his salvation. And Luther had been a very conscientious member of his order – indeed so conscientious that he drove his confessor to near distraction, with his constant worries and sometimes despair about whether he had done enough, and in the right spirit, to deserve salvation.

So what changed between 1505 and 1517? How did the super keen young monk eager to earn his salvation become the man who caused the whole edifice to crumble? Well, Luther the dutiful friar was given new duties. The new university of Wittenberg was shaped by the spirit of humanism, which in reaction to a scholasticism in which study had become a matter of writing a commentary on a commentary on another commentary, pressed for a new kind of enquiry, and in particular a return to the original texts of the Bible in the original languages. And Luther, the new professor, was given the task of writing the lectures for the new syllabus – as so often happens, the old guys were happy using the lectures they had written 30 years before – so Luther had to lecture on the Old and New Testaments in Hebrew and Greek. Looking back he would identify his encounter with two texts as crucial to his conversion, as he saw it, texts he encountered as he set about writing his lectures. We heard them in our first and second lessons.

In Romans he read Paul's words, 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation. In it is revealed the righteousness of God as it is written, "the just (or righteous) shall live by faith."' But what is the righteousness of God? Luther had always been taught and thought, so he said, that the righteousness of God consisted in God judging and punishing the sinner. But as he meditated on that passage from Romans, and as he looked back at those words in Genesis, which we heard as our first lesson, and to which Paul himself points later in his letter to the Romans – where we are told that Abraham believed God's great promise to him, 'and he counted it to him for righteousness' – Luther came to see that God's righteousness consists not in his judging, but in his justifying the sinner. The just would live by faith not by works – not by their merits, but by faith in God's will to save. Salvation was not a reward for effort, but God's gift in Christ. It was not earned or deserved – rather, it was to be joyously received.

With that thought, the old economy, not just indulgencies, came tumbling down – and it is difficult for us, perhaps, to realise the magnitude of the revolution in thought and action which it effected. It is as if you have been solemnly saving up to buy a wife for the whole of your teenage years and twenties, only to discover that wives are not bought and sold. Under the old economy, Christians, Luther amongst them, had been solemnly piling up merits. But God's love was not to be bought and sold. It was not to be acquired or earned, certainly not through indulgencies, but no more by any other elements of the religious life which Luther had so assiduously practiced – not by mortifications of the flesh, not by fasting, not by reciting the psalms late into the night, not by praying decades and decades of the rosary, not by going on pilgrimage, nor even by doing works of charity, albeit that works of charity are, so Luther taught, good and worthy. No. Luther's proposed a whole new revolutionary way of thinking and being in the world – he proposed that the Christian's faith is securely founded not on his or her own efforts, but on the graciousness of a gracious God.

Revolutionary though it was, Luther's simple thought caught on, and caught on on account of a whole host of factors – certainly Luther's courage, charisma, passionate advocacy, and powerful polemic were chief amongst these, allowing him, for example, to stand before the Emperor at the so-called Diet of Worms in 1521, and command the scene with his famous defiant declaration, 'Here I stand; I can do no other'. But this revolution made its way not solely on account of Luther's passion and persuasive power, but for a host of other reasons. To name just one: his courageous and powerful voice was powerfully and very effectively amplified, so to speak, by the cunning use of the new technology of printing. Think of his use of printing as like Donald Trump's use of tweets – only not so disturbing.

In any case, it was as if, with that notice posted on the notice board in 1517, Luther had put a match to some very dry kindling – such that by as soon as March of 1518, just six months after he had posted his notice, the situation was so enflamed that one of his opponents had predicted, or rather threatened, that Friar Martin ‘would go to heaven in his bath shirt’ (that is, in the simple shift left to a heretic about to be burned at the stake). The revolution progressed with such speed that when Luther married in 1525 (to a nun, just to add insult to injury), and was looking for a home, he was able to move back into the friary he had left some years before, since the other members of the community had, in the meantime, simply drifted away.

In celebrating the Reformation, we declare that it was a good thing that Luther was not sent for an early bath on a bonfire, as many wished, even up to the day of his death in the year this College was founded, 1546. But as one recent biographer has put it, Luther is a ‘difficult hero’. He was certainly a wounded hero – always prey to doubts and depression. And yes, difficult too. Alongside his good points – alongside his intense determination to proclaim afresh, and far and wide, the message of the Gospel – he had many bad ones. He was irascible, jealous of his pre-eminence, implacable with those he came to view as enemies, anti-semitic, misogynist, and one whose trust in the established authorities was combined with a deep distrust of the people (which led him to frame a woeful theory of church/state relations which was at least in part responsible for the Lutheran Church’s generally pitiable resistance to Hitler). And I shouldn’t even mention his sense of humour, which I had better simply refer to as earthy and leave it at that – though with the clue that it normally relies on the sort of words which make 3 year olds giggle hysterically, but which everyone else finds rather revolting.

But then I don’t think that the celebration of the reformation of which Martin Luther was a prime mover, needs to be, or should be, a celebration of heroes. Luther, more than anyone else, was aware that each and every one of us is a sinner before God, each of us needing to count on the righteousness God imputes to us, not on the righteousness we have squirrelled away in some religious savings bank. What we celebrate in celebrating the Reformation is not Luther as a man, but Luther’s discovery or rediscovery of this great message from the Bible – and, of course, his passionate desire, on account of this discovery, to return the Bible to all Christian people (which is actually, I think, the Reformation’s very greatest legacy). Luther, a very flawed man, found in the Bible a message of God’s justifying grace to us flawed people. What we celebrate in celebrating the Reformation is just that he voiced abroad with a new, fresh and powerful advocacy, the great message which he had discovered and to which he clung, and which he proclaimed with all his strength – the news of the pure and utter graciousness of a gracious God.