

Sermon on Romans 3:21-28, 29.10.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

21 But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

There are many inadequate views regarding the essential nature of the Protestant Reformation and especially about Martin Luther. Some consider him as an ecclesiastical rebel who sought to overthrow an ancient church organization. Nothing was further from his purpose. He pleaded only that the gospel of Christ be given free course within the church. The Reformation was not a summons to attack the Roman Catholic Church but to affirm the positive convictions derived from God's revelation of himself in Christ.

Another misconception is that Luther was a political and economic revolutionist. It is true that he divested religion of its monastic garb and put it in overalls. We are rediscovering today the dynamite in his teaching on the priesthood of all Believers and the sacredness of everyday work. But Luther was convinced that outward conditions would not improve until men experienced the transforming power of Christ and became the means for releasing it into all areas of life.

Still another inadequate view is that of seeing Luther as moral reformer, champion of the freedom of conscience and the right of private judgment. To be sure, when the solitary monk took his stand against emperor and pope on the ground of conscience, it was the beginning of a new age. Without the forces that he set in motion, the North American and Western European way of freedom and democracy, which rests upon the dignity and initiative of the individual, would hardly have been possible. But freedom from external restraint is only a by-product of the Reformation, not its essence. Luther did not say "My conscience is free" but "My conscience is bound to the word of God." When individuals and nations try to declare themselves free from God, they find that they are free only to destroy themselves.

Luther's real 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 men. 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 frightened 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:

"For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."

This is the key doctrine of the Reformation, justification by faith.

28 For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

God himself puts things right with us. How does he do that? 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 right wising take place? The answer is: "God puts men right with himself through their faith in Jesus Christ."

Christ sets us free 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.

Let me talk about these three principals for a moment:

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 God. It is to entrust yourself to Christ as a patient about to undergo an operation entrusts himself to the surgeon. I just have experienced this on Thursday when I underwent a major tooth operation. There was nothing by which I could influence the outcome. I had to trust this man that he knew what to do. I had to trust the anaesthetist to use the right amount of medication to knock me out, but also to wake me up again.

I think it is great that we can say: I can trust in God. Although I do not know everything, although I have no control over everything which happens in my life, there is the one who can take care of it, calm my fears, and has the capacity to give me peace in my heart even in the middle a mess I might be going through.

The second principal is that of 'sola gratia', by grace alone. As Paul states it, we are *now justified by his grace as a gift.* - 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 necessary for a close 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 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 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. The deep calls unto deep, the depth of man's distress to the depth of God's grace, and with a glorious result.

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 principle 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." And Peter declares, "Salvation is to be found through him alone, for there is no one else in the entire world, whose name God has given to men, by whom we can be saved." 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."

Through the centuries the keenest minds in Christendom have explored the meaning of that redemptive act by which Christ put us right with God. But the mystery remains. The Cross is God's way of bringing reconciliation, of healing rifts, of making peace. When a rift has occurred in human relations, each party waits for the other to make the first move toward reconciliation, and the rift only gets deeper. If it is to be healed, the one or the other must take the initiative, go half-way and then more than half-way. What God has done is to go all the way in freely given all of his love to heal the rift of our sin and to draw us to himself. It is a mistake to think that I must do something to make God my friend. The Cross tells me: God has done everything in his power to make me his friend. This is the reconciling strategy of the Cross, and this strategy we are asked to apply in all human relations, for to us has been committed the ministry of reconciliation. We become instruments of the reconciling love which alone can change human hearts.

When Stanley Jones was missionary in India, a British government official told him how he became a changed man. He said that he first became involved in sexual immorality when he went to Europe to study, leaving his trusting wife behind. When he returned home he continued his double life. The innocent trust of his wife stabbed him like a knife until he could bear the guilt no longer. He made up his mind to make a full confession to her but he was afraid that it would break up their marriage. But one day he decided to face it and told her the whole wretched story. As she realized what he was saying, she turned pale, staggered against the wall, and wept. Watching her, he saw his sin crucifying his wife. Her love was being tortured on the cross of his sin. "That moment," he said, "I saw the meaning of the cross of Christ. I saw from her lesser cross the meaning of the greater cross of him who bore the sins of the world. And when she said through her tears that she would not leave me but would help me back to a new life, I felt the offer of a new beginning made by the crucified Christ. From that moment I was a changed man."

The Cross has the power to transform our self-centered life into a God-centered life. It is God's great plus sign which stand from now on in front of our name.

Luther-scholar von Löwenich is therefore right in saying that all the basic emphases of the Reformation, 'sola fide', by faith alone, 'sola gratia', by grace alone, and 'solus Christus', Christ alone, may be summed up in sola cruce, by the Cross alone. For there is only one Mediator between God and man, only one bridge between heaven and earth, only one connection between our mortal life and life eternal - the crucified and risen Christ.

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.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.