

REFORMATION SUNDAY 2009

In 1516-1517, Johann Tetzel who was the Papal Commissioner for Indulgences was sent to Germany. His mission was to raise money for the rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. And he was to raise the money by selling indulgences – time off for the soul in purgatory, which you could buy by the year or day.

One of Tetzel's sayings he was fond of using when he was preaching was that "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul into heaven springs!" The priest and theology professor, Martin Luther, took exception to this abuse of the people of God. "Why does the pope build the basilica of St Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?" (Thesis 86)

The story goes (and there is of course some dispute about the order of events) that Martin Luther on 31 October 1517 wrote his 95 theses on this issue of indulgences and posted them on the church door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg. And that action is regarded as the event that sparked the Reformation – the Reformation which has written the history of the Western world as we know it, and the Reformation which is customarily remembered in churches around the world on the Sunday before All Saints Day. In other words, this is Reformation Day.

It may well be that the whole thing was not as dramatic as it sounds. After all, it seems to have been a regular custom at Wittenberg University to carry out theological debate and dispute by posting your views on the door of the church.

But we do know that Luther's 95 theses were very quickly translated from Latin into German – were printed and widely copied – which made the controversy one of the first in history to be facilitated by the printing press. Within two weeks, copies of the theses had spread throughout Germany; within two months throughout Europe. They reached these shores as early as 1519.

The fact that Reformation Day coincides with Halloween may not be mere coincidence. Halloween, being the Eve of All Saints' Day might have been an entirely appropriate day for Luther to post his 95 Theses against indulgences since the castle church would be open on All Saints' Day specifically for people to view a large collection of relics. The viewing of these relics was said to promise a reduction in time in purgatory similar to that of the purchase of an indulgence. Martin Luther may have been shrewd in his choice of that day to post his theses.

There was a time when Reformation Sunday provided the occasion for Protestants to get together and say bad things about Catholics. Reformation services were conclaves of smug pronouncements. We had the truth and they did not. They felt the same way about us.

And we do live in more enlightened times. Of course, this has not been the best week for relationships between Rome and the Reformed. The decision of the Vatican to set up a structure where disaffected Church of England priests can find a place does little to progress the cause of friendship between the Churches. It may be that in time this will be an enormously important watershed in the history of the Church – and not for the better. But in the meantime, we need to remember that much of the old bigotry and hatred has been well-

moderated – and that the prayer of Jesus that all his people should be one is probably closer to being realised than for many centuries past.

But why talk about Reformation in Morningside United Church this morning? Or in the Church in general. It is true that fewer people in our world know much about Jesus – so why confuse the issue with stories about Martin Luther. If folk today don't know biblical history – will church history be of much use to them?

In today's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31-32) This is a message that lies at the very heart of Reformed Theology. At its best – and it has often been at its worst – but at its best the Reformed tradition has taught us that the biggest danger to our relationship with a loving God is when we avoid thinking about truth.

You hear it said often enough. "All religions are the same – all religions lead to the same God – they just take different paths!" But in truth, and in truth spoken with the deepest respect for all creeds, and the deepest love for all our fellow human beings – nevertheless in truth that kind of statement puts its faith in faith – and not in the object of that faith which is for us Jesus Christ – incarnate among us as God.

We can't truly begin to speak to fellow Christians, Muslims, Jews – the whole world of belief – if we abandon the very language that is reformed and Christian.

We must abandon forever the hatreds that have plagued us – but at the same time, hold on to that especially Reformed gift of passion and devotion to a truth that is larger than we are!

The truth of Reformation is that Jesus alone has dominion over our lives. Today as we celebrate here in church baptism, the ordination of four new young elders, and finally communion – we are living out our commitment to "abide in Christ" – in the language of John's gospel. From Christ, and from Christ alone, we claim confidence – along with his love for others, his understanding of our weaknesses, his forgiveness, his healing. And we rejoice and celebrate.

And that is our message for Reformation Day 2009 – and for all the days God gives us.

AMEN