

Readings: Romans 3:21b-28
Matthew 5:2-10

On behalf of Canon Felicity and myself, I want to say a big ‘thank you’ for your invitation and for your kind welcome. It’s a great privilege for us to share with you in such a significant anniversary. This very day in 1517, Martin Luther published his 95 theses and sent them to the Archbishop of Mainz.

It was Luther’s reading of the Psalms and his reading of St. Augustine that caused him to look afresh at the letters to the Romans, to the Galatians and to the Hebrews.

Our reading from Romans chapter 3 this morning could well have been one of the significant passages on his road of discovery.

- Here he encountered an experience of the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. He wrote, ‘Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace.’
- Here he discovered that God loved *him*.
- Here he discovered the power of the cross for atonement of his sins.
- Here he discovered that he was forgiven freely; he didn’t have to *earn* it.
- Here he discovered that he was justified by God, rather than having to justify himself by his own deeds.
- As Luther himself said, ‘We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds.’ Luther discovered that holiness was a gift of the Holy Spirit, not a human achievement.

These were revolutionary discoveries which now lie at heart of the Reformation Churches – and we need to ensure that they remain so.

In the light of all this, then, how are we to approach this great celebration today? Is it simply to be a time of looking back in gratitude for God’s work through Martin Luther? Of course, that is part of it. We thank God for the effect it has had in the hearts and minds of countless people at that time and in the years that followed.

I have entitled this sermon *Semper Reformanda* – this is a Latin Phrase which may be known to you. It means ‘Always reforming’. I’ve used it as my title because I believe that this anniversary is an opportunity to reaffirm our desire to be continually reforming and renewing ourselves and our churches.

As we look back in gratitude, I think we should be asking two important questions:

1. What does *Semper Reformanda* – always reforming – mean for our churches today?
2. What does *Semper Reformanda* – always reforming – mean for the individual Christian today? What does it mean for you and for me?

1. What does ‘Semper Reformanda’ mean for our churches today?

Since I was ordained in 1974, the world has changed greatly. Those changes are the background to where our continuing reformation should be taking us. We need to change, in part, because of the rise of secularism; in part, because of the rise

of materialism; and, in part, because of an increasing individualism. These three factors have led to an alienation from the church of many people, young and old alike.

I read a statistic about the UK some while ago, which said that 53% of the British population had *never* been in a church. It's difficult to believe it, but many people are seriously alienated from the Christian faith in our society. Please correct me if I am wrong, but I think, in Germany, 40% of the population have now declared themselves as 'non-religious'.

In the 1980s, the American evangelist, Dr Billy Graham came to the UK, and preached to huge crowds in a variety of football grounds around the country. I was Vicar of a church in the city of Bath at that time. Each evening for a week, we took a double-decker bus full of people – many unchurched – to the Bristol City ground.

I don't believe that could happen today, because we live in a much more individualised society than 35 years ago. An illustration of this is that an 80 year old woman who lived opposite us – a member of the church where we worship – died recently. Such is the lack of community in our road of 40 dwellings that people living only two or three doors away from her were unaware of her death until sometime later.

I mention this because social changes such as these need to be taken into account as we think about our mission to be salt and light in the world.

Semper Reformanda does not mean abandoning the truths which Luther rediscovered from the Bible, but rather reforming our churches to present Christ more effectively to the world in which we live, just as Luther did in his world 500 years ago.

For many years, the Church of England has assumed that people will come to us. However, if you have never set foot in a church, or at least, not since childhood, it's a daunting prospect to do so.

Let me give you an illustration: In the UK we have betting shops, places where people go to bet on horse races, or on football matches, and so on. I expect you have similar places here too. I've never been inside a betting shop. When I pass one, I can't see in because the windows are obscured so that people can't see who's in there. If I went in, I wouldn't know what to do, or where to go, or how it all works. I'd feel I was an alien.

It's like that for someone who passes a church. The same is true; often you can't see in through the stained glass; you don't know how it all works; you wouldn't know where to sit; you wouldn't know where to open the service books. You'd feel you were an alien.

If our churches are to re-engage with folk who have either lost touch with their Christian roots, or only had them as children, we need to be *intentionally missional*. That phrase 'intentionally missional' has become a bit of a cliché in Britain, but that doesn't stop it being vital. In our churches, we have to find ways of engaging with people spiritually.

Many churches in the UK have all sorts of social programmes running in our buildings, and I think it's true in Germany too. The church where my wife and I have worshipped since my retirement has a good number of them. We have a pre-school running daily; people with dementia come to sing songs from the past; some of our church members are street pastors for the night life in our town; other people volunteer at a foodbank, and so on.

All this is highly commendable, providing for people's physical needs. The challenge, though, is to have a spiritual dimension to what we do, so that people's spiritual needs are met as well as their physical ones.

To begin to meet those spiritual needs I want to suggest three things.

(i) First, I want to suggest that the key to this is to equip the laity – the people of God – to be able share their faith with others. We need to catch a vision that it is part of our calling as Christians to help people to understand the free gift of the gospel – that precious truth that Luther rediscovered.

Those of us who are ministers need to offer encouragement and training to our congregations so they are more confident of what they believe. If they are more confident in their faith, they will be more confident to speak naturally to others about their own experience of Christ.

Ministers need to help people to recognise that they are Christ's ambassadors in the secular world. The laity go to places and meet people where ministers may never have the opportunity to go.

(ii) Secondly, I want to suggest that we ensure our churches really are places of welcome to people. I know from my experience as a Bishop that almost every church thinks it is a welcoming church. Welcome, though, is more than just a 'good morning' at the door. People need to feel the warmth of the love that members have for one another. It was said of the early Christians, 'See how these Christians love one another'. Do people say that about your church and mine?

We need to remember also that people often come to faith *after* they have joined a congregation. People often come to belong to a church before they come to a belief of their own. The warmth of the Christian family should enfold the newcomer without making demands of them. First, they experience being enfolded by the love of the church members. Then they start to realise they are also being enfolded in the love of Christ. If the church is indeed Christ's body on earth, then we should expect people to encounter Christ in our midst.

(iii) Thirdly, we need to recognise that however wonderful our church might be, culturally there are many people who will never cope with the structure of church as we traditionally have it.

The Fresh Expressions of Church movement in the UK tries to reach certain groups of people by not 'doing church' the traditional way, but by releasing pioneer ministers to experiment with unconventional approaches to being church.

For example, a fresh expression of church in the town where I live, is called 'The Order of the Black Sheep'. In English, the phrase 'Black Sheep' means a person who is rejected by or alienated from conventional society. This church operates in a café environment with a clientele of people who appreciate heavy metal music.

There is a chapel with impressive visual presentations which are quite different from traditional churches. The pioneer minister is an ordained Church of England minister licensed by the Bishop, but set free from the constraints of traditional patterns. People feel comfortable there because there are no expectations to dress in a certain way or to be 'respectable'. There's a strong sense of community which is part of the attraction for people who feel marginalised.

Another example is a story of three Christian women in a village who love cooking. They invited teenagers to learn how to cook – and then they ate what they'd made. As they ate together they talked about their lives, and, when it seemed natural, the women shared what their Christian faith meant to them. The meals always started with a prayer of thanks. The teenagers were invited to add their own 'thank you', and later their own 'asking' prayers. They wrote their prayers on a piece of paper, dropped them into a cooking bowl, passed round the bowl and drew out a prayer to read. Increasingly, the teenagers chatted about Christianity and eventually Cook@church, a new Christian community, was born.

Of course, such experiments as these are risky, and challenge the way we are as a church traditionally. But isn't this exactly in the spirit of Martin Luther, whom we celebrate today? The question for us all, as we consider the continual renewal of our churches, is this: 'What is God calling us to be and to do in the present time?'

2. What does *Semper Reformanda* – always reforming - mean for you and for me?

As our gospel reading today, we had the first part of St. Matthew's account of the 'Sermon on the Mount'. As you know, this was preached to the disciples, not to the crowds. It was intended for those who were Jesus' followers, not as general teaching for the interested people who were flocking to hear him. So this list of blessings are for those followers of Jesus who exhibit these particular qualities. Indeed, I think the intention of Jesus is not so much to encourage us to be pure in heart or merciful or meek and so on, (though he does want to encourage us to those things), but rather to demonstrate the whole range of Christian character.

'If you're the sort of person who shows these qualities as a Christian then you'll be blessed indeed', seems to be what he is seeking to convey. Put simply, Christians are blessed when they adopt the character of Jesus their Lord.

'This is the sort of person I want you to be', he says to his disciples, 'and, if you are, then be blessed indeed.'

'Blessing' and 'blessed' are two rather archaic sounding words in English, but it's difficult to find any satisfactory modern equivalent. Probably the best translation I have come across is 'How great is the joy of those who have these qualities'.

If we take an overview of the qualities mentioned here, they are summed up in a word which is closest to a summary of the character of Christ. That word is 'humility'. The things Christians are blessed for are not the great things in life. They are not the things which are marks of greatness in the world's eyes; but they *are* the marks of humility.

(i) There's a *spiritual humility* here: blessed are the poor in spirit.

The kingdom of heaven doesn't belong to those who think their spirituality is acceptable to God, but to those who know that it isn't. It rather belongs to those who know they are spiritual paupers, and have come to rely on the spiritual riches of God himself who are truly blessed.

(ii) There's also a *personal humility* here: blessed are the meek.

Who inherits the earth? The conqueror; the statesman; the financier? The presidents and the politicians? Bishops and priests? 'No', says Jesus, 'it's the meek'.

It's those who are personally humble; those who are prepared to put God before position and honour and power.

Stress and strain drop away when we cease to compete with the world on its own terms. Stress and strain drop away when we allow God's Holy Spirit to give us his power for living a Christ-like life.

This means always reforming. This means a constant spiritual renewal if we are to inherit the promises of these verses. I have a friend from University days, who said that his prayer was that he might have a moment by moment faith in a moment by moment Saviour, for a moment by moment cleansing from sin, and for a moment by moment refilling with the Holy Spirit.

I think that's a wonderful prayer. *Semper Reformanda*. If we Christians are to make any impact on our society, we need that constant renewal in the Spirit so that we always reflect the character of our Lord.

As we thank God for Luther today, may the Lutheran churches be a beacon of constant renewal. My prayer is that you will meet the challenges of our day, as Luther met the challenges of his day. Amen.

+Richard Inwood