

Sunday 5th November 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 32 “Meet and right it is to sing”
 416 “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”
 433 “Out of the depths I cry to thee” vv 1-3
 585 “God, whose love is all around us”
 623 “A safe stronghold our God is still”

READINGS: Romans 3:21-26
 Matthew 23: 1-12

“THE LEGACY OF LUTHER”

When you read the November edition of our Church magazine, Window on Wesley’s, you will read the quite dramatic story of what has happened to our member and Heritage Steward, Monika. She fell at home, was unable to get up and lay there for eight days on the floor of her home in Kingston. When the ambulance people came to take her off to hospital her greatest concern was that they should not forget her books – her books on Luther which she was reading in preparation for giving a presentation at her local Methodist Church in New Malden.

When I went to visit her a few days later I asked her how she had managed to cope with all that time lying on the floor. She responded to me by saying, ‘I was planning my presentation on Luther in my head.’

Monika grew up in Germany in a Lutheran environment. On coming to Britain she found her home in the Methodist Church. She had been approached by the New Malden Methodists to speak about Luther on the 500th Anniversary of his writing of his issues with the Church – his 95 theses – on the door of the Church in Wittenberg for debate.

I hope that Monika gets to do her presentation – even if later than intended – as she is still in hospital.

For Monika it is important for Methodists to have some understanding of Luther’s influence directly and indirectly on the Wesley’s.

Over the past few weeks in preparation for the 500th anniversary of Luther’s provocative action in Wittenberg in 1517 there have been worship services, lectures and programmes on radio and television. It has been difficult to escape from Luther – his ideas, his impact and his music. I am not sure what most Methodists make of this. Do we look at Luther as a person who started off the movement which we now call the Protestant Reformation but whose influence was strongest in Germany and Scandinavia? There are some Lutheran churches in Britain but relatively few.

However, the Protestant Reformation on the continent of Europe did, of course, have a tremendous impact on the Church in 16th century Britain which gave rise to the

Church of England once Henry VIII broke the link with the Pope in Rome for domestic and political purposes as much as for religious reasons. All of that is seriously simplified history but this is a sermon not a history lesson.

The Wesley brothers were priests in the Church of England and inherited all the influences which had formed their Church. They also inherited a continental European form of Protestantism through their contact with the Moravians, a group who had begun their life in the 14th century in the Czech Republic and then had a revival in the 16th century when they moved to Saxony.

Yet, for Methodists, there is just one point during our church year that reference is made explicitly to Martin Luther and we shall come to that in a moment after a little bit of scene setting.

On May 24th 1738 we know that John Wesley was in some state of spiritual agitation – indeed he and his brother, Charles, had been in that state for some time. They had the feeling that they were just going through the motions of faith. They went to America to try to convert not only others but themselves. They returned from America dejected, no further forward in their spiritual pilgrimage. It was German Moravians who supported them during this wilderness period.

Then, to cut a long story short, Charles Wesley had a decisive experience on the 21st May – having read Luther's comments on the letter of Paul to the Galatians. Then, three days later, John Wesley went to the service in St. Paul's Cathedral and then on to a meeting of a religious society in Aldersgate Street – close to where the Museum of London now stands.

John Wesley wrote in his Journal about his experiences that day and although we have heard these words many times before, they bear repeating here.

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through Jesus Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation.”

It was the Biblical scholar Luther's understanding of the New Testament and particularly of Paul's letter to the Church in Rome that had convinced him that his own Church, the Catholic Church, had got things badly wrong. In parts of the Catholic Church the emphasis had come to be on good works as being that which put people right with God.

What particularly angered Luther was the sale of 'indulgencies'. Let me explain that. The Church taught that before entering heaven Christians were in a state called purgatory. It was claimed that they stayed there until they paid the penalty imposed by the church for their sins. Forty years before the Reformation the Pope began to

grant 'indulgencies' which could lessen, or even cancel the pains and punishment of purgatory for oneself or for those already in purgatory. In Luther's day indulgencies were sold and people thought of them as, in Luther's own words, 'securing their salvation. The money from selling indulgencies, by the way, went to build the magnificent St Peter's in Rome.

Luther read Paul's Epistle to the Romans and read of something very different from what he saw in his church. He saw justification – that is, being put right with God being gained not by what a person does – good works or, even less, by money paid but, in contrast by the grace of God in Christ.

Let us hear again a few lines from the Romans passage we heard read earlier.

“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God They are now justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

For Paul, writing to the Christians of Rome of both Jewish and Gentile heritage, in Jesus God had proved true to his Covenant relationship with his people. In Jesus, God had provided an answer to a world gone astray. Or, to put it in other words, the death of Jesus could be represented as a new Exodus, freeing God's people from their slavery to sin.

For human beings to be in right relationship with God, the initiative had to come from God in sending his Son. It was the grace – the unmerited loving-kindness of God towards his people that made salvation possible not the works of humankind.

God's grace in Christ – a free gift – accepted by the believer, was the bedrock of belief for the Christian – and if there were good works they would flow spontaneously from this relationship.

Wesley did not agree with all that Luther said and did but on justification by faith and not by works as a basic starting point in the life of the believer they were at one.

For both Luther and Wesley faith was not something we will out of our own head or heart, it is not an intellectual or moral achievement on the part of the believer for, if it were, we would be back to 'works' again. Rather faith is what happens when the gospel is rightly spoken to or enacted for us and which then puts each one of us in the place where we can only say, 'I believe,, help my unbelief.' The gospel by which we are saved is not only justification by faith but justification by faith in Jesus Christ – Jesus risen from the dead, Jesus always going ahead of us, Jesus always beckoning us into a relationship.

Faith hears the unconditional promise of our inclusion in God's future and responds, 'I believe, help my unbelief.'

That is the good news but the less good news in our own time is that fewer and fewer people care about whether they are right with God because God does not figure in their thinking most of the time.

Justification by faith in Christ needs to be preached in our own time not primarily in contrast to justification by works as in Luther's time but against self-justification – the idea that people have in which they consider themselves self-sufficient, able to save themselves through a successful life according to the worldly standards of our time.

That is what makes communion so powerful – here at the table – it is God in Christ who invites us to this table. We come empty-handed, whoever we are, holding out our empty hands to receive the body of Christ. In a few minutes in our service we shall hear these words:

“God, you made a Covenant with your people and declared your purpose of justice and love. When all things were ready you sent your Son to be our Saviour.”

All things are ready – and so we may approach this table in faith, through God's grace. Amen