

Reformation 500.

If you have travelled to Germany this year, you won't have been able to miss the commemoration of Reformation 500. The Germans have turned with relief from lamenting their role in the world wars to recalling their part in triggering, exactly half a millennium ago, the spiritual renewal that we call the Reformation.

The man who pulled the trigger was Martin Luther. Son of a lesser mine-owner in an obscure corner of Saxony in NE Germany, Martin turned out to be intellectually gifted and was put through university at Erfurt. His father expected him to climb the social ladder by becoming a lawyer, but Martin disappointed him by becoming a monk in an Augustinian monastery famed for its learning and for the rigours of the monks' life-style. Looking back on his time in the monastery, Luther wrote,

I was indeed a good monk and kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say: if ever a monk got to heaven through monasticism, I should have been that man....I would have become a martyr through fasting, prayer, reading and other good works had I remained a monk very much longer.

Yet Luther failed to achieve spiritual peace.

And yet my conscience could never give me certainty: I always doubted and said 'You did not do that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession'....Then God appears horrifyingly angry....There can be no flight, nor consolation either from within or from without, but all is accusation.

Though he didn't use our terms, it is plain that even Luther's sympathetic confessor thought Luther the victim of obsessive, compulsive disorder. But it was not with his confessor that Martin took issue. From 1509 he taught at the new university of Wittenberg, a town on the Elbe noted then chiefly for the enormous collection of relics of saints which the local ruler, Elector Friedrich the Wise, had gathered in his Castle Church. According to late medieval doctrine, the saints had accumulated a vast store of merit of which the Church was the custodian. If ordinary people were to shorten or avoid the pains of purgatory, where after death they had to pay the penalty for their sins, they needed to draw on the merits of the saints by acquiring indulgences. By the

Church's authority, indulgences were attached to visits to the Elector's relic collection, especially for people going on All Saints Day. Additionally, indulgences were sold from time to time by licensed indulgence-sellers and it was these, currently at work in Germany in order to raise money for the rebuilding of St Peter's in Rome, who attracted Luther's anger in 1517. The indulgence system made salvation a mercenary matter, in contradiction to Luther's deepest-held convictions. It had even become possible to buy indulgences on behalf of others, such as deceased parents, a refinement which seemed to remove the individual's responsibility before God altogether. So it was that Luther protested by posting his 95 Theses (or arguments) against indulgences on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church on the Eve of All Saints 1517. Though the traditional image of Luther hammering his Theses on to the door has dramatic appeal, more important was the rapid dissemination of his protest throughout Germany by means of the printing press, which meant that the argument would not be confined to academic debate.

It used to be thought by historians that Luther had already worked out his main theological positions by 1517. It is now argued that Luther's theology evolved as he responded to the attempts by the Church after 1517 to make him shut up. The men who debated with him spelt out the logical conclusions of his initial ideas, which, they showed, might well lead him to the same fate as the Czech heretic Hus had suffered a century earlier: burning at the stake. In an autobiographical fragment of 1545, Luther claimed that he made his breakthrough in 1519 as a result of meditating on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans. He concluded that salvation could not be achieved by buying indulgences or indeed by any human effort, no matter how heroic. It was something given to us as a free gift through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, which we access through faith. Salvation is through faith alone, *sola fide*. Having reached this insight, Luther said, *I felt myself straightway born afresh and to have entered through the open gates into paradise itself.*

Faith is a personal relationship with God; so salvation does not come to us via an intermediary, a priest in other words. What Luther meant when he wrote in a manifesto of 1520 about the priesthood of all believers was simply that all believers have a direct relationship with God, who does not need ordained clergy as channels of his grace. It was above all this radical attack on the status of the visible church which led first to his excommunication by Pope Leo X in 1520 and then to his outlawry by the new Emperor Charles V in the Assembly at Worms in 1521. Luther there summed up his own position as follows: *Unless*

I am convicted by the testimony of scripture or plain reason...I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I neither can nor will revoke anything. Or, more punchily, but less accurately: Hier steh' ich; ich kann nicht anders.

Luther seems at one point to have expected martyrdom, but he avoided that fate largely because the printing press enabled him to achieve widespread popularity and because he was protected by the powerful Electors of Saxony. Luther had hoped that the entire church would be speedily transformed as everyone accepted his insights, which he regarded as the plain meaning of Scripture. The Catholic Church proved more resilient than he had assumed. After 1525 the new Saxon Elector Johann found it necessary to establish an organised Lutheran church within his territories. After 1532 his son Johann Friedrich headed a German Lutheran league against the German Catholic rulers, including the Emperor himself. By the middle of the 16th century Lutheran churches had become established in Scandinavia and much of Germany and Western Christianity had been split.

What was Lutheranism? Perhaps it will be easiest to explain if I take you on a tour of the first purpose-built Lutheran church in the Johann Friedrich's castle at Torgau on the Elbe, Schloss Hartenfels. We enter the rectangular building through an arch in the middle of the long north side decorated not by statues of the saints or the Virgin, as in many medieval churches, but by carvings of the instruments of Christ's Passion, the sole means of our salvation. Facing us on the opposite wall as we enter is the pulpit, reminding us that the Lutheran pastor is above all a preacher who expounds the Word through which God awakens faith in us. The pulpit is decorated with three Biblical scenes. One shows Christ as a child in discussion with the doctors of the Law: Jesus himself set the precedent of expounding the Scriptures which the preacher in this pulpit will follow. Another panel shows Christ expelling the money-changers from the Temple: just as Jesus purged the Temple, so Lutherans saw themselves as purging the Christian religion of the distracting and disfiguring excrescences which it had acquired in the middle ages, like the cult of saints and sale of indulgences. The church I am describing is appropriately bare, lacking the profusion of side-chapels and images characteristic of late medieval churches. The third scene on the pulpit shows Christ and the woman taken in adultery. This story appealed to Lutherans because all involved in it are brought to accept their sinfulness, echoing Luther's (and St Paul's) view that

human beings are incapable of saving themselves—all have to rely on faith in the redeeming sacrifice of Christ.

The church at Hartenfels is above all a preaching hall. It was hardly practical to make the congregation to stand, as in medieval churches and this church has a full complement of seats at ground level, with more in the galleries that provide for people at first-floor level. Luther did not intend, however, that the congregation should simply be passive listeners. The entire west end of the church is taken up by a large organ, a reminder of the role of music and congregational singing in Lutheran services. Unlike other Protestant reformers such as Calvin, Luther did not distrust the senses. He determined to exploit the emotional power of music. He became an important hymn-writer and made room for a musical tradition that would ultimately produce the oratorios of J.S.Bach.

We must now turn eastwards in the church at Hartenfels. Two items of furniture dominate the space. First comes the font. Its centrality emphasises its importance as one of the two sacraments (out of the medieval seven) accepted by Luther. The small bowl is suitable primarily for infant baptism, an institution which Luther defended against radical critics who insisted that only adults could experience saving faith. In contrast, Luther held to the importance of bringing children up within a Christian community of which they became members at baptism. And then there is the Table, no longer, strictly speaking, an altar, since the presiding minister is not thought of as repeating Christ's sacrifice. It is not the minister's actions that matter, but the words of Jesus, spoken at the Last Supper and now read by the minister: *Hoc est corpus meum*. These words from the Bible assure the believer that Christ is fully and really present in the sacrament. So the most significant article on the Table is the Bible. This reminds us that Luther's most important legacy to the church he founded was his translation of the Bible into German. Unlike our King James translation, Luther's Bible is not the product of a committee of scholars, but the work of one man determined to make God's Word accessible by translating it into simple and colloquial German. Luther's achievement transformed both German religion and the German language.

500 years after his protest, how are we to evaluate the career of Martin Luther? There is much about him to dislike: his nasty comments about the Jews, his harsh condemnation of down-trodden peasants who dared to rebel against their lords and his uncompromising and divisive approach even to

other critics of the Roman Church. Most of us have been sufficiently affected by the modern ecumenical movement to regret the schism in Western Christianity which resulted from his career. And yet Benedict XVI, successor of Pope Leo X, who excommunicated Luther, finds much to commend in Luther's thought. In particular, Luther called Christians away from an egocentric preoccupation with getting through Purgatory to the fundamental issue of their relationship with God. And he put Jesus Christ back at the centre of the Faith, from where some people had displaced him by their devotion to saints and to the Virgin Mary. Add to that the German Bible and his contribution to the German musical tradition and it is clear that for all his failings, Luther has had a hugely positive impact on Western Christianity.