Back to the Cross – Bringing the Reformation Full Circle



Lightning struck – right in the path of the young law student Martin Luther. What if he had been hit? Where would he have found himself? That was the big question. A question none of us can evade today, unless we have opted to shut God right out of our lives. For Luther, the experience marked a radical turning point in his life: he emerged as the reformer of our Church.

A mighty fortress?

A mighty fortress is our God … Does pride in our Protestant beliefs fill our hearts as we sing the famous lyrics? Not so for Luther, who wrote them in desperate need and distress. Under pressure from all sides, he was making a powerful statement of faith that God's protection was sufficient in the face of hostility from church and state.

It would never have occurred to Luther to question God's existence. He was well aware that one day each of us will have to give account to a holy God. And this awareness led him to joy: to the discovery of a treasure so precious he was willing to suffer for it, foregoing the joys of the world. In life and death he could depend on the Kingdom that "is forever!"

Sr. Joela Krüger

Which kingdom did he mean? The Kingdom of God, eagerly anticipated by Christians everywhere – in happiness and sorrow, in prosperity and poverty, in affliction and persecution. For two thousand years Christians have been united in the words from the Lord's prayer: *Your Kingdom come!*

But the young, Spirit-inspired Martin Luther knew that for God's Kingdom to come the Church needed a radical about-turn. The Church is subject to Holy Scripture and not the other way around. **SOLA SCRIPTURA** – back to the Word of God.

Legacy and burden

Experts on the Reformation agree: the young Martin Luther is to be preferred over the old. But to this day the patently irrational change in the last twenty years of his life is hard to explain. What could be behind it?

Outstanding as his early ministry was, Luther was soon to become increasingly aggressive on all fronts. His late publications include vulgar, profoundly destructive attacks on the Jews, continuing an age-old, deeply ingrained pattern of church history. The promise of renewal and reorientation gave way to an eruption of anti-Semitism in its crudest form, seen to this day in the sculpture high on the outside wall of Luther's parish church in Wittenberg. Can a "culture of remembrance" justify the preservation of a "work of art" and inscription that flagrantly ridicule God Himself and His chosen people? Is a church wall a fitting place for such a "teaching tool"?

Available for download

Like an installed app, centuries-old attitudes program and influence us. Instantly retrievable, they affect our thinking patterns almost imperceptibly. While it is important to gain an intellectual grasp of the theological issues at stake, underlying attitudes can remain untouched: the "system" has not been "cleared of a corrupted program".

Our intellect comprises only a small part of our personality. All that we are, body, soul and spirit, needs to be surrendered to Jesus Christ. That is the only way to set in motion a deep and lasting process of reconciliation and healing: **SOLUS CHRISTUS!**



As if at the clicking of an icon, 400 years after Luther's lifetime an old program was reactivated. To change the metaphor, a volcano long since deemed extinct erupted in full force. Destructive masses of lava flowed out from Germany into the whole world. With few exceptions, the German state and church united in hatred of Jews. As elsewhere, swastikas were raised over the sites of Luther's most prolific activity: the Wartburg, Eisenach and Wittenberg.

But isn't it time to conclude with relief that this barbarity is now history, the volcano poses no further threat?

Back to the "founding charter"

Unless the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ stands tall at the centre of the Church, this same volcano could erupt at any time, spewing out its destructive mass of lava.

At Calvary a title was nailed above the head of our crucified Lord: **JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS.** Written over 2000 years ago in three languages by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, it was intended as a mockery. To this day we find it in many churches and cathedrals in its shorter form: **INRI** (Latin: JESUS NAZARENUS, REX JUDÆORUM).



The inscription refers to the Lord of Christians everywhere. We have claimed His work of salvation at Calvary with grateful hearts; we have built on the foundation which He alone could lay. But in the process we have lost sight of a key document, our "founding charter". Fixed to the Cross, its exact wording was recorded in the gospels. The facts are clear: Jesus Christ came from Nazareth and is King of the Jews.

Our forgetfulness was to have dire consequences. It paved the way for the unthinkable. Down through the centuries, apparently without qualm or misgiving, Christians brutally persecuted God's chosen people. The pivotal issue for the future of Christianity will be whether or not we recognize the **INRI** inscription and its implication: the Jewish identity of our Redeemer.

Hallowed be Your name!

The volcano is still rumbling. It is up to us, Christians from all walks of faith, nations and backgrounds, to forestall a further eruption. Let us gather together at the place that defines our identity: the Cross. Integral to this process is our recognition that Jesus suffered the worst excesses of His Passion at the hands of Gentiles: the Romans. Scourging, death sentence, crowning with thorns and crucifixion were all carried out under the mocking accusation that He claimed to be King of the Jews.

Jesus taught us to pray, *Hallowed be Your name*. Will the humiliation and mockery of our Lord at last be turned into honour and glory for the King of the Jews? Will we join together in setting an ecumenical milestone that can't be missed?

There's another way we can further the true spirit of the Reformation. We can be specific in addressing God. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When joining together in the Creed, there is a small addendum that we can make inwardly: "… conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, *a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel"* (see Luke 2:32).

A significant step forward

The sixty-second of Martin Luther's 95 theses reads: *The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.* This leads us back to the heart of our faith: grace is being offered to us. Grace free and without cost.

Grace undeserved, grace which covers even the deepest offences. **SOLA GRATIA!**

But free doesn't mean valueless. The gift of grace needs to be probed in its full significance. It needs to be firmly anchored in our lives so that we can discover the secret of renewal:

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, I would like to get to know You better. Reveal to me the truth about Yourself, about myself, about the conflicts and confusion of the various religions and the massive problems engulfing our world today. Be merciful to me, a sinner. I commit my life completely to You, my Lord and my God.

Above the North Portal of his parish church in Wittenberg is a saying by Luther that sets us in the right direction:

THE CHRISTIAN MAY BEAR MANY CROSSES, YET IN HIS HEART HE WALKS ON ROSES.



BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

SJ 10e The Cross in the Crossfire, 24 pages
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© 2016, Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, P.O.B. 13 01 29, 64241 Darmstadt, Germany

BRANCH ADDRESSES:

Australia: P.O.B. 430, Camden, NSW 2570 • Canada: R.R.1, Millet, AB T0C 1Z0 • UK: 17 Gills Hill Lane, Radlett, Herts. WD7 8DE • USA: P.O.B. 30022, Phoenix, AZ 85046-0022

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