

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we're celebrating the Reformation, although most of you know that the actual festival is October 31st. We're actually finishing up the 500th anniversary year of the Reformation. You might remember for us, most of the celebrating actually happened in the year preceding the 500th anniversary day.

Reformation, of course, is just the result of reform, that is, of a change in something to make it better. And in the 16th century, the church needed reforming. It was filled with abusive doctrine, harmful practices, corrupt leaders, degenerate clergy. On the other hand, if you pay attention at all to the news, you know that many shameful things are taught and practiced in the church today. And you are right if you think we need reform, for the church is always in need of reforming, for she is made up of people; and people are sinners; and sinners mess things up.

In the 16th century, Luther's struggle with the church began with the penitential system, indulgences, and purgatory, but the corruption went deeper. We today hear of the priestly abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, and the corruption has been shown to extend to the leadership. But let us not only cast a disapproving glance toward Rome. Let us also look at our own house to repent of the things we've messed up, that we might live in the freedom of Christ.

Now there is an historical aspect to the Reformation, that I'll not ignore this morning — not everyone here has been raised on this history.

Reformation history revolves, in large part, around Martin Luther, although there were other reformers before Luther. They, however, ended up mostly martyred for the audacity to challenge church authority. But the Lord protected this messenger who restored the eternal gospel to the church, and he died not as an obscure martyr but as the Reformer of the Church.

I'll pick up Luther's story as he is studying to be a lawyer. One day while traveling down a road, a terrible storm arose, frightening Luther. "St. Anne, save me, and I'll become a monk," Luther prayed. Luther did survive the storm, and true to his word he became a monk, and later was ordained a priest, and later still became a doctor of theology at Wittenberg University.

But that's where his questions began—about that whole system of penance. And that led, as most of you remember, to his nailing the famous 95 Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg that historians mark as the beginning of the Reformation.

News spread quickly, and Luther had to defend his teachings. He was summoned before Cardinal Cajetan — that didn't go well. He debated others, most

particularly his arch nemesis Johann Eck. Pope Leo sent him an official writing—a Papal Bull: recant or be excommunicated. Luther threw the bull in the fire.

Luther was called before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at Worms. Again, he was ordered to recant. And it was difficult — the emperor held Luther's life in his hands. If he said no, his life was surely forfeit. Luther asked for a day to think about the command.

But the next day, Luther came back steeled by the word of God and prayer. Before the emperor, the princes, and representatives of the Pope, Luther replied: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ... I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything" And he concluded with the famous words: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

Luther is allowed safe passage back to Wittenberg, but Luther's prince was skeptical about that. Elector Fredrick had Luther captured and taken to the Warburg Castle for safe-keeping. There Luther studied. There Luther translated the New Testament into German. Indeed, there we find Luther's legacy to the church.

For Luther's legacy to the church is not the details of history, as interesting as we may find them, but in his theology. Luther pointed the church back to the Word of God and not "pope[s] or ... councils" who "have often erred and contradicted themselves." That's why he translated the Bible into the people's common language: that we might take stock in Jesus' word as Jesus taught: "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"

Luther pointed the church back to Jesus' work on behalf of sinners. Luther struggled with his sin that enslaved him and kept him out of the house—condemned. He struggled with the law that reminded him that he was "*accountable to God*" and his accounting fell "*short of the glory of God.*" He struggled for knew he could not be justified by the works of the law, for the more he strove by the law, the more he knew his sin. Luther struggled until he was set free by the Son.

Thus Luther found his comfort in Christ and in His cross. "*The cross alone is our theology,*" Luther said, echoing St. Paul: "*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Cor. 2:2). Again, Paul wrote, "*Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*" (Galatians 6:14). By this, Luther emphasized that our salvation is not "do," contrary to what the world would tell us, but "done," accomplished by Christ on the cross: "*It is finished*" (John 19:30).

Luther pointed the church back to a salvation that is a gift of God, not based on any merit or worthiness in man, but solely on the merits of Christ. St. Paul writes, “*All ... are justified [declared righteous, holy, forgiven] by his [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [atoning sacrifice] by his blood, to be received by faith*” (Romans 3:24-25). It is the Son that sets us free from sin and condemnation and their dread by a life offered up freely (no one took His life from Him —John 10:18). We are truly set free... as a gift. Out of love, God **gave** His Son. Again, St. Paul: “*For by grace you have been saved And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Luther pointed the church back to a salvation that is received by faith in Christ alone—faith here meaning not the doctrine that is believed, the so-called *fides quae creditur*, but a personal belief, the *fides qua creditor*, the faith that grasps hold of the grace offered up by God. We are saved “*by grace ... through faith*”—we cannot save ourselves. We heard Jesus teach it just last week: “*With man [salvation] is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God*” (Mark 10:27)—and that’s so not only with regard to the act of our redemption (Christ’s blood sacrifice on the cross), but also with regard to our faith (the work of the Spirit through the Word and Sacraments).

But Rome still holds onto the false teaching that our conversion only begins a process of justification that we must complete by our works! They are wrong! No, we will continue to hold onto “done,” as Luther taught: “The law says, ‘do this’, and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done” (Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 26). “*We hold*” with St. Paul “*that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law*” (Romans 3:28), and that means by faith alone.

Luther pointed the church back to the Good News, the Gospel message of Christ, “*the power of God for salvation.*” That’s what set Luther free: hearing and understanding the words that once gave him such grief: “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it [in the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’*” (Romans 1:16-17). For Luther found freedom in these verses, his shackles taken off, the very gate of paradise opened to him. The righteousness of God was not that by which God judges poor sinners, but “that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith” (Luther, Tower experience).

Luther understood the Gospel—found in Christ and His cross. Luther communicated the Gospel—a salvation by grace through faith. And that is Luther’s legacy, the Reformation legacy, to the church.

But, dear friends, the church's struggles did not end with Luther. The church struggles today as she seeks to shine the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through a glass splattered with sin and its effects. On this Festival of the Reformation, we give thanks to God for Luther then and for the pure Gospel of Christ, but let us also be fervent in prayer for the church now, praying today: "Gracious Father, [we] humbly beseech Thee for Thy holy Catholic Church, fill it with all truth, and in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purge it; where it is in error, direct it; where it is superstitious, rectify it; where any thing is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen and confirm it; where it is in want, furnish it; where it is divided and rent asunder, make up the breaches of it; O Thou Holy One of Israel."

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer from "Ecclesia" by William Laud, *A Summarie of Devotions*, 1667

Source: William Laud. *The Private Devotions of Dr. William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Martyr*. A New Edition. Oxford and London: John Henry and Jas. Parker, 1855, 147.