

Sunday 24 September

In Christ alone

Heavenly Father, may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be always pleasing to you our Lord and Redeemer, Amen

Introduction

Last week in his Introduction to this short series on the five ‘Solas’ of the Reformation, Andrew spoke about how Luther had been asked to appear before the church leaders to explain his thinking, and basically recant – which he refused to do.

As I was thinking about this morning’s theme, I was reminded of a good friend of mine, who had a similar experience and, although not to the degree of Luther, also had a significant impact on the life and teaching of the modern day church. My friend was a theology student in the late sixties, studying in Germany and his PhD supervisor was a man called Joseph Ratzinger, a prominent theologian and one of the ‘progressives’ at Vatican 2 – the council that pretty much dragged the Catholic Church into the twentieth century. Twenty years later, my friend published a book called Jesus Christ Liberator, largely based on his original PhD. He was called to Rome to meet the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (what used to be known as the Holy Inquisition. That man was Joseph Ratzinger, now a Cardinal (and of course later to become Pope Benedict). On arriving at the Vatican, my friend was ushered into a large room with Ratzinger the other side of a huge table. As he sat down, Ratzinger started to ask questions, but my friend who is

Brazilian interrupted and asked quietly, should we not pray first. So Ratzinger started the prayer *Veni Creator Spiritus* – in Latin!

About ten years later, whilst I was studying for my PhD on liberation theology at Cambridge, I met Cardinal Ratzinger and asked him why he had had such a change of views on the writings of my friend Leonardo Boff, since he had worked with him in the early years. Ah, he said, I have moved since then...

Martin Luther's battle with the church hierarchy and the leading thinkers of the day is not, sadly, a unique experience. Though obviously not to the same degree, other thinkers with a laser sharp focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ Crucified have challenged the church of the day, often to their own personal misfortune. One of the key elements of Luther's condemnation of the church at the time of the Reformation was that the church had lost its way, lost sight of the centrality of Christ crucified, to the exclusion of everything else.

It is hugely significant for Luther that the five solas – Scripture alone, Christ alone, Faith alone, Grace alone, to the Glory of God alone – do not make any mention at all of the Church. No, for Luther, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone to the Glory of God alone. In fact, for Luther, the church was a major part of the problem, a stumbling block preventing people from being drawn to Christ. And in a similar way, the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America in the early 1980s was trying to draw the institutional church back to the path of preaching Christ crucified, away from the riches and protection of the dictators and the elites and back to the suffering of the poor, the outcast, the little ones of society. As a nineteenth century theologian once said 'Jesus preached the kingdom of God, but it was the church that came'!

For Luther, as later for my liberation theologian friends, Christ crucified is the only thing you need to know. And this sole focus goes back to the earliest writers. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, ch1 v 22 'we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.' And again, a few verses later (ch2 v 2) I resolved to nothing whilst I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.' Paul's Damascene experience, an intensely personal encounter with the risen Lord, transformed him from a zealous persecutor into a passionate, driven evangelist. He himself recognises his shortcomings as an orator, as a charismatic individual, and emphasises that everything he does, he can do because of the power of the risen Christ acting in him and through him.

And the logic of this intensity of purpose is obvious from the gospel passage we heard this morning. Jesus says very clearly 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.' This is probably the most important of the seven 'I am' sayings of John's gospel, in which Jesus unusually speaks of his own character. I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the gate, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the true vine. In each of these other I am sayings, you can see different facets of what Jesus says here in John 14. Here all of these other sayings are brought together: I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life. No wonder Paul urged the Corinthians to know nothing except Christ and him crucified.

Now you might ask how 'sola Christus,' Christ alone, can make sense when our creed says that we believe in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Surely it can't be Christ alone. Well, Jesus makes it very clear in this same passage, that he and the Father are one. As he answers Philip who asks to be shown the Father, Jesus says in verse 9: Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and

that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me;

In other words, he and the Father are one. The sole access to the Father is through Jesus, as the Father lives in Him. Jesus is the way, the gate to the Father. Jesus is the truth, all that is needed to understand and come to the Father. Jesus is the life, the bread of life, the resurrection, through whom all are called to be with the Father. Christ crucified is all that is necessary, is sufficient, is everything for salvation. Through his crucifixion, through his one perfect sacrifice, made once for all of humanity, we have been saved.

You can see why Luther was so convinced of Christ alone as the key message the church should be conveying to the world. The church should stop trying to draw people to itself, offering prayers for money, offering healing to increase the church's power and importance. Quite the opposite, the church was a stumbling block, getting in the way of people's approach to Jesus. And these were the same problems that my friends had in Latin America in the 80s – the church had become the church of the rich, of the powerful, of oppressors. Bishops and cardinals living in palaces, partying with generals and dictators, whilst the mass of the people live in shanty-towns in squalor and poverty. Their message emphasises Matthew's stress on Jesus' identification with the poor, the sick, the oppressed – whatever you do to these, the least of our brethren, you do to me.

This is because Christ is in us, each and every one of us. It is why we are called Christians, we are 'in Christ'. Or, as Paul says sometimes, 'put on Christ'. If we know nothing except Christ crucified, we become different people, our

priorities, our relationships, our very being is changed: in Christ alone, through faith alone, by grace alone, to the glory of God alone.

Our Bishop has written to us urging us to become more Christ-like. I think this call is drawing us in precisely the direction that Paul and Luther are pointing. Bishop Steven describes Christ-like as contemplative, compassionate, courageous. The Jesuits have a wonderful phrase to describe their approach to discipleship – contemplative in action. Prayer is absolutely central to being Christian, how can you know Christ crucified, how can you preach Christ crucified to the world without being close to him, being drawn to his presence, his grace through meditation and prayer. Being contemplative is a key characteristic of being Christian. And for some, this is the fullness of their calling, of their living out Christ crucified. For others, the outward and visible manifestation of this contemplation is through action, which is I think the other two adjectives of Bishop Steven come into play. Because one is contemplative, immersing oneself in the grace of God and his Spirit through prayer, because of this as Christians we cannot be anything other than compassionate towards others – for as much as we do anything to anyone, we do it to Christ. As we say sometimes in the confession – we have wounded your love and marred your image in us. Christ is in us, Christ is in the other, in all our neighbours whether we like it or not, so why would we NOT be compassionate?

And as a consequence of being contemplative and compassionate, some see no choice but to be courageous. Whether this be at huge personal risk, as in the case of those preaching the gospel in dangerous places, or whether this be challenging the behaviour of others in the workplace, I don't personally think

that 'meek and mild' is what we are called to be as Christians, whatever the carol says.

I believe that the more we are prayerful, the more we see Jesus in our neighbour, the more we preach Christ crucified, then as a result the more we are a stumbling block and foolishness (as Paul put it). The more we draw others to Christ, the way, the truth and the life, the less are we able to tolerate, support or live by values or behaviours that lead in different directions. To take this path, is to be courageous, because it is not popular, it is not easy and there is no time off for good behaviour!

But, I believe that is what following Jesus is all about. It is hard work, of course, it can be very frustrating especially when your contemplative, compassionate prayerful encounter with the Father calls you to be extremely courageous, but at the end of the day, we stand at the foot of the Cross. We are drawn to the Father through an excruciating death, a sacrifice for us, which leads us to eternal life.

So, in Christ we stand, contemplative, compassionate and courageous. May his Spirit of grace and truth fill our hearts, give us strength to follow the path to which he calls us, and the commitment and perseverance to do his will, today and always, Amen.