

Shortened transcript of talk by Bishop Martin Lind, St Albans October 28<sup>th</sup>

**Life is a Gift**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1517, exactly 500 years ago this coming Tuesday, Martin Luther was supposed to have nailed his 95 theses on the gates of a church in Wittenburg. As far as we know today, he might or might not have nailed his theses on that particular day. What we really know is that he wrote the 95 theses, and sent them to the authorities in Latin, but they were very quickly translated into German by a friend of his and circulated all over the country.

The debate was initially centred around the subject of indulgences, although that is now an obsolete issue which I won't go into today. But I would like to say that last year, on October 31<sup>st</sup> 2016, I was present in the Lutheran cathedral in Lund in Sweden when Pope Francis came, together with the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation, to celebrate an ecumenical service. It was a very strong experience; in fact, I have to say that I was once myself ordained, 50 years ago, in the same building. It was also important that there was a confession of sins; on both sides these were admitted, by the Pope and the LWF leaders. There was also a thanksgiving prayer on both sides after the guilt of the Reformation. To hear the Pope of Rome thank God for the gifts of the Reformation was something quite new for me.

It's good to start with this kind of event, which wasn't really possible even 50 years ago, not even ten years ago possibly, but now *is* possible. It is now crucial for the understanding between Catholics and Lutherans or even between Catholics and other reformed faiths.

Today I am going into the relevance of Martin Luther's philosophy and I have four points which I would like to specially emphasise. But before I do that, I have to say that there are negative things to be said about Martin Luther. For me, as a Lutheran, it is crucial to start with the negatives. Only when you understand those negative points is it possible to see the positive issues in a new light.

First of all, the worst mistake was anti-semitism. Yet in the beginning of Luther's career he was, in a way, in favour of the Jewish people. There are several examples of how he spoke in a positive way about them but I think he was also rather naïve in the beginning, when he was thinking that the Jewish people did not convert to the Christian faith because they had never heard the Gospel. The Catholics, he said, were hiding the Gospel. But thanks to Martin Luther and his friends the Jewish people could listen to the Gospel for the first time and they were all going to convert to the Christian Faith.

But when they did not convert he was furious and disappointed and finally, in 1543, just three years before his death, he wrote about the Jewish people in his book *On the Jews and their Lies*. The book has been defended by Lutheran theologians on the grounds that the book was not anti-semitic but anti-Jewish, and Martin Luther was actually against the Jewish *religion*. In the book he argues that the Jewish religion is a false religion. I would not agree, however: for me, the book is clearly anti-semitic. Even in his own time some people were against Luther because of his anti-Semitic writings.

Secondly, I would like to raise the question of his views on the Peasant War. This was the uprising of the peasants in 1524 and 1525, in Germany. It was a hunger uprising, it was simply that people did not have enough food. Their children were starving in their houses. Some say that his anger against the peasants was motivated by the fact that his enemy Thomas Münzer was in favour of the peasants' uprising. That may explain something but it was certainly no excuse. Münzer was the leader of the radical reformers, whom Luther called the dreamers, and he had a theology which Martin Luther was heavily criticising. There was a kind of dichotomy between the inner and outer life, in which the inner life of Jesus was the only really important life.

In Luther's letter to the princes of Saxony in 1525 he wrote that everybody who was able should kill those peasants, openly or in secret, because nothing was more ugly than people who advocated uprising and revolt. About 50,000 people were killed, although there might have been more, and the war was infamous for its brutality.

Now Luther was, of course, a feudal man. He was a child of his times and he was defending the feudal system. But the way he was applying that was not defensible. In the feudal system everything came down from above, so the princes had a responsibility to guarantee welfare for the people, and yet the people were starving. The way Luther encouraged the killing of the peasants was absolutely irresponsible.

I have covered the negative points and I will now move on to four positive points. The first is that he believed in Creation. God, he said, has called all human beings to be God's co-workers, *cooperatures Dei*, with or against their will: in family, in society, in professional life. All people are called, not according to their Christian faith but because of their birth, because of their being created by God, as images of God. The deeds of human beings are better than they themselves.

So Creation is filled with love, according to Martin Luther. We are told to do good deeds, to live in love and the whole of Creation is filled with it. There are two other points on this issue, for which the relevance today is really important. When we read our mass media today, or we listen to television or radio, we often read about the humiliation of people, or violence against people. But human beings help each other each day in thousands of good deeds and our society is based on these deeds.

Secondly, this view of Creation will also lay open for us a new respect for other denominations. Luther teaches us to see God's deeds in every human being, independent of faith and nationality. We can get encouragement to open our eyes to our Moslem friends and to our friends of other religions to see how much we belong together.

My second point is close to my first point: it is the view of human beings. Luther was clear that every woman and every man was a whole person. He wasn't in favour of a distinction between an inner and an outer life. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer – who was 39 when he was hanged by the Nazis in 1945 – in one of his letters from prison in 1944 the concept of inner life was an invention from the time of the Renaissance. But one of the main teachings of Luther was that human beings have a relationship to other people and to God. You might think that is rather theoretical but he had this distinction that what you do towards other men could be absolutely sinless, while what you do towards God is always coloured by your imperfection. So in front of God no-one is sinless. But in our relations with other people, God uses all of us in sinless deeds. Our deeds towards other people are also, certainly, God's deeds.

I would say at this point that Luther's theology and teaching could be summarised in the words: life is a gift. The whole of life, in a biological sense, is a gift. From birth, we can't live without the love of other people. And no-one can control his own life. Life is greater than ourselves. Our life belongs to God, and we have a responsibility for how we use it, of course, but it is always bigger than ourselves. This question of respect for human beings has relevance today, not only in our Church life but also in our society: the need for a new respect for every human being in a holistic way.

Now, my third point. The foundation of the Church is the Living Christ, the living voice. The best witness we have about Christ is, of course, given to us in the Biblical texts. Luther is keen to understand the biblical text in the Living Christ, the

liberating gospel in Christ. Where in this text is the message about the gift given to us? The Bible is certainly extremely important for Martin Luther. He uses the Bible very much against his enemies. And he has a dialectical way of keeping the outer letter together with the inner message.

The Pope was, of course, in those days underlining the decision of the Councils of the Church, and Luther was critical of many of those decisions because of his readings of the Biblical texts. He couldn't find in Biblical texts the justification for much of what was taught by the Roman Catholic Church in those days. He was fighting on two fronts, you might say, against the Catholic Church for neglecting the Biblical scriptures, and against the radical reformers such as Thomas M nzer because they were also neglecting the Biblical texts. They were concerned so much with the inner message that they neglected the outer letter of what was really written in the book. So Luther kept the outer letter in line with the inner message.

My fourth point: Luther never wanted a Church split. Some years ago I saw a website, from a Lutheran Church (I won't say which one it was) and it was written there that the Lutheran Church was founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But Martin Luther never founded any church: of course not. And he would be furious if he heard that. We believe that all Lutheran churches were founded from the beginning by Jesus and the Apostles. All Lutheran churches are linked to the origin of the Christian Church. Martin Luther himself was not a Lutheran but a member of the one Catholic and apostolic Church. His aim was to reform, to bring the Church to its origin, to the original commission of Christ.

My fifth point is a summing up of these four points. This is: *life is a gift*. I would like to underline that the message of Luther could be translated into those words. I know that we would normally say that Luther's contribution is seen in terms of justification by faith. I'm so happy that in 1999 we achieved the Joint Declaration between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. The Vatican and the LWF agreed that the main division in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the question of justification by faith, now could be phrased in a way which would show we had a similar opinion in that question.

But today I think we need new words to describe what Martin Luther meant and I often use these words: life is a gift. It is just an attempt to interpret his main message. It is a message that fits in with his view on human beings, that we are all co-workers with God, and how life is a gift from God. We are sinners, but God will by grace give us our real life. Life is a gift, in a holistic view, both in the biological and

creative senses but also in the spiritual way. So the whole structure of our existence is based on givenness. It is also in our Church life, in the sacraments: we receive in baptism a gift from God, in the Holy Communion, in the bread and the wine, we receive forgiveness in confession, also in the sermons, of course, in all cases the structure of givenness is there.

It's all about *Life is a Gift*.