

Reformations

Michaelmas Term, 2017

8th October 2017, Revd Dr Simon Perry, Martin Luther, An Introduction

15th October 2017, Professor Morna Hooker, Erasmus' Egg

28th October 2017, Dr Mark Hayes, Eulogy for John Grieve Smith

29th October 2017, Dr Mary E Stewart, Luther's German Bible

5th November 2017, Revd Simon Goddard, Commemoration of Benefactors

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Martin Luther, An Introduction

8th October 2017

Medieval Western Europe had been largely a Christian realm for well over a thousand years, with a worldview derived from Christian belief. Everyone was baptized at birth. Everyone, after all, was a sinner from birth, in constant need of forgiveness. And everyone wanted to get into heaven, so you needed that forgiveness. And the only way you could achieve forgiveness was through the Church. And the church had a clear hierarchical structure – at the top of which, sat the Pope. You can imagine the amount of power he wielded – and of course, power is also open to corruption. Not all popes were hopelessly corrupt, but some were corrupt, and some were more corrupt than others. And in the early 16th Century Papal authority over Western Christian Europe was not in a good state. The Pope was in need of money, and how was he going to get it?

Forgiveness. Since the church had a monopoly on forgiveness, they were gatekeepers to the Afterlife. If you were a hard-working, field-ploughing, grass-chewing, straw-hat-wearing yocal, how could you guarantee that you and your loved ones had access to an eternity of blissful rest beyond the grave? Forgiveness. And the Church knew how to sell forgiveness. To keep it an attractive commodity, you needed to keep everyone terrified of hell, remind them that they are horrible sinners worthy only of unending torment. What was the only way to avoid eternal torment, being skewered with a red-hot-poker, in an unspeakable orifice, by Lucifer's depraved minions? Forgiveness. And forgiveness cost. In what amounted to a means-tested forgiveness-tax, the church's Roman headquarters grew very wealthy.

Enter Martin Luther. Having wrestled his whole life with the guilt he felt at his own sin, and then witnessed at close hands how corrupt the Rome of his day had become, and how it profited from guilt – he launched a scathing attack on the Pope. In 1517 he famously nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenburg Church. Historians tell you there is no evidence for this action, but if you look on the front cover of the Term Card, you will see photographic evidence, albeit taken on a Nokia 3210. The technology of the time obviously means there was a gap between the event, and the image capture – in this instance a gap of 3-400 years.

But as a former monk, plagued by the sense of his own unworthiness, he was convinced that no Christian could earn or buy or achieve God's forgiveness. Instead, he relentlessly emphasized that God's grace alone is what saves people, and there was no need for a priestly middleman. Luther's widely publicized polemic triggered an ideological avalanche across Christian Europe.

I've never been convinced by those who regard history as the history of great acts by great men who conjured up a new epoch like a rabbit from a hat. After all, if Luther had been born 50 years earlier, his actions would simply have led to his execution. Had Luther been for 50 years later, the upheavals he triggered would no doubt have long since been triggered by other means. But Luther was born when he was born – and he proved to be a colossal historical figure with as much claim as anyone to be a great man of history.

But was he a great man? If Game of Thrones has taught us anything, it is that there are rarely good people and bad people. Luther was an astonishing, electrifying combination of good and bad. For some he was a Ghandi-like purveyor of ancient wisdom. For others, he was a raving anti-Semitic misogynist. There is evidence of both. For some he was humble, tentative in his claims, open to the fact he might be wrong. For others he was insecure, arrogant and unable to cope with people who disagreed with him. There is evidence of both. He once said of the Pope, "You say, "What comes out of your mouth must be kept!" ... which mouth do you mean? The one from which ... farts come?" (You can keep that yourself). For some he was a PR genius, a brilliant wordsmith, whose rhetoric was devastatingly effective. For others he was naïve, with little idea of the effect his loud-mouth claims would have. There is evidence of both, and perhaps the combination of both is what made him Martin Luther.

Karl Barth account is particularly apt for Luther: that his actions amounted to climbing the tower of a medieval cathedral in the dark, reaching out for the rope to steady himself, and accidentally pulling on the church bell to wake up the whole world. This seems like a pretty good description. His relentless barrage of rhetoric, emphasizing how the individual's fate was in the hands of a gracious, forgiving God rather than a corrupt ecclesiastical regime, had a massive impact on world history. In fact, here in England, the Royal Title 'Defender of the Faith' is held by British monarchs because in 1521 Henry VIII wrote a theology book defending the Pope precisely against the rhetoric of Martin Luther.

All this talk of sin, and buying forgiveness, of course, seems very dated today because we no longer use that language. But that does not mean that the concept of sin is still essential to modern politics and culture. The weight loss club my parents attend, is sensitively named 'Fat Club'! Their strict dietary regime allows them two 'sins' per day. Sins here, are where they are allowed to eat terrible food. As evangelical Christians it's a bit odd to hear them complain in the evening – 'I haven't had my sins yet' before feasting their chops on a tub or lard. But the idea of sin is well and truly there – as a departure from a strict regime designed to make them feel bad about themselves.

There are multiple examples from which to choose. For instance, a friend of mine has a PhD student who gave up a life in advertising – because she would often find herself sat around a table with a group of other advertisers, attempting to conjure up new ways to make women feel bad about themselves.

This marketing method dates back at least as far as the 1950s. Your job is to make people feel too fat, too thin, too out of date, too stupid, to be happy with themselves. You present them with an ideal to treasure, a minimum standard to which they must measure up, a law to obey. They can then buy their way out of their deplorable state, out of their social unworthiness, out of the low self-esteem you implanted into them. So they click, 'buy now', present their credit card, or even hand over money. Lo and behold, they feel better. Or in medieval terms, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

The trouble is, once you've bought the product, that's it. There's no more money to be made from you. You have already purchased the most fabulous shoes in all Christendom, so you feel fulfilled! How are you, the advertiser, guarantee that person will keep buying stuff? You have to ensure that they are kept in a state of social unworthiness, of feeling bad about themselves, of feeling unsatisfied soon after buying the last product. You have to convince them, in other words, in perpetual need of the forgiveness only you can offer. You have to keep them forever bound by a sense of not being good enough. You have to keep instilled within them, the deep conviction that they can never measure up to the ideal you have rooted deep into their worldview. In theological terms, you have to make sure – in the most subtle and undetectable fashion – that they remain sinners.

From a theological perspective, the social dynamics of sin and forgiveness is almost as old as humanity – and is alive and well in the modern secular West.

What might a Martin Luther have to say in our own culture? Different speakers will address this question from different perspectives this term. In one way or another, it may well be that today's Martin Luther's are equally those fallible, faltering, fault-ridden people who nevertheless climb that tower and inadvertently pull on that bell that wakes up the world.

Professor Morna Hooker

Eramus' Egg

15th October 2017

It's all a matter of interpretation. In the world of scholarship, one soon discovers that the all-important questions are what one makes of the evidence, and for any historian or literary critic, that means how one reads – that is interprets – the written word. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the written word was essentially the Bible – which, following the invention of printing, increasingly meant the printed Bible. The 95 theses which Martin Luther is said to have nailed to a church door in Wittenberg – a tradition which I see no reason to doubt, whatever purveyors of 'alternative truth' may say – were based on his interpretation of the teaching of the Bible.

But which text of the Bible? For centuries, the Church had been using what was known as the Vulgate – a word meaning 'common tongue' – in other words, the translation into Latin made by Jerome in the second century, when Latin was the everyday language of the people. From then on, the original Hebrew and Greek were rarely consulted, since they were known only by a few, and though in time Latin was no longer the 'common tongue', it remained the language used by scholars, who referred to the text of Jerome. Had you come to a Cambridge College in the Middle Ages, you would have found that all the teaching and all the conversation were in Latin.

Now there were two problems. First of all, ordinary people no longer understood Latin. And secondly, the Vulgate was a translation – how reliable was it? By the time that Luther posted his theses in 1517, a new edition of the Greek New Testament had appeared, together with a new Latin translation, both of which had been prepared by the great Humanist scholar Erasmus – and there is evidence in Luther's commentaries that he knew both. The new text and translation were important firstly because Erasmus had collected better Greek manuscripts than those known to Jerome, and secondly because his translation was a more accurate one.

Erasmus is often referred to as 'Erasmus of Rotterdam' – the city of his birth – but anyone who comes to Cambridge soon learns that Erasmus spent several years at the Queens' College in this University. According to tradition, which again I see no reason to doubt, he was the Lady Margaret's Professor – or Reader, as the post was known in those days, reminding us that scholarship was largely a matter of how one read the text. Erasmus does not appear to have greatly enjoyed his stay in Cambridge; he complained about the weather – and it was undoubtedly a very cold and damp place before the days of central heating; he complained about the English beer – he clearly would not have been a patron of CAMRA; and he complained about the pay; in that last respect, at least, modern academics would have agreed with him. But his residence in Cambridge was significant. It was on an earlier visit to Cambridge that he had realized the importance of knowing Greek in order to understand the New Testament, and that discovery had led him to learn the language. Now he was teaching Greek and producing the first critical edition of the text of the New Testament, which he used as the basis for his new translation into Latin.

It is often said that the English Reformation began in Cambridge, in the snug of the White Horse Inn, in the 1520's, and although Erasmus had by then returned to the continent, it was his new Latin translation that was studied by the small group of scholars who used to meet there, and which fired their ideas. As for his critical Greek text, that became the basis for scholarly work for the next 300 years and more, until it was replaced in the nineteenth century by a far better text, based on more reliable manuscripts.

And it was apparently Erasmus' edition of the Greek text, published in 1516, together with his Latin translation, that were used by Luther in his lectures in Wittenberg. A second edition of the Greek text a few years' later became the

basis both of Luther's translation into German and William Tyndale's translation into English – and so, in time, of the translation we know today as the 'Authorized' or 'King James' Version'.

Erasmus himself made no attempt to translate the Bible into English, but he was clearly sympathetic to the idea, suggesting that even women should be able to read it. In his Exhortations to the Diligent Study of Scripture he wrote: 'I would have these words translated into all languages, so that not only Scots and Irish, but Turks and Saracens too might read them . . . I long for the ploughboy to sing them to himself as he follows his plough, the weaver to hum them to the tune of his shuttle, the traveller to beguile with them the dullness of his journey'. Had he lived today, Erasmus would undoubtedly have downloaded a Dutch translation of the Bible onto his i-phone, in order to beguile the dullness of his travels.

In his introduction to this series last week, the chaplain speculated about who might have inaugurated the Reformation, had Martin Luther lived fifty years earlier or later. As you see, things were changing already when Luther appeared on the scene. It has been said that Martin Luther merely opened the door to the Reformation after Erasmus picked the lock. Or if you prefer a more domestic image, that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. But that does not mean that the two saw eye-to-eye – far from it. They disagreed about many things – in particular, about the role of the Pope – and engaged in theological disputes. But more importantly, Erasmus was a scholar, Luther a man of action. And it was Erasmus' scholarly work in producing a critical Greek text of the New Testament which was the stimulus for Luther's exegetical work and so, in time, to his revolutionary ideas.

There are no less than 55 volumes of Luther's Works translated into English, many of which consist of Lectures or Commentaries on biblical texts. This is hardly surprising, since it was by reading the text of the Bible – in particular the text of the New Testament – that Luther's understanding of God was developed and transformed. What he read there led him to challenge many of the assumptions that he had hitherto accepted as part of the Church's teaching.

Last week we heard from the chaplain about the problem of sin which dominated the mediaeval world. It was a problem that tormented Luther when he was a young man. The church's solution was to sell indulgences and pardons; you could apparently buy yourself out of purgatory – or at least, reduce the time spent there. Now, reading the Letters of Paul, Luther realized that this solution was unnecessary – worse still, that it contradicted and undermined the Gospel, which was about the grace of God. In Romans, in the passage we heard earlier, he read how God freely offered forgiveness as a gift, not something to be bought or earned. And because it was a gift, it needed only to be received by those who trusted in the love and mercy of God.

It is frequently said that Luther's theology – and indeed, the theology of the Reformation, can be summed up in the slogan 'Justification by faith'. Christians, it is said, have been 'justified by faith'. But is that right? And what exactly does it mean? The main problem is that word 'justification'. What does it mean to be justified? If you want to impress your director of studies with your essay, you may well 'justify' your margins, which will make the essay look tidier, even though it won't improve the content. What you have done is to make all the rough ends of lines conform to an invisible straight line, as a sergeant major might do with his troops. And if you want to justify your actions, then you will endeavour to demonstrate that they conform with what is accepted by others as just, or good, behaviour. But 'justify' and 'justification' are not words that are much used in everyday speech, except by those – usually politicians – who seek justification for their – often dubious – actions. In modern English, then, the idea that men and women are justified seems a somewhat obscure and negative way of saying that God makes them what they ought to be.

And how about the words 'by faith'? Is this a requirement to believe six impossible things before breakfast, as Alice was instructed to do in *Through the Looking Glass*? And how did Paul imagine that our faith – or 'trust', as the Greek word should perhaps be translated – could bring about our 'justification'? In fact, of course, it doesn't, and Paul's point – and Luther's, too – is that it is God who 'justifies', or puts us right. Believers do nothing – they simply receive what God gives them – the gift of righteousness. God did not have to be pacified or satisfied with gifts or penances. On the contrary, he had sent his Son to reconcile men and women to himself. So a much better summary of Luther's teaching is the alternative slogan 'salvation by grace'.

In our reading from Exodus tonight we heard how God had revealed himself to Moses as a God of grace. And then we heard Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, explaining that the grace of God was far greater than any human sin.

Anything you can do, I can do better, sings Annie in the musical, and anything men and women do, is nothing in comparison with what God can do – not simply because they are sinful and he is righteous, but because the power of grace is far greater than the power of evil. All that is necessary is to receive it.

But that's not quite the end of the story. Luther, the man who spent his time bewailing his own sins, was concerned only to save his own soul. But the remedy – grace – was not, like a prescription bought from the chemist, something that mustn't be shared with others, but something which, on the contrary, demanded to be shared. The grace of God is a gift which cannot be kept to oneself. Neither Paul nor Luther were talking simply about how individuals can be put right with God, but rather about how they might become conduits of his love and reconciling power to others, offering aid to those in need and bringing peace where there is conflict. 'You know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ', Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 'how he was rich but became poor for you, in order to make you rich. Well, then, be like him – full of grace: put your hands in your pockets and find some money to contribute to the collection I'm making for the poor'. In our modern world, we may perhaps think that theological language about sin and redemption are irrelevant – but of the need for those who have experienced the grace of God to share God's love with others there can be no doubt.

So if I were to sum up what Luther found in scripture in one phrase, it would be 'The rediscovery of God's grace'. Sadly, what that meant was often lost sight of in the years that followed, when men and women went to war and persecuted one another for their beliefs. All too often, the Reformation involved revolution. And what of Erasmus? Although he may have picked the lock on the door, he stayed firmly on the outside when Luther went through that door and left the Roman church. And one of the things which divided Erasmus and Luther was their understanding of the role of grace. If they disagreed, then this is because, as I said at the beginning, it's all a matter of interpretation – of how one reads the text. Nevertheless, it was Erasmus' work of editing and translating the text of the New Testament that enabled them to argue about its meaning. The egg laid by Erasmus had hatched, even if he did not entirely approve of the bird that emerged from the shell.

Dr Mark Hayes

Eulogy for John Grieve Smith

28th October 2017

How often do we only find out things about people after they are gone! When I arrived at Robinson in 2006 I was delighted by the College's positive response to my unfashionable approach to Economics. What also struck me was the remarkably good collection of books in the Library from my point of view. Soon I received a phone call from John (not many people used the telephone by then) introducing himself and proposing lunch in the SCR.

This was the first of several regular lunches where we talked about economic policy and the state of economics. It became clear to me why the Fellowship was so receptive and the Library so well stocked! Although John by then had reached 80 years of age, his conversation remained lucid, stimulating and sometimes challenging. He was a kindred spirit in many ways. At first, I now regret, I did not take him seriously enough until, with the passage of years, I became a little wiser, at least enough to understand his thought more fully.

It turns out the affinity was well-grounded. John never really talked about himself. He never mentioned that he had read Economics at Clare (like me) nor that he was supervised by Brian Reddaway, as I was 30 years later. Reddaway was a contemporary of Keynes who considered that the main purpose of Economics was to work out how to secure full employment as the necessary, if not sufficient, foundation of a decent society. John was a direct link to the world of Beveridge and Attlee. He believed firmly in social justice. He was one of the few voices who would make the case for the welfare state as it was originally conceived, a system of universal social provision underpinned by full employment.

John understood that a classless society first requires the abolition of class, in the provision for health, education, housing, retirement, sickness and unemployment. He saw through Thatcherism's claims about equality of opportunity and individual freedom. True equality of opportunity means a society where bankers and judges are perfectly content that their children go to the local school, become carpenters or plumbers, and live in a Council house, with no sense of letting down themselves or their families. It also means that it should not be remarkable when the children of carpenters and plumbers become bankers and judges, by dint of their own ability and merits. He understood that Margaret Thatcher's philosophy, distilled from Hayek, was a reaction against the very nature of a full employment society, against the historic post-war change in the balance of power between economic classes. She and too many others did not want – still do not want – a classless society. It may be that such a political consensus emerges only in the course and aftermath of total war.

John recognised the pitfalls of the post-war era and argued consistently for the need to overcome the adversarial character of industrial relations in Britain. He understood that the root of this dangerous antagonism was in the nature of the ownership of enterprise, which still remains based in the 19th century. As an experienced manager of large-scale industry, he argued for industrial democracy and for a change in the understanding of the duties of directors. Although the law now pays lip-service to some of these ideas, Mrs May's recent foray into this area has shown how implacable is the opposition of the City of London to real reform in this area — the City which pays our pensions and for much of this College's work, of course. All political choices have their costs as well as benefits. The question is who bears them and who profits.

Apparently one of John's more modest but extremely important contributions to the College's welfare was the building of a wall to keep the Bin Brook in its place and out of the College. As a bulwark against Thatcherism he was less successful, although he remained unbowed as the tide overtopped him.

John's best book was 'There is a Better Way' published in 2001. In the book, he quotes Beveridge and I cannot improve on that quotation to convey John's intent:

The challenge to management that will be presented by full employment is a challenge that enlightened employers will welcome. The essence of civilization is that men should come to be led more by hope and ambition than by fear.

John was radical only in the sense of going to the root of the matter (unless one sees Beveridge and Attlee as radicals). He displayed great courage in speaking up publicly against the consensus, despite being labelled 'unreconstructed' by New Labour for his pains. His was a strong, clear voice in the wilderness, reminding us that we can be better – so much better – than this.

John is sorely missed but his understanding of Economics has not been lost, and has been transmitted to further generations of students and scholars, however embattled we may find ourselves at present within the academic establishment. There is hope. It is not misplaced. May he rest in peace.

Dr Mary E. Stewart

Luther's German Bible

29th October 2017

From the sublime words of recent weeks to the ridiculous: did you know that Luther with his Bible has become the fastest-selling Playmobil figure ever?

But why on earth should we be interested in an old German Bible? And anyway, what does 'German' even mean here? In Luther's day there was no such language – indeed, no country called 'Germany'. He wasn't the first to try Biblical translation into Germanic vernacular either. So why is it that 500 years on Luther's Bible matters at all? Was he just lucky that Gutenberg had revolutionised printing only decades before, or that Lucas Cranach was his illustrator?

After Luther published his 95 theses against indulgences on 31 October 1517, perhaps intending to initiate a university discussion, the furore they created led to a Papal Bull and an Imperial Ban being issued against him in 1521. His life was at risk, but fortunately for him the Elector of Saxony, Luther's home state, had him abducted for his own safety to the remote Wartburg Castle near Eisenach. Convinced that faith must be based directly on God's word in the Bible, not Church dogma, Luther used his isolation to translate the New Testament in just 11 weeks (his Old Testament came later in 1534.) He was familiar with the Latin 'Vulgate', but as Prof Hooker explained, Erasmus' new Greek edition was his prime source. Luther had been schooled in Latin since early childhood and had a good command of classical Greek from his university education in Erfurt, so had no problems of understanding. But in what kind of language did he write, and for whom was his new translation intended?

The world in which Luther lived was very different from modern Germany. There was no unitary German state: the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was a vast disparate grouping of principalities, dukedoms, kingdoms, Imperial free cities etc. This fragmentation benefited Luther in so far as it prevented an effective campaign of suppression against him (such as poor Tyndale would soon suffer here in Britain), but there was a negative side too. The educated lingua franca of the Empire was Latin: there was no one common German language, only a huge range of regional spoken dialects – and so-called High and Low German forms (a roughly south/north division) were almost incomprehensible to each other. So how could he reach people? The German Luther wrote was broadly modelled on that used for business in the Chancellery (the administrative office) of Saxony, which providentially lay in the eastern central area of the Empire, neatly placed between the main dialect blocs. Luther himself spoke both High and Low German dialects, and skilfully evolved a fusion of the two that could be understood more or less everywhere, and formed the basis of what became over time standard written German. (One tiny example: there could be unrelated, competing words for the same thing, and whichever Luther chose became the standard: e.g. for the image of separating the sheep and the goats he chose Low German Ziege for 'goat' as opposed to Geiß, which was thereafter consigned to spoken dialect and fairy-tale.)

But Luther was concerned with social as much as geographical reach. In his 1530 "Open letter on translation" he stated his aim of writing a living German, i.e. replicating the speech patterns of everyday life, not slavishly copying Latin phrasing, as earlier translators had done. "You don't ask Latin literature how to speak German" Luther wrote, "you ask the mother in the home, the children in the street, the common man in the market – look at how they speak and translate accordingly." He was well aware that literacy was limited, though it was perhaps a little more widespread in the Empire than elsewhere in Europe because every state had its educated bureaucracy. That certainly helped to make Luther's Bible an astonishing best-seller: in 1522 over 3000 copies of the New Testament sold within a few days of publication, even though it cost half a guilder – the weekly pay of a workman - and over ½

million Bibles sold in his lifetime. But Luther's world was still a predominantly oral culture: listening and learning by heart was the norm, so he concentrated on simple vocabulary, idiom and folk sayings from everyday life, using syntax and rhythms explicitly meant for reading aloud, hearing and memorising.

As a result, many of Luther's Biblical phrases have become deeply embedded in colloquial German (much more pithily than is the case with our literary King James Bible and English). At the risk of boring you with linguistic niceties, one good example is the story of the widow's 'mite', as told in Mark 12 and Luke 21 – 'mite' is of course a coin of little value. Luther followed neither the Greek text – 'two lepta' – nor the Latin Vulgate with its 'two copper coins.' He chose the word Scherflein, a Scherf being the smallest silver coin then in use in northern parts of the Empire, and added the diminutive ending –lein for several reasons: it reinforces the impact of the story (the widow is incredibly poor but still gives); it captures the way German speakers do frequently use diminutives in everyday idiomatic speech; and it smoothes the rhythm of the sentence, making it easier to read aloud and remember (legte zwei Scherflein ein as opposed to the slightly jerkier legte zwei Scherfe ein.) The phrase 'sein Scherflein beitragen' (to contribute one's pennyworth to something) is still in common use today.

Another example: where the King James Bible has in Luke 6 "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh", Luther characteristically avoids abstraction and translates freely - possibly borrowing a proverb - "when someone's heart is full, his mouth overflows" ("wes das Herz voll ist, des geht der Mund über") – arguing in typically robust form that "no German would speak of 'abundance of the heart', unless his heart were too large or he had too much heart; it's no more German than 'abundance of the stove'!" That is Luther's earthily democratic translation practice in a nutshell (though, without venturing into complex theology, when he controversially translated Romans 3,28 as 'justified by faith alone' and argued that the additional word was required for idiomatic German, he was pushing it a bit! It wasn't necessary in those terms, though equally it's not wrong.)

So does Luther's Bible still matter? It's all about impact. Its extraordinary vigour appealed even to arch-atheist Nietzsche who praised its linguistic skill, and it still matters to Germans as the communal source of their standard written language, not the royal court as in England or France (so even the atheistic GDR could later claim Luther as an antecedent.) His Bible helped to create a first sense of coherent nationhood through shared language and culture, across the frequently changing political borders that divided German speakers for centuries up to 1871 (though this very sense of a nationhood beyond borders takes a darker turn in the 20c.). Of course Luther's Bible matters historically and theologically as one of the main drivers in the huge upheavals of the Reformation; by giving everyone access to the scriptures and a direct route to faith, it encouraged the emancipation of the individual and the beginnings of European, not just German modernity. And finally, remember how in wk.1 Simon gave us Barth's image of Luther inadvertently waking up the world? Whatever we may think of Luther as man or theologian – and he certainly wasn't docile like his Playmobil image! - the story of his German Bible exemplifies for all time the dangerous, wonderful power of words to do just that: awaken minds.

Rev Simon Goddard

Commemoration of Benefactors

5th November 2017

John 12:20-28a

20 Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." 22 Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

23 Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. 25 Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

27 "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name!"

The Miracle of Multiplication

"That's me!" said 12 year old Trevor McKinney as he drew a little stick figure of himself on the chalkboard in front of his social studies class. "And that's three people" he says, drawing three arrows to three more stick figures. "And I'm going to help them... But it has to be something really big. Something they can't do by themselves. So I do it for them... And they do it for three other people... that's nine! And those nine each help three more..."

Perhaps you recognise the movie this scene is from – it's called 'Pay it Forward' from the year 2000. It stars Haley Joel Osment as a young boy responding to his teacher's challenge to 'think of an idea to change our world and then put it into action'. "And those nine each help three more...that's 27... and it gets big real fast!" The feedback of Trevor's classmates causes their teacher to suggest to Trevor that his friends think "he has come up with an overly utopian idea". Trevor responds by saying "You mean like, a perfect world? So?!" And he goes ahead and puts it into action – and after paying it forward a number of times it quickly becomes a movement – touching the lives of people across the country – and giving them a small glimpse of that perfect world which seems so out of reach.

On the occasion of this benefactors' service I want to share some thoughts stimulated by the gospel reading and evident in that inspiring and moving movie. There is a miracle in this passage from John 12 which characterises the Kingdom of God. But it's also a miracle which we see within nature, and in humanity. What is this miracle – it's the miracle of multiplication!

John 12: 24 – "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

In these words Jesus is talking about himself by pointing out a truth which is evident to anyone who has ever planted any type of seed. In the harvest festivals of recent months we've been celebrating the miracle of multiplication. We've been giving thanks for the way that farmers and allotment owners buried their seeds in the ground earlier in the year, knowing that, after a little bit of rain, and plenty of sun, they would be reaping a harvest of thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or even a hundredfold. The miracle of multiplication! I am just awestruck by the reality that in every single seed there is potential to multiply and reproduce that seed an infinite number of times!

We'll think about what Jesus was referring to a little later, but first it's worth thinking about how we see that miracle at work in human society too. Indeed, our capitalist economy is built upon the foundations of this miracle of multiplication. It's why Alan Sugar is willing to give away £250,000 to another Apprentice, and why the investors in Dragon's Den are so eager to give their cash over to some of the entrepreneurs who pitch their innovations to them. Their hope, of course, is that they will get more out of the new company than they have put in. That the money they have invested will multiply itself.

In developing countries micro-loans have become a successful way for people to escape the poverty trap.

A small loan, to help buy a goat for example, enables the family to earn money from the milk – multiplying the initial investment enough for them to repay the loan, look after their family and soon buy a second goat and so on. Somehow, in the act of giving something away, of letting it go, that gift is miraculously multiplied.

Now, I'm in danger of sounding like one of those American TV evangelists. Who persuade people to send them their hard-earned money on the promise that God will give it back to them many times over. But it's the evangelists who seem to reap all the benefits and end up flying around the country in a private Lear Jet and living a luxurious lifestyle. And it's because the evangelist's promise is a perversion of what Jesus is talking about in John 12:24.

John 12: 24 – “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

Christ-like multiplication involves sacrifice, a falling to the ground and dying. Not a selfish act wanting to get something out of it for ourselves. But a selfless act, where we give, with the intention that someone else will benefit from the miracle of multiplication. In this verse from the gospel, Jesus was talking about his own imminent death. Like a seed, Jesus, was to be crucified, taken down from the cross, and buried in the tomb. And like the green shoots that we see bursting through the soil in spring, Jesus was to rise from the dead, and bring new life to many. With that one life of selfless love, lived with integrity - Jesus practiced what he preached – his has become a life that has inspired millions ever since.

One life of love became multiplied many times over...

Through the twelve disciples who sought to follow the example of Jesus. Through the three thousand who responded to Peter's sermon of hope at Pentecost. Through the millions who have been inspired by the gospel message ever since. A message that can, and does, change the world for good. And in a world that seems to be increasingly full of meanness, hatred, violence and despair; doesn't the world need more people who are inspired by generosity, love, peace, and hope? People who don't just believe in someone who lived that way. But who count the cost, and seek to put their faith into action.

One life of love became multiplied many times over...

In the following verse v25 it says: "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." A hero of mine, Martin Luther King Jr., once said that "If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live." A follower of Jesus himself (and a fellow Baptist minister), he was inspired by a vision of heaven. Where the world, at last, is as it should be. For Martin Luther King Jr. it was that particular aspect of heaven found in Revelation 7:9.

"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing together before the throne of God."

A heavenly vision of unity and love where the barriers that exist between us, are all broken down. Some people responded to that dream which Martin Luther King Jr. so powerfully communicated, in the same way as Trevor's classmates, thinking that it was a dream of an overly utopian future. A perfect world. But it's a perfect world that Christians believe in because it is one that is revealed to in the Christian Scriptures.

Heaven.

And whilst heaven has an eternal element to it – the hope of the Church is that one day the world will be as God intends it. There is also a temporal aspect to it as well. What the Bible calls the Kingdom of Heaven, of the Kingdom of God. And the task of the Church – the task of those who follow Christ – is to give of themselves, following the example of Jesus, making that future reality evident in the here and now.

There's a story Jesus told called the parable of the talents. A talent being the equivalent of 20 years of a day labourers' wages. We read about it in Matthew 25.

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five talents more. 17 So also, the one with two talents gained two more. 18 But the man who had received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."

The first two people he described as "good and faithful servants". The third person he described as a "wicked, lazy servant". Whatever God gives to us – our finances, our natural abilities, our health, our friendships – He encourages us to give them to Him for the making the Kingdom of God a reality. To let them go, and see them miraculously multiplied for the benefit of others.

That's what Martin Luther King Jr. was willing to do. Even laying his life down in the process. And if you've not seen the film, 'Pay it Forward', then here's a spoiler alert! As I said, Trevor's school project turns into a national movement and the idea of 'paying it forward' goes viral, as we might say now. But, as he 'pays it forward' himself, one more time, by helping a friend who is being bullied, he gets stabbed and killed.

As Jesus, as well as the fictional Trevor and the real Martin Luther King both find out, it seems that our world isn't kind to those who seek to embody love, who try to bring a piece of heaven to earth.

In our society the term 'do-gooder' is an insult, not a commendation. And yet, as we celebrate the generosity of the benefactors of Robinson College this evening, we do indeed give thanks to you for 'doing good', for acting in a way that benefits others. These verses from John's gospel encourage and commend those willing to let go of what they have and allow it to become miraculously more than might have been possible if they had held on to it for themselves.

But what's amazing is that, when we actually do give without wanting to benefit ourselves, we often end up receiving something back anyway. In your case, for example, the awareness of the impact that your gifts will have in the lives of the students in this place, in the research and learning that it facilitates, and the impact which this new knowledge will have in society at large. Elsewhere in Scripture Jesus said it is "more blessed to give than to receive". May you know, through the miracle of multiplication, the truth of those words this night.