

“Sermon for the 50th anniversary of the LCA”
Reformation Sunday, 30th October 2016
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(Edited slightly by Pastor André Meyer, for clarity)

Text: 1 Peter 2:4-10. Pray: Father, thank you for this time that we may hear your Word through our Bishop. Open our hearts by your Holy Spirit, and grow us in faith together for Christ’s sake, Amen.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear friends, what extraordinary things Saint Peter says about Christians! ‘... *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...*’ But doesn’t that sound a little ‘over the top’?

Before we get any fancy ideas, however, let’s think about the audience to whom those words were first written. Peter the apostle wrote to small churches scattered around the western end of the Roman Empire around the time of the emperor Nero (who hated Christians). These were marginalised groups in social and religious isolation. Peter calls them ‘exiles.’ He wrote to tell them that no matter how isolated or alone they might feel, they still *belonged* to Christ, they were still part *His Body*, the church, and that they should be confident in living out their faith.

During those early days, it was important for Christians to stay together. Personal contact and continuity of teaching were critical to the survival of the church. 1 Peter, then, emphasises unity in Christ and the gospel, and the shared life and discipline that exists in the church. God chooses the church. As Christians, we can live the faith confidently, because we are God’s *own* people.

Those were the early days. The whole church on earth was younger than the Lutheran Church of Australia is today. But there was no New Testament. They were still sorting out how Jewish and Gentile Christians could co-exist despite centuries of division. They had no confessional writings to help them unpack the truth of the faith. They had the Hebrew Scriptures, the lived experience of the risen Jesus, they had letters like 1 Peter, *and* the gift of faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. Although at that time, the first generation, those who had met Jesus in the flesh, were dying – though rarely by natural means. Many, even most, died as martyrs for the faith.

And that’s how it is. The Christian church has been through many tough times. Yet Christians *have* endured. Faith and the church have always been God’s work, *not* ours, right from the beginning.

On this 50th anniversary of the Lutheran Church of Australia, this helps us put things into perspective. Like the early Christians, it’s *not* our size, our institutions, our organisational prowess, our wealth, or our position in society that are most important. Christian unity and faithfulness in confession and life – these matter most. We depend 100% on the *gospel* of Jesus Christ. It is a gift, which we receive by faith, against the

odds. It is never our work; it is *not* our church. It's always *God's* work, *His* church. It all hinges on that reality.

When Lutheran Christians first came to Australia in the 19th Century, they came for a number of reasons. In the 1830's, a major 'push' factor was a church union forced on them by the Prussian king. For a short period, the Lutheran faith became illegal, so they looked for somewhere else to live and worship. Those early settlers were united in their stance against the king's new law, but they were *not* so united on how to teach and practice the faith in their new land. Inevitably, then, there were divisions which caused a great deal of sadness. Those divisions afflicted the health of Australian Lutherans for the next 120 years, all through the next waves of migration and settlement.

Over the years, however, an amazing thing happened... the people of the church continued to plead and pray for its unity. And, occasionally, unity would 'break out.' They could agree happily, for instance, on sending missionaries to Central Australia, and what an amazingly positive impact that had, and *still* has. Local congregations cooperated. But sadly, the leaders still argued, so divisions continued.

Eventually, the plea for unity overcame the scandal of division. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church declared altar and pulpit fellowship in 1965, it sealed the pathway to full union. Symbolically, on Reformation Day 1966, the divided Synods ceased to be, and a united Lutheran Church, one synod, was born. That's why we are celebrating today!

The concept of one church spanning two countries, Australia and New Zealand, is quite rare in global Lutheranism. In North and South America, in Africa, and in much of Asia, there are multiple Lutheran bodies. In 1966, sadly, a handful of our pastors and congregations did not join the new church, but, the vast majority chose a common life as one body in Christ. And today, we still believe that what unites us – God's call to a shared faith and witness in Christ – is so much greater than what could divide us. And so, when we don't agree on something, we turn again, as our ancestors did, to the Word of God and our Confessions. We seek to work it out together, because we are committed to one another in Christ.

For 50 years, we have repeatedly shown our commitment to each other. We have asked our theologians, our pastors, our Synods, and our lay-people to carefully work through issues, sometimes more than once. And as we do it, we have deliberately chosen to stay together and to pray together. We choose to give each other time, space, and grace. We treat each other with compassion and respect.

For decades now, as we well know, one of the issues we have confronted is the ordination of men and women. It is still a sensitive matter. It is testing us as a united synod. Another test for us is 'Renewal.' How *does* the Holy Spirit work among God's people? What *does* that look like? How do we understand baptism, faith, and spiritual gifts? As we explore these important questions, we will do what we have always done.

We will go back to Scripture, re-read the Confessions, pray, talk and worship together, and we will sort things out. That's just what we do. It's just who we are.

Unity of faith and witness is not just important for us, but it's important for the world. In this present age, materialism and spiritual apathy are widespread. Many people are also hostile to faith and the church. The church is not trusted as it once was, sometimes for very good reason. So today, Christians must work together to address these realities, because we are a message of hope for society in a time when many people, despite their affluence, live in despair and meaninglessness.

Whatever difficulties we confront today Saint Peter brings us back to basics. Let's remind ourselves of what those basics are:

- Firstly, belonging to the family of faith does not depend on where you live, what you have (possessions), or who you are. God elects you. God says 'yes' to *you* because of Jesus. God makes you holy. He sets you apart as His people. God says 'yes' to you; 'yes' to us. (1 Peter 2:9a)
- Secondly, it means we can tell the world about the great things God has done for us. That God's plan for His church. The world needs Jesus, and He asks us to introduce Jesus to others. We are to tell the world the message of how we have been called out of darkness and into His marvellous light. God's 'yes' to us, means that we can now say 'yes' to others. (1 Peter 2:9b)

These are Peter's basics. Once we were nobodies, but now we are God's people. We are *somebody's*! Once we were under the law, but now we are under the gospel. It's true, God really has *had mercy* on us. (1 Peter 2:10)

The Bible is crystal clear that the work of salvation, of becoming and remaining God's people, is *God's work*. The Lutheran Confessions back that up. Justification and faith are pure grace. That's why the Lutherans were so radical during the Reformation era 500 years ago. Many people in the church at that time had forgotten this basic truth. It's still easy for us to forget it today. That's why we are a confessional church. That's why we hold to God's Word – so that we will *not* forget. Every day we learn to live in the free grace, love, and mercy of God. Every day the grace of baptism turns us away from sin, and God teaches us once more what it means to trust Him.

We are here today because millennia of Christians have passed this faith on *to us*. Through good times and bad, times of ease and times of hardship, times of growth and times of persecution, times of wealth and times of poverty, times of certainty and times of doubt, and even times of genocide or apostasy, the Church has endured, Christians have endured. Against all the odds, the faith continues to be proclaimed. The church of Jesus Christ endures, and you and I, are part of it. Our witness today includes all who have gone before us, and all who will follow us – because we pass on the message of Christ to them.

And like them, that great cloud of witnesses, we have the immense privilege and task of telling the world today about the mighty acts of our God. At 50 years old, the LCA is in its early days. We have so much growing, so much living, and so much witnessing still to do. We have barely begun.

Jesus is alive. We are resurrected in Him. *We have* the Holy Spirit. *We are* rich in everything we need. *God has called* us, set us apart, and made us *His* people. *We are free* to live in the promise of God, and to experience the new life of Christ.

So yes, we are ready, ready for the work God has prepared for us to do. Let's go on and do it confidently, sharing in Christ's mission to the world. Let's tell everyone how He has brought us out of darkness, and *into* His marvellous light. And let's do it together, and let's do it joyfully, in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

...And the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.