

Sermon Reformation Sunday, Yr. A @ St Johns – 25/10/20
“Translating the Good News” (Jer. 31; Ps. 46; Rom. 3 & Jn. 8)
- Pastor André Meyer

Pray: Father, bless us in this time as we reflect on your good work, in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Question: How would you share the Good News to someone? ...If you were asked to give the reason for why you are a Christian, a believer, a follower of Christ, what would you say? How would you answer if someone asked, “*What is so special about Jesus?*” I would like you pair up briefly with your neighbour (COVID safely) and share what you might say to share the Good News of the Gospel; first one, then the other. You have 2 minutes for *both* of you. Go! ...It will go quickly. [2 mins.] So... anyone like to quickly share *their neighbour’s* answer? 😊

One of the reasons we can understand and even share the Good News simply is because of faithful believers like Martin Luther who opened up God’s Word to everyone so that people can read it, share it, meditate and reflect on it, and enjoy the blessings of a relationship with God and a deeper understanding of His great love for us through His Son Jesus Christ.

We celebrate the Reformation around the 31st October each year to recognise the Protestant movement that is said to have begun on that day in 1517. On the eve of All Saints Day, Martin Luther (1483-1546), an Augustinian monk and a Doctor and lecturer of Sacred Theology in Wittenberg, Germany, “*out of love for the truth*” posted 95 Theses protesting the sale of indulgences on the Castle church door, calling for honest discussion and debate on the matter. Luther had no idea that this would be regarded as one of the turning points in Christendom, protesting the abuses that had crept into the life and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church of that era. His call for reform stirred up a movement that culminated in his very own trial at the Diet of Worms in April 1521 before Emperor Charles V. On the 17th April Luther was called forward to recant all his writings under the threat of excommunication from the Church, and a likely death as well. On the 18th he makes his famous speech... standing upon the Word of God as the source of his authority, rather than Rome and the Pope.

Spanish born royalty and now Holy Roman Emperor, Charles, along with the Pope’s authorities, were furious at Luther’s response. Though given safe passage to Worms, Luther now found himself in great danger. A few weeks later early in May, as he travelled to Wittenberg on an isolated forest road, his small party is set upon by masked men who ambush them and take Luther as their prisoner. Word of Luther’s abduction spread quickly and many believed the Pope’s hand was behind it to bring Luther to a quick end. But those who had abducted Luther were under orders from Luther’s Prince and protector Frederick the Wise, uncle to Emperor Charles. Frederick requested he was not to know anything of Luther’s whereabouts

so he could speak truthfully if asked. Luther's captors dressed him as a knight and took him along the back roads to Frederick's Wartburg Castle which overlooked the town of Eisenach.

Here Luther stayed secretly in 'captivity.' It was Luther's very own time of 'lockdown' staying in an unused part of the castle for almost a year, away from the world he knew. As his life was under threat, Luther grew a beard and continued to dress as a knight to keep his true identity a secret. He called himself 'Junker Jörg,' 'Knight George.'

Although very difficult, and suffering stomach problems and insomnia, Luther's lockdown was not unfruitful. There was no mobile phone, internet or Netflix to keep him occupied, or social media to keep him in touch with the world. Instead Luther took to his passion – writing about the Word of God. By November, with great fervour and as a labour of love, he began translating the New Testament into German. Though there were a number of other German translations in existence already, they were not of good quality and had depended on the Latin *Vulgate* translation officially used by the Roman Catholic Church. Latin was the common language of the people over a thousand years ago, and had become the language of the educated, used also in worship. But Luther was convinced that the everyday person needed to read and hear God's Word for themselves in a language they could understand, rather than hearing a translation of a translation, or interpretations of God's Word based on human traditions or erring doctrines. So Luther turned to the original Greek, Erasmus of Rotterdam's (1466-1536) *Textus Receptus* (1519). To help him translate the original text into contemporary German, Luther secretly ventured into nearby towns and markets to listen to people speaking. He wanted to produce a work which the average person could relate to. Using the original Greek, even forced Luther to invent new words so that Biblical concepts could be understood more clearly, and these words too were inspired by the Spirit.

Some say Luther's vigour led him to finish the first draft of the New Testament by March 1522 before he left the Wartburg, in only 11 weeks! Either way, 11 months from the time he began, it was sent to the printing press and on September 21st 1522 the first edition was printed. Luther did not include his name on the publication, choosing to remain anonymous and to let Christ receive the glory He was due. To the people, it was like a republication of the Gospel. In December a second edition with many corrections and improvements was then published.

After the success and reception of the New Testament translation, Luther continued to work collaboratively on translating the Old Testament from the original Hebrew and published parts as they were ready through the years. The entire Bible, known today as the 'Luther Bible' was published in a six-part edition in 1534. Luther's goal

was to equip every German-speaking Christian with the ability to hear and understand the Word of God, and it was one of the most significant acts of the Reformation. He continued to work on refining the translation with colleagues right up until his death in 1546. Luther's Bible was a bestseller in its time and about 700,000 copies and many reprinted editions appeared before his death. While publishers and printers made fortunes off these publications, Luther never received or asked for a 'copper' for the greatest work of his entire life.

However, for many years, the Bible remained too expensive for most people; an unbound copy of the 1534 Bible cost a month's wages for the average labourer. How many of you would be willing to spend that much on a Bible? Instead, the Bible was bought by churches, pastors, and schools until it was cheaper to produce and buy for those who wanted one.

Luther simply wanted to help those who were confused about what all the fuss about him was, to see for themselves that the disagreements he had with the Roman Catholic Church were real and significant. An accessible and accurate translation of the Bible allowed everyday people to develop an informed opinion for themselves about the issues. It empowered people to embrace the necessary reform in both the Church and society, and liberated people to hear and read the Gospel of Christ for themselves. ...It also created other problems through the interpretation of the Scriptures – which we still struggle with today.

Historically, Luther's German Bible and its widespread circulation helped to unify the German dialects and facilitate a standardised modern German language for the German-speaking people of the Holy Roman Empire. He also gave shape to the modern high German (*Hochdeutsch*), combining the official language of the government with that of the common people. If Luther saw his months in lockdown and hiding as a curse, those who benefitted many years later from what came out of his exile, would have seen it as a blessing beyond counting and an answer to prayer... as a diamond is produced in the earth's mantle by extreme heat and pressure.

The magnitude of Luther's translation of the Bible and all his work set the stage for the English King James Version of 1611. And today, we Christians likely have *at least one copy* we own, not merely in print, but also on our electronic devices we carry in our pockets, or which we can search for in seconds for free on the internet!

The point of *why* Luther translated the Bible is obvious, isn't it? So that the average person could hear and understand the Gospel, the Good News of our salvation that is found in Christ alone. We often attribute the 95 Theses as the heart of the Reformation, when really it was the Word of God (Christ) being rediscovered, received and believed in the hearts of the average person that was the catalyst.

This is *evangelism* at its core – the Good News being shared, taught and proclaimed by the people of God contextualising and translating Christ into a language that people can understand in their day and age. *This* is what the Reformation is all about – Jesus, the Christ, and receiving God’s grace and love through Him alone... and, the forgiveness of our sins by His death upon the cross, and our eternal life being secured by His resurrection from death.

This is why we have the Bible texts before us today (Jer. 31, Ps. 46, Rom. 3 & Jn. 8) reminding us of the struggle of the Reformation and the power of God’s Word to reveal the truth of our salvation through Christ alone. Not to hear some philosophical ‘truth,’ but to know the truth of Christ that leads to salvation. Luther wanted *all people everywhere* to hear the Gospel and to be set free from sin by Christ...

Today, we are challenged to once again know, receive and believe and trust the truth of God’s Word that reveals our salvation in and through Christ alone. We are called to receive and know the Good News in our hearts and live it out in our lives. We are to continue to drink deeply of God’s Word all our days. So too, are we called to translate and share the Gospel in ways that are meaningful to all people, so that those who live in our world will *truly* hear of Jesus and come to know He is working for their eternal good. As one person I heard said... if people haven’t heard God’s Word shared as Good News, it still needs translating by us.

Luther’s aim was to reveal and point all people to Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, just as it is to be ours. Luther didn’t translate God’s Word for his own glory, but to the glory of God. And so, we say today: thanks be to God! Amen.

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