

The Reformation: What's it all about?

2 Kings 22-23



If you chat to a teacher, or go into a parents evening – Most teachers would say that their subject is the most important. But I think when it comes to history, and how important *knowing* history and *learning* from history is – we'd all agree wouldn't we, that we must – we must learn the lessons from history. For example people realise that to **not** know about the world wars is a problem – in terms of understanding where and who we are and where we've come from as a country, and avoiding mistakes which real people have made in the past, again in the future. History is important; we need to learn from it. We need our schools to teach about it, and we want people to understand.

I want to say that *religiously* speaking the reformation is as important to know about as *historically* the world wars are! It was, spiritually, a life and death matter – eternal life and death. That's why as you learn more about it, you'll find that so many people had to and were willing to give up their lives for their cause. But do we know we know much about it? Do you? Our faith background, where we stand now – this church, our services, our faith, rests upon it. We need to know where we've come from! And hold on to the lessons from it! If you believe that God's love for you is unconditional, then you owe that to the Reformation if you believe you're saved by faith, then you owe that to the Reformation, it's part of our history.

Today, and this talk, is partly to set the scene for the rest of the series. And so I want to start by saying that the Reformation was not just an intellectual turnaround – that it was deeply pastoral, and the men behind it were pastoral. (That is, it was about real people, like us, and made a real difference in their lives) So we mustn't imagine the reformers as simply brains on sticks! They were pastors who loved their church congregations.

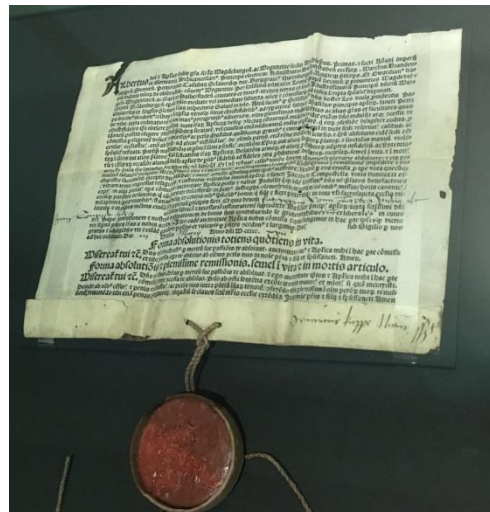
So, let's imagine St Nicholas Church being taken back in time, back through the ages to the time of the Reformation. You need to imagine the place cold (that may not be so hard), the people are poor, and the pressures of life are very great – you can't nip to Sainsbury's, but more seriously than that there is no NHS, antibiotics haven't been discovered yet – you get the picture, life is hard.

Now let me take us on to the church – and some of the landscape of the time religiously: Imagine having no access to the bible in English, that it was only available in Latin, which, as you know, most people in Stevenage can't read – but to be a true parallel, imagine even fewer!! Essentially it was only the clergy who could read the bible.

So, if you wanted to know what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, you would have to be told by a priest, and (I guess) learn it and remember it. Everyone thought 'what the vicar

says, goes' don't question them, they are the ones who interpret it all. Then, what about our place in heaven? How do we get that? What did the church teach? How can we be friends with God? Well, you are taught that God loves you, that he wants you to have faith, and he gives salvation as a gift. But it isn't *only* by faith. You need to contribute too – good works. So, your support for the church – financial(!) And in other ways contributes to your being saved. God's forgiveness gives you a blank slate if you like – and you've got to fill it with good deeds in order to be acceptable to God! You've got to do enough!

But there is some good news: Wonderfully the church wants to help you – and they have made it as possible to **purchase** extra bits of forgiveness, and extra-credit of good-works, which could be added to your account. Things called indulgences (one pictured which I snapped whilst away in Leipzig this June) can be bought from the Pope for extra forgiveness and extra good-work credit. Fantastic you think! But, just a little bit of a burden. Adding to what is already a very difficult lifestyle.



And so, out of love for struggling people, and fighting against the corruption of the church, for the sake of people - Martin Luther (and at a similar time, others around Europe) begin to question the church's teaching and challenge it – and seek to go back towards what Jesus teaches and what the Scriptures teach.



And so, five hundred years ago *this week*, an unimportant vicar, a lowly German priest (Martin Luther) walked up to his church door in Wittenberg (which acted like a noticeboard) and posted 95 statements which he intended to spark debate and discussion. One of them, for example, said “if the Pope could offer people forgiveness and good-works credit, why wouldn't he do it for free, out of generous love?” And that moment changed the course of history, like the spark of a fire, especially in Europe.

5 Latin statements are often used to explain the changes which occurred and the teaching of the Reformation. Here they are. The sola/soli bit means alone:

Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone. That's the basis for our faith, they taught – let's give people the bible in their language so they can read it. German, English, French etc.

Sola Gratia – Grace alone. Forgiveness is given to us as a gift, it isn't earned, we contribute absolutely nothing. (There is no such thing as good works credit) it is a gift from a generous and loving God.

Sola Fide - Faith alone. Our *faith* is the way that we receive this gift. Faith alone, nothing else. No need to buy indulgences!

Solus Christus – Christ alone. He is the one we need to have faith in, not the church, not the Pope... Christ alone – he alone should be our focus.

Soli Deo Gloria – glory to God alone. The meaning of life, the reason I exist, the reason God chooses to rescue me and save me, the reason forgiveness is free, all of it... is for the glory of God.

And for the next five weeks were going to work through these ideas, and I hope you will see how each one is true (it's what God teaches us) but more than that, it's good for the soul, it's life transforming - not just intellectual ideas with no impact on our lives.

But, a Reformation like change isn't unique to 500 years ago. Something like it happened in England and America in the 18th century through the teaching of men like George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers, and something like it happened 2600 years ago in a little Middle Eastern nation called Israel, under the rule of a king called Josiah.

If you turn back to page 393 you'll see Josiah became king at just 8 years old, and died when he was 39. He obviously would have had advisors when he was younger. The key moment in his life (and he was a good king) came when he was 26, and had been king for 18 years already. The key moment was the rediscovery of the book of the law, ie, the rediscovery of the scriptures. It was discovered by the high priest during some repair work on the temple. And it's interesting that even before it is discovered, we get the suggestion that Josiah was a trustworthy guy, and that his officials were trustworthy too (under his leadership) – he seems to be a man of real integrity. It's a wonderful and remarkable story, but the credit isn't so much for discovering the book of the law, as the way Josiah responds to it! You'll see in v8 "Hilkiah the high priest said to...the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord" It wasn't Josiah, Josiah didn't find it. But his humble reaction, and his willingness to act is immediate in v11 "When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.¹² He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, [and some others] "Go and inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found"

And that, is something we too need to have (his response):

A humble, obedient, personal response to God and his word. Which brought about change.

It's so easy to just accept things how they are, to go along with things because that's how they've always happened, and change can be really hard – I know I resist change! But without that willingness, the reformation wouldn't have happened. Listen to what God says about Josiah, listen to God's praise for him: v18 "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard:¹⁹ Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people... and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord"

God praises him for being humble hearted – that means he thought highly of God and not too highly of himself. He praises him for a personal response – he tore his robes and he sought the Lord. And Josiah also brought about a national response!

He called the nation together to celebrate the Passover festival – a huge feast where people would gather to Jerusalem from all around, and they would remember how the Lord rescued his people! v22 which I read at the start said "Neither in the days of the judges who led Israel nor in the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah had any such Passover been observed" And that wasn't all, he destroyed some of the idolatrous worship places, he got rid of the household gods that people had, and he got rid of the mediums and spiritists - people who claimed to teach the truth about God but who didn't. Now I'm sure these

people objected, I'm sure this wasn't simple – but he was following the Lord. Through him, the whole nation was *changed*. And for those of you who knew the story of Josiah, rediscovering God's word already... Please notice how the key to understanding this historical event, isn't simply the discovery of God's word – actually it's much more important the response to it: A humble, obedient, personal response to God and his word, Which brought about change.

Could that happen in our time? I think it's fair to say that the first question in most people's minds about something these days... isn't "does this please or honour God?". Much more, "is this what I want? Am I being true to myself? Could this happen in our time... Well, yes, if people would be willing to respond like this to God's word? Is it your response?

When we think about the life of Martin Luther, it's really interesting how just like with Josiah, it's clear that he was a man of great integrity right from the start. Luther's father in particular wanted him to be a lawyer, and massively opposed Luther going into the church. From a worldly point of view, it seemed to be an unwise choice, which would lead to less security, influence and renown – ironically.

One day as Luther was travelling and there was a great thunderstorm, lightning struck nearby and the air-pressure change through him to the ground, in a panic and terrified Luther prayed (to a saint!) And promised St Anne that if he was saved, he would become a monk. As I said, Luther was a man of real integrity, so, when he did survive the storm – he also did become a monk. Later on in his life, Luther had his integrity really tested, along with his nerve – as the conflict between him and the established church/the Pope intensified, he was essentially put on trial at a debate and told to recant all his teachings. His famous response was: "Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me, God." That shows his integrity, but also shows his humility... He feared God and not men. God was big and he (and all people) were small in his thinking. Luther also, like Josiah, was someone who wasn't afraid of change. This began really when he became a priest a few years later in the town of Wittenberg. Before this he had been to Rome and seen the corruption and ungodliness of the church – I'm sure that had influence his thinking. But it was as a parish priest seeing indulgences being sold to poor people who were struggling in life, that he really started to teach against the church, and take people back to what the Scriptures were teaching. Luther had discovered in his own life the doctrines of grace, and salvation through faith alone in Christ alone – and that had set him free. And now he increasingly wanted to change the church. Just like the Wesley's, who many of you will know about, Luther didn't want to start a new church – but he wanted to change the church he was a part! However, it became very clear in his own lifetime that wasn't going to be possible, and when Luther had concluded that the Pope (who was very much a political leader as well as head of the church) wasn't actually a converted believer in Jesus, And that the church as it was then was not going to turn back to the scriptures, he did begin (with many others around him) to start a new church movement.

Protestants, those who protest, emphasise the personal faith and a personal relationship with God – and ironically became known for their hard work. You may have heard of "the Protestant work ethic". Despite teaching that you don't need to do good works to prevent

favour from God – it's all Jesus. Despite that, Protestant believers ended up being very hard workers, because they were thankful to God and worked for his glory in every area of their life. And the fact that the printing press had been recently invented allowed Luther and others to spread their teachings far and wide. I guess it was a bit like having a recent explosion of Internet communication (like we have), people loved to read and hear what was being discussed. If you didn't see it last night, I would recommend that you try to watch the 2003 film called Luther, about Martin Luther's life. There are other articles and videos and books talk about in our grapevine, take some time during the series to learn about the history.

And also open your heart to the teachings of the Reformation too. We have an opportunity to understand our church history, and our faith history. Learning lessons from history, and this month to appreciate again and afresh how important some of the things we believe are – and what it cost people in the past that we would be taught them and know them.

And It's my prayer that we would have open ears to God – like Josiah did, and Luther did – and more than just hearing, we would have godly responses, each of us, in our hearts. That we would be glad to know what God wants, and respond humbly, obediently, and willing to change... and perhaps in time willing to make change.

Look I know that changing is hard, and I wrestle with myself and my character and my changing – (not as much as I should actually) but day after day... And let's each do that, and resolve to care about what God thinks – and long that God would say to us, what he said to Josiah... "Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before me [when you heard my word] I also have heard you"

Let's pray.

Lord you see our hearts, but we want nether-the-less to open ourselves up to you.

We open our ears, and ask you to speak to us, give us a hunger to hear from you...

We ask you to soften our hearts – and make the idea of change not so scary... help us to change if we need to.

We ask that you would make the church (and this church) always more pleasing to you, and faithful to you and your word,

And we ask that you would raise up people who would have an influence and make a difference to our land, to bring many back to a personal faith and commitment in your son Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen