

Where Do We Stand?

Romans 3:19-28

Some of you know that I recently celebrated my 50th birthday. Half a century gives enough perspective to look back on life so far, and to consider where I've come from and what I've accomplished. There is so much for which I am thankful: the parents who raised me, my marriage to Jodi and our life together, my wonderful children, the work God has called me to do, which I count an incredible blessing.



The view looking in the rear-view mirror is not always positive. There are things I wish I hadn't, and there are certainly things I wish I had.

Forgiveness becomes an ever more precious gift the older I get, because I've simply had more opportunities to get it wrong.

Fifty has become a time of great introspection. I know myself a whole lot better now. I am clearer about what my gifts and passions are. And time is ticking, I don't know for how long, and so I want to live authentically, faithfully, and with integrity. And I

want to do all of this with reference to God and in response to all that he has done for me. I want the good news of Jesus to so inspire me that I can't but live a life of service and praise. I am so thankful for the totally undeserved love that God has poured out on me. I've received all of the good things that Jesus accomplished through his perfect life. That's God's gift to me, and the more I look to Jesus and what he has done, the more my life reflects his goodness, peace and strength. My life is an act of gratitude to God for all his blessings.

How did I come to know this? Through God's word, which continually points me to Jesus, through parents who taught me the faith in their words and actions, and who faithfully brought me to worship in God's house, and through a church that was committed to proclaiming and practising the good news.



Tomorrow is the 50th birthday of the Lutheran Church of Australia. I quite like the fact that I'm the same age as the LCA. While the German Lutheran emigrants arrived in South Australia in 1836, the sad truth is that different theological understandings divided Lutheran in Australia for nearly 120 years. It took 25 years of patient and detailed theological discussion for the two major church bodies, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, to come together and form one new church in 1966, named, somewhat unsurprisingly, the Lutheran Church of Australia.



And this was the basis of their rediscovered unity: “one faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and the one doctrine of his holy Gospel.” Jesus is at the centre. And the gospel — the story of what Jesus did and how that has changed the world, and not least of all our lives. And of course this is revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. And this is where what happened almost 500 years ago comes into view. The actions of a junior theology professor, placing 95 points for theological discussion on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, started a theological revolution.

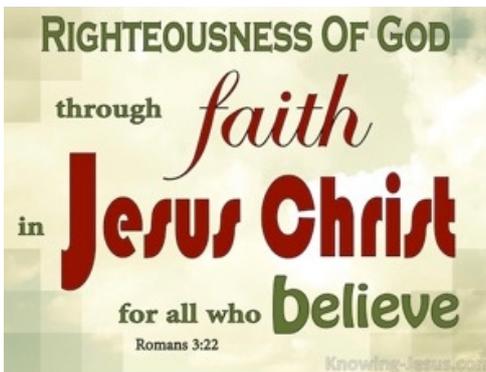
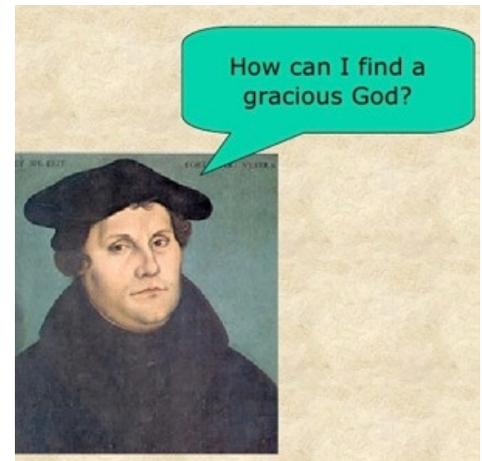
As a theologian, Luther had the rare privilege of studying the Bible in the original language, in a time when most people were illiterate and access to the Bible was tightly controlled. It disturbed Luther greatly to see the chasm between what he read in the Bible and what was being taught by the church of that time. Preachers were going around playing on people’s bad conscience and hoodwinking them into purchasing indulgences to make sure that God would no longer be angry with them.



This is what the most famous of these preachers, Johannes Tetzel said: “Remember that you are in such a storm, in peril on the raging sea of the world that you do not know if you can reach the harbour of salvation ... you should know, whoever has confessed and is contrite and puts alms in the box, will have all his sins forgiven.” And worse than that, more money would

secure the forgiveness of loved ones suffering in purgatory.

Once Luther had felt this way too. He had been taught to fear an angry and judgemental God. He was nothing if not conscientious, and he tried as hard as he possibly could to climb the slippery ladder up to God. He became a monk because he thought this provided a fast track to heaven. But the harder he tried, the worse he felt. Luther explains it this way: “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction [things done to satisfy God as payments for sins]. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God...”

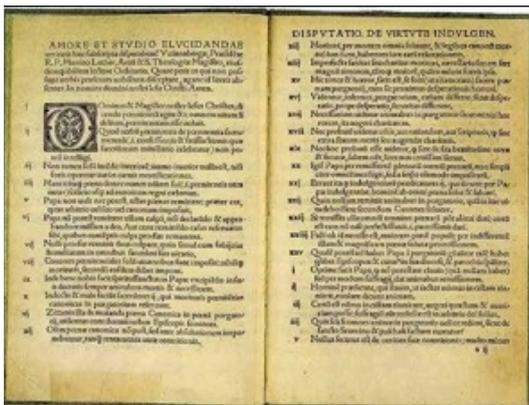
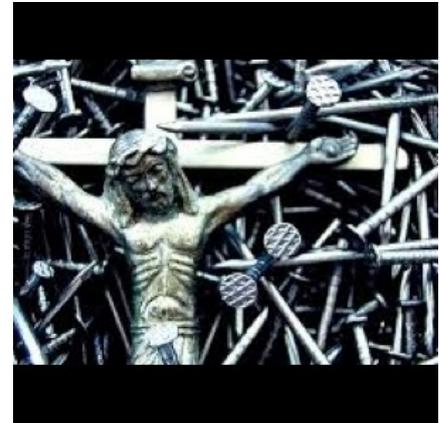


But deep and careful reading of the Bible revealed to him another picture of God. And it was today’s passage from Romans that first revealed the treasure of the good news: through Jesus, God takes the initiative to welcome us into his holy presence: “The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” is the key that unlocks the door of heaven. Luther writes: “There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which

merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

It may sound strange to us, given Luther's education and intellect, that it took so long for Luther to realise this; but for the first time, he came to see that God's purpose was not to condemn but to save, not to turn away but to welcome. But this welcome came at a huge cost: the price of the life of God's own Son, Jesus Christ. There's a huge chasm between God and us: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

This broken creation breaks God's heart. His response is personal, heartfelt. It involves him giving up his Son, the one he loves more than anyone else, so that "he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus." This is not something that God can do remotely but personally. God expresses his love in his Son, Jesus Christ. Fixing this mess will come at the highest cost. All "are now justified by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood." Someone had to pay the price. Someone had to bridge the gap. Someone had to take our place. That someone was God's Son. And because of God's great love, we have a new start, a new life, a new relationship, freely given, received simply through taking God at his word and trusting him.

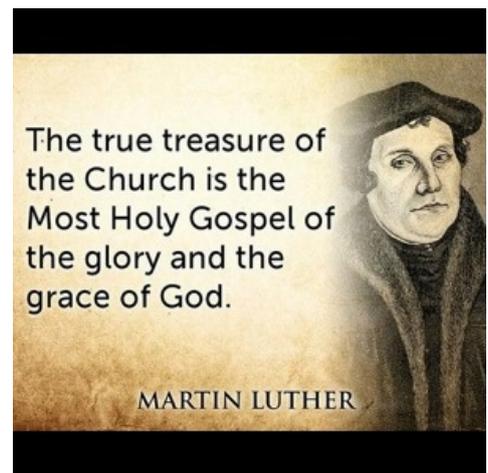


That's why lay behind the 95 theses. There were about how to have the life God wants for us. It begins with repentance, which is where Jesus began too, his first preaching in Mark's gospel: "Repent and believe the good news." And so Luther states: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." We don't start with the good news and move beyond it. We always need to know God's loves us, over and over again. When we repent, we're not doing so out of the fear of hell, but because we know that God loves us, unconditionally, and he's constantly running to find us.

That's because, as Luther writes in Thesis 62: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God."

It's a treasure that is so easy for us to lose sight of. Luther himself says in the very next thesis: "But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first the last."

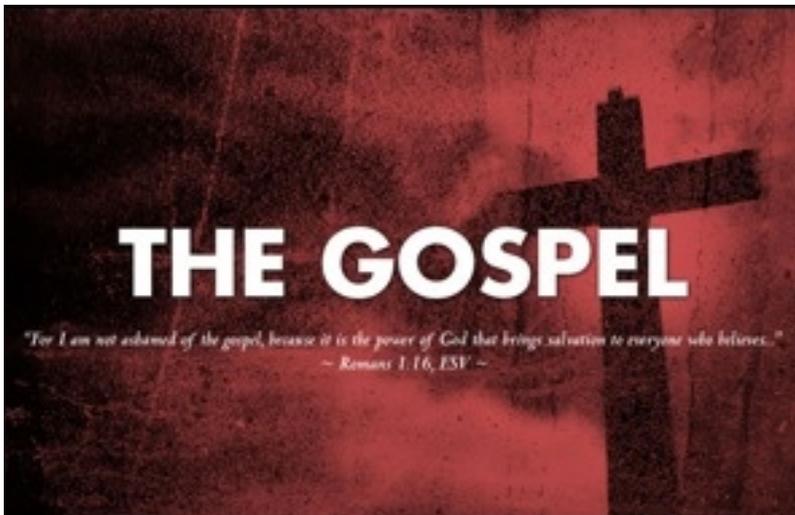
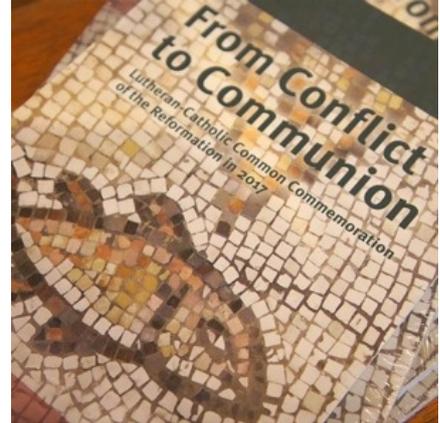
The gospel is an affront to the idea that we are all we need, and that God must naturally be very impressed with us. It's an antidote to thinking that it's our wisdom and intelligence that runs the church and keeps God's kingdom going. It's a rebuke to the idea that once I've been saved, I progress through life under my own spiritual steam, getting better and better along the way



The Lutheran Church of Australia turns 50 tomorrow. There

are things to celebrate. But there are also reasons to come before God in repentance for how we haven't lived in the power of the good news: for the fact that it took 120 years to come to unity in the first place, for our loss of confidence in the gospel and our searching around for all kinds of techniques and strategies to make God's church grow, instead of falling down on our knees in repentant prayer and overflowing thanks for the treasure that is the glory and grace of God.

And it's a time to also reflect on the historical division of the church caused by these events. It was a privilege yesterday morning to be part of a Lutheran delegation speaking about what the Reformation meant for us, and to hear about the good work of Lutheran and Roman Catholic dialogue in Australia and internationally. As one of these dialogues observes: "We have shared joy in Jesus Christ and his reconciling grace... But we Christians have certainly not always been faithful to the gospel; all too often we have conformed ourselves to the thought and behavioural patterns of the surrounding world. Repeatedly, we have stood in the way of the good news of the mercy of God."



But the good news is this: God calls us back to himself. And, our response, as Luther says: "Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, and with all my heart, and with an eager will to do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? ... I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbour, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbour, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ."

That's the gospel is, and that's what it does. Amen.