

## Reformation today

*(Input by Horst Müller during the opening of the Reformation exhibition, DSP, 21 April 2017)*

Five weeks from today thousands of people will travel to Berlin and Wittenberg to celebrate the “Church day”, “Kirchentag”. And on Sunday, 28 May between twenty and fifty thousand people will gather a few hundred metres from the Church in Wittenberg where Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door. They will celebrate the closing service of the Kirchentag. A few million will watch it on German TV. This will be the biggest single event held in Wittenberg during the 500 years celebration of Reformation.

The preacher on that day will be none other than ... the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Magkoba.

I can imagine that many will shake their head in disbelief - the major celebration held in the cradle of Reformation having a non-Lutheran and non-German as preacher? Staunch Lutherans might even see it as betrayal of the Reformation.

I think it is amazingly appropriate. The young lecturer who posted the 95 theses 500 years earlier also was not a Lutheran. He was a Roman Catholic priest. And he did not post them in German, but in Latin. So, the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517 definitely was not a German, nor a Lutheran event. It was, however, an event that changed Europe and the western world, and all the countries influenced by Europe since then.

Of course, for the Lutherans it marks the beginnings of the Lutheran Church - and also for many protestant churches.

And for the Germans it is a significant German event. Apart from celebrating the rise of the German language as a unified, written language, it also marks a new beginning in schooling, especially of girl-children.

In the old GDR the more radical Reformers like Thomas Müntzer and Andreas Karlstadt were celebrated as people’s heroes and revolutionaries.

And yes, the Reformation had its dark sides: first the slaughtering of nobility and then of the peasants; the strong anti-Semitic statements made by Luther and embraced by Nazi Germany centuries later.

Perhaps, the most significant negative aspect from Church perspective, is the break up of the Roman Church, not only into Catholic and Protestant, but the massive break up within the Protestant camp.

Even sadder, speaking as a Lutheran, is the break up within the Lutheran Family between true Lutherans, very true Lutherans and other Lutherans.

What is the relevance of Reformation today?

I refer to the issue of the preacher 5 weeks from now - a South-African Anglican Archbishop preaching in English on the meadows of Wittenberg. This actually captures some of the essential aspects of Reformation today:

1) Reformation is an ecumenical event.

It is celebrated by many, many different denominations. Not only the Lutherans are having a direct connections to Luther. So do the Moravians and the Methodists, and to a larger or lesser degree the reformed portion of the Protestant Church.

In many Reformed Institutions and training centres you will find pictures of Luther next to Calvin and Zwingli. The Dutch Reformed Church here in South Africa has a special team to prepare the celebrations. (One wine farmer has studied beer brewing and hopes to issue a special “Litre for Luther” beer!)

Many Roman Catholic theologians are not only experts on Luther, but can highlight his core teachings better than many Lutheran theologians, and concur with them.

Since 1999 the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Lutheran World Federation are co-signatories of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, in which they together affirm that salvation is by grace through faith and not by works. More importantly, in that

document they are withdrawing the condemnations that were issued against each other since the sixteenth century.

The Methodist later co-signed the document, and another South African, Jerry Pillay, will be present when the Presbyterian Church signs it in June this year in Leipzig.

2. Reformation is a global event.

The Archbishop of Cape Town preaches in Wittenberg - North, South, East, West - the spread of the Reformation is global.

Two years ago I attended a conference in Zürich hosted by the German speaking Protestant Churches of Germany and Switzerland. They had invited their partner churches from across the globe.

During group discussions there were always two venues - the large hall for the three hundred German speaking participants, and a small side room for the 30 international, non Germans.

It struck me to realise that this small group of Non-Germans represented a far larger group of Protestants than the large group next door. The Reformation spread far beyond the German language boundaries. At that event I mentioned that Wittenberg is a spiritual home to many people. When they come to visit in 2017 the Germans will see them as visitors from across the globe and welcome them as such. But for many this will be a visit to their spiritual home! As I said it, a Korean delegate nodded “loudly” - and so did many of the others. To many, many non-Germans Wittenberg is part of *their own* history.

3. Reformation is a Christ event.

In the foyer at our Church office in Bonaero Park there is this beautiful Reformation poster. It says “It still is all about Jesus” This is the most significant aspect of the Reformation. When the Archbishop is preaching, he will be wearing his cross. That is the core of the reformation: bringing the message of the cross.

It is all about Jesus - that is very clear when we read the first words of the first of the 95 thesis. Luther does not start with a long introduction, a theological discourse. He starts with: “When our Lord Jesus Christ said ...” (*1. Dominus et magister noster Iesus Christus dicendo ...*) It is not about the Lutheran Church, nor about Germans - it is about Jesus who challenges humanity, about the Church being challenged by what Jesus taught, about us asking: What would Jesus do?

What about having someone who cannot preach in German? That too is quite meaningful. It is common knowledge that Luther translated the Bible into German. But he did not do it to further the German language or to create a German culture. He did it, so that the people in his country could understand the message of Jesus in their everyday language!

So I can extend the sentence from the poster: It’s still all about Jesus ... in a way that everybody can understand it!

Reformation is not a Lutheran thing - nor is it a protestant thing. Reformation is about the gospel of Christ reaching people wherever they are, whoever they are. And this is done by all denominations - be it with different theologies and approaches - but ultimately it is all about Jesus.

4. Reformation is a life changer

The first thesis says: This Jesus, about whom it is, wants us to change our lives and live as his followers.

Reformation is a life-changing event - and as such an ongoing one. It needs to happen time and time again when Christians have forgotten that it is all about Jesus. It needs to happen when society has gone astray. It is a daily process.

I am looking forward to the rest of this year - not so much as a celebration of Lutherans for Lutherans (that will be nice too!), but as a year of again focussing on Jesus, hoping and praying that many, many people will hear the message in a way they can understand, and then have the courage to repent and live a life to his glory!

Horst Müller