

“Reformation 500: It is still about repentance”

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

This evening we have come here, in our Lord’s presence, to remember a very important event, that changed not only the Church, but to great extent also the course of entire Western civilization.

The Lutheran Reformation. That’s how this event is remembered. However, everything begun in a very humble and lowly way. A professor in Wittenberg University, Dr Martin Luther posted on the University’s notice board 95 theses, which he had prepared for public disputation.

And the first among them sounded like this: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” That simple. Repentance.

What do you think about this word? “Repent!” It seems that today this invitation, or command of our Lord is not overly popular. Neither for the world, nor among Christians. Why so?

I guess there are two main explanations. One is arrogance, for people today are not going to listen to anyone or obey to anyone, the least to this Jesus or His Church. The other is ignorance.

Repentance is perceived as something unpleasant. As focusing on something that we, out of politeness, should be pretending doesn’t exist, namely, our sins. However, in fact, responding to this command ‘repent!’ is one of the most joyful Christian experiences.

We know that sin is like a sickness. It robs us of our joy. It takes away our peace. It denies us true, divine wisdom. It stands between us and the most beautiful person, – our God the Father and our dear Lord Jesus Christ.

Our sin prevents us from living out fully our humanity and rejoicing in the beauty of this creaturely life. Repentance, on the other hand, is a joyful experience.

Imagine, that deceived by sin and devil and the world you have been wandering away from the blessings of the Triune God, that you have been walking away from light and life towards darkness and death.

Then you hear the gentle voice of Jesus: “Repent!” Meaning, – “turn away from what robs you and return to me, and I will give you rest, forgiveness, I will restore your soul and will fill your heart with my Spirit”. This is what ‘repentance’ means.

Also, the word ‘reformation’ is closely tied with the word repentance. Remember, re-formation is the opposite of de-formation. Something good was deformed and is in a need of reformation, restoration.

We are talking about our lives, and about our souls. Every day they are being deformed by our sin, and by this world, and more than everything we need repentance and restoration, we need to return to our life-giving Lord Jesus.

When the Lutheran Reformation began, it began as a call to repent of our sin and to return to gracious and loving God. It was a call to restore in the Church everything that was corrupted by sin and the world.

Five centuries later, many things have changed, but many things are still the same today, and therefore reformation, in the proper sense of this word, as turning away from our sins, is as needed today, as it was back then.

I propose that this evening we look at three aspects of our Christian faith and life, where we need to repent and which we need to reform and restore again and again. The first is about the Word of God. The second is about our God Himself. And the third is about the relationships between faith and new life of obedience. So the first, about the Word of God.

It is a great malady that has inflicted so many churches, namely, Christians have lost their trust in the Word of God as the highest authority for their faith and life. The beauty, the depth and the wisdom of God's Word is often exchanged to our own haughty opinions, that so often are shaped by the society around us. To certain extent we all are guilty of this.

Here we come to one of Luther's greatest contributions for the sake of the Gospel. Immersing himself in the Bible, and listening how God Himself speaks to us through the Sacred Scriptures, Luther realized that the true God is God of conversation. God of conversation.

That He is God who accomplishes everything by speaking. By speaking He created and ordered everything that exists. Today by speaking the same life-creating Word He restores His fallen creation, and by speaking He calls His chosen people out of this world into His family, His Church.

We need to remember, that we don't read the Bible to study God. We read it because through this book the eternal and holy God Himself speaks to us, giving us answers to the most profound questions: who He is, who we are, what is wrong with this world, where we are heading, and many others.

Luther also understood something else. And this is a very important insight for all of us. Listening to God Luther realized that God uses us as His children to build His Kingdom and to create new hearts in His chosen people.

This is very important. Whenever you tell someone about Jesus and about what He has done and prepared for all who respond to His love, those are not your words only, they are at the same time words of the Holy God.

And as we have it discussed many times, God's Word never travels alone. Who accompanies Him? That's right. The Holy Spirit. Remember this, brothers and

sisters, when you tell others about Jesus, the Holy Spirit goes forth and works with your listeners to reveal them the truth and to lead them to eternal life.

Such a great privilege is given to us. To be God's own messengers and co-workers. Such a great authority is entrusted to us, to send forth the Holy Spirit and to bring people in the Kingdom of God's Son. If only we could comprehend and appreciate it, there would be no end to our joy, we couldn't stop smiling.

The second topic was about our God; where to find Him. Again, this is where we often sin and need to repent. Every human being knows that there is someone higher, but usually people don't know who He is, and don't care.

The true God has come to us and has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. And still, many self-identified Christians make this mistake thinking that they can gain access to the holy God somewhere else, apart from His Son Jesus.

Instead of receiving God's own revelation, we often want to create a god after our own image and likeness. Like some good earthly ruler; just and benevolent. A god who blesses the good ones, that is, us, and punishes the evil ones, that is, those who are not like us. Then we write for him to-do list, and later wonder and get upset that he doesn't follow our instructions.

Luther wrote, that he didn't know any other god, but only this man Jesus Christ. By saying that Luther didn't deny the divinity of Jesus. On the contrary. He emphasised that the only way we can know the Almighty God, the Creator and Redeemer of the whole Universe, is if He reveals Himself to us.

This is exactly what He has done and does in Jesus Christ, when He comes to be among us and bless us with His Word and Sacraments. It is an unusual revelation, for sure. Very strange for our fallen reason. Nevertheless, it is the most wonderful revelation that the humanity has ever received.

In Jesus we know God as gracious Father, who cares for all His children. In Jesus we know God, who is ready to sacrifice His own life, so that only we could be with Him forever.

In Jesus we know merciful God, whose patience surpasses all our understanding. We get to know almighty God, who will restore the whole creation, so that those who love Him could live in eternal blessedness and joy in His near presence.

We get to know God, who is close to each one of us, who has sent His Holy Spirit into our hearts as a guaranty that all His faithful will be raised in new bodies for exciting, adventurous and everlasting life in renewed heavens and renewed earth.

Wonderful and heart-warming is God's revelation in Jesus, but so many want to ignore it and to have their own faith. It just doesn't work. Luther wrote that thus we can only fall-down and break our necks. Then, hopefully, we could realise,

that all this time Jesus has been at our side patiently calling us: “Repent! Return to me! I want to be your God.”

The third thing was about the relationships between faith and new life of obedience. O, how much those people, who at least entertain thoughts about the eternal life, how much they want to obtain it by means of their own good lives.

That is a plague from which even Christians are not spared. It seems so reasonable to think that if I do this, then you should do that. ‘I’ll be a good person, and you, God, will bless me, and welcome me. Hopefully at the end of my life I will have more good works than bad.’

So sad when people think this way. Probably they haven’t had a chance to hear the Gospel. God doesn’t deal with us as with business partners. Like parents love their children long before they have done anything good, so also our God loves all His children unconditionally, long before we have done anything good.

He is our Creator and Redeemer. He not only gives us every hearth beat, every breath, but He also has chosen His loved ones from before the creation of the world, so that through Jesus we would be His beloved sons and daughters.

Think about this! Even before the world was created your God had chosen you so that you could joyfully dwell with Him in New Heavens and New Earth. How could we possibly merit something like that?

The Spirit of God, our faith in Jesus, our eternal inheritance in God’s New Creation, all these things are God’s gifts to you. Undeserved, unconditional gifts of loving Father to His beloved children.

But how about our lives? Does it matter what they are like if all God’s gifts are unconditional? Of course, it does. Like beloved children who want to please their loving parents by listening and obeying them, so we too want to please our Father in Heaven.

The more we realize how much He has done and does for us, the more grateful our hearts become. The more we experience God’s love, the more we want to please Him with our new and obedient lives. That’s the purpose of our renewed lives. Gratitude and glory to our God, as we serve our neighbours.

Today, as we celebrate the anniversary of the Reformation, it is a fitting time to repent of our indifference and complacency, and appreciate and rejoice in all those precious gifts that we have received from our God, and of which Martin Luther so clearly reminded us.

The Word of God as a light to our path, our access to gracious God through His Son Jesus, and His unconditional grace and forgiveness which we receive simply trusting in His promises.

It is good to remember how easy we tend to forget about those gifts, how quickly we turn away from the light of Jesus towards the darkness of this world, and how much we all need repentance and restoration.

This evening I pray that our entire lives are lives of repentance. That our Lord Jesus bless us, so that we always joyfully listen to His Word and share the Good News with others. That we always search for God where He has revealed Himself, in Jesus, His beloved Son.

That our hearts be filled with joy and hope, for you know that the greatest gifts, the forgiveness of all your sins and the eternal life with our God, we receive simply by faith, by trusting the promises of our God.

I pray that God would bless us all, so that filled with His marvellous gifts we would joyfully lead renewed and obedient lives until finally, fully restored and prepared for the live everlasting, we see Him, our Lord Jesus, as He is.

Amen.