

“Born of bold confession”.

Remembering the proclamation of the Augsburg Confession.

Happy birthday of our church, dear fellow Lutheran Christians! 492 and counting!

There was a beautiful movie made in 2003. Luther. If not exactly historically accurate in every detail, it certainly reveals the Spirit of the Lutheran Reformation and of the birth of the Lutheran Church, or we could say – of the Church of the Augsburg Confession.

At the very end of this movie there is a remarkable scene. It's 25th of June, 1530. Augsburg. Roman Emperor Charles V had to deal with Turkish invasion and needed unity among his subjects that the explosion of the Gospel had shattered.

He had summoned his subjects to force them to reject this new evangelical faith and to bring them back under the wings of Roman church. In this scene, Charles V angrily demands obedience from the evangelicals and return to Roman practices.

Essentially, he demands them to reject the Gospel, to reject the freedom that the Gospel has brought, to reject the Word of God, or... they will taste his sword. There is a moment of silence. Then one of the dukes, who had signed the Augsburg Confession, comes forward and respectfully declares:

“Before I let anyone to take away the Word of God from me and ask to deny my belief, I will kneel and let him strike off my head.” He kneels... One after another other dukes and princes and council-men join him kneeling before the emperor.

“We will rather die than compromise the Gospel,” as it is summarized in the Augsburg Confession. And thus, the Lutheran Church was born. Born out of this bold confession. Wonderful and inspiring testimony. How much those our brothers and sisters loved the Gospel; how much they loved their Lord Jesus!

Dorothy L. Sayers, famous British essayist, beautifully gifted and insightful sister in Christ, this is what she wrote in her essay “Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine”.

She was confronting the same reality that we too often face here in Australia. Irrelevance of Christian Doctrine. This is what she wrote: “World calls it tolerance... but it is the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing...

... interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive only because there is nothing it would die for.”

Does it sound familiar? What about churches in the West? What about Lutheran churches in the West? What about the LCA? What about us? What do we value? What do we value so much that we would be ready to suffer for it?

What do we cherish so much that we would be willing to be rejected, mocked, lose our comfort and conveniences? What are we afraid to lose more than the approval of society, of our peers, even more than our life? Is there anything?

For our Lutheran forebearers in faith it was the Gospel. The pure teaching of the Gospel. But why, why to make such a big deal about this pure teaching of the Gospel? Why to be so stubborn even when peace and unity is at stake? Why to refuse to make even small compromises that would help church-politically?

Those Lutheran Reformers had a very particular understanding of God's message. For one, they believed that only the pure teaching of God's Word, of both, the Law and the Gospel, brings us salvation and eternal life.

They believed – what seems like a common sense – that the new life creating Holy Spirit will only accompany the truth of the Scripture, but not some false or distorted teachings. Otherwise put, the pure teaching of the Gospel brings us the assurance and certainty of our salvations, nothing less.

But the other was their understanding of God's message. It is interesting, they only spoke and wrote about Biblical doctrine in singular, never in plural. Doctrine, not doctrines. They used the metaphor of body speaking about the Biblical teaching.

The body of Biblical doctrine. One body, consisting of many members. But why to make such a big deal about this pure teaching of Biblical doctrine? I think this illustration can help. Melanoma. Skin cancer.

Imagine the situation – your doctor tells you that that little dark spot on your neck is melanoma. What is your reaction? What do you say, what do you do? Imagine that you just shook your shoulders and said: "Not a big deal. I know that other people also have it. Nothing to worry about." How likely is such scenario?

I would guess, quite unlikely. Why? Because we realize that what may seem like a small and quite innocent dark spot today, will turn into deadly disease not too far along the way. So, we take all the possible steps to protect our health.

Makes sense, not any divine wisdom required. But then, please, help me to understand, why, when Christians see spiritual melanomas growing on the body of Biblical teaching, why don't we react with the same caution?

Don't we realize that any seemingly innocent doctrinal error, that any deviation from Biblical teaching, that any false teaching, whatever small and tolerable it may

seem to our modern sensitivities, is like aggressive spiritual melanoma, it will bring in deadly disease which will end with spiritual death and eternal damnation.

Or think about our food-obsessed culture, how carefully we choose what to eat and what not. Today for many their eating habits have become a part of their identity. But when it comes to spiritual food, people just don't care, whatever goes... as long as the wrap is nice and shiny. What is wrong with us?

One more illustration. Jesus comes and invites us to follow Him. As we follow Him, imagine that we change our trajectory by just one degree. One degree, what is it? Nothing. After a few steps almost nothing has changed. It would seem weird to sound alarms... just one degree. Others will consider you some kind of fanatic or troublemaker. Let's keep peace and keep moving.

But, just an hour later we will be almost hundred meters off the course. Keep going on that trajectory and soon we won't see Jesus at all. One degree. One degree! What do we value the most? Shouldn't that be the medicine of eternal life, the life-giving Gospel message, the pure teaching of the Gospel? The eternal life!

I don't know what your experiences are, but I have been quite disturbed by how even our brothers and sisters in our own LCA seemingly despise and scorn at our Lutheran heritage. Sometimes it seems, people are almost ashamed of being Lutheran, not much interested even to learn what it means.

Our God has blessed us so richly. So abundantly. Without any merit or worthiness of ours at all. We didn't burn with this incredible passion digging deeper in the Word of God to bring out the treasures of the Gospel. The Reformers did.

We didn't sacrifice our comfort, our security, even our lives to protect this message from being erased. They did it. We haven't been so pushed and squeezed by the Holy Spirit as Dr Luther and his colleagues, as they agonized to articulate the pure and clear teaching of the Gospel, while facing attacks from all directions, from Rome and from different radical elements.

We are no better than Christians of other stripes. We may be worse. But it is foolish not to acknowledge that for some unknown divine decision we have been the blessed recipients of this incredible grace, that we are brought into God's family in Lutheran Church. Oh, if only we were able to comprehend what is given to us!

If only we knew how to appreciate it, if only we had the eyes enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see the beauty and splendour of what treasures we have in our Lutheran Church. The Church which was born of that bold confession.

You see, we can go through a long list of theological terminology, such as – the distinction of the Law and the Gospel, our beautiful sacramental theology, our

Lutheran liturgical theology, theology of the Cross, Biblical anthropology of Two Kinds of Righteousness, doctrine of vocation, and more and more.

But when we consider all these treasures of Biblical-Lutheran theology, when we consider the pure teaching of the Gospel, in reality, it is nothing else, as being blessed to hear God's gracious voice speaking to us clearly in all situation.

To be able to hear the voice of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit clearly and with wonderful assurance. The purer the teaching, the clearer the voice of God, the greater the joy, the more certain the assurance of your salvation. That simple.

We are so blessed to be able to hear clearly our Triune God speaking to us. It is His voice that invites and gathers us here. It is Him saying to you: "Come, I want to be with you, and I want to bless you!"

It is our Father in heaven, who adopts you in His family, who puts His name on you and makes you heirs of His Kingdom, that is His gift to you. It is His voice that you hear declaring: "I forgive you all your sins! They are forgiven! You are free!"

It is our God who speaks to you as He reminds us what His holy will for our lives is, and reminds us how much we have fallen short. And it is Him who assures us that our relationships are not based on our performance, that they are based on His love and grace: "I welcome and embrace you not because you deserve it, but because I love you, I want you to be with me, and I know that my love will make you good!"

It is Him who hear your prayers, who feeds you forgiveness and eternal life, it is Him who sends you away with blessings. It is our God who helps you to understand who we truly are, created for glorious life with Him, and for joyful service to others.

It is Him who assures you that He is with us even when the whole world seems to be against us, and that it is especially in those moments, when He dwells with you, and allows you to experience His peace that surpasses all our understanding.

It is Him, who fills your lives with meaningful activities, as He invites you to serve your neighbours together with Him, to allow Him to use your gifts and talents for the sake of others. It is Him, our God of conversation, our God of community, your God and God who has done and does all of this and so much more for you.

Today we can listen to this clear, heart-warming and new life-creating message, not because our pastors are so smart, no! but because of those blessed saints, Dr Luther and his colleagues, who were God's chosen instruments to purify His message, who suffered and sacrificed so much.

Do you wonder, where did they find so much courage, so much passion? It was given to them, as they trusted the power of the Word of God, they trusted that God will keep His promises, that the Word will not return empty.

Even if it meant standing against the church leaders, and the mighty of this world. And God kept His promise; sure, there were trials and challenges, threats and persecutions, but God's Word didn't return empty, it accomplished its purpose, it renewed the Christian Church and it bore wonderful fruits – the pure teaching of the Gospel as we have received in in our Book of Lutheran Confessions.

It is our turn now, we have received the same life-giving, Spirit filled Word of God, more, we have the fruits of their labour, our Lutheran Confessions, and we have the same Holy Spirit as our Helper, ready and keen to support us whatever comes.

Let us pray that the Spirit of God works through us mightily, that we too can confess boldly and live graciously, so that some gifted essayist, an Australian counterpart of Dorothy Sayers could say about us:

“These Lutherans, they truly believe the Word of God, they care for salvation of all people, they seek the good for all people, they interfere whenever they can make a difference, they enjoy being loved by the Triune God, they hate sin and false teachings and indifference, they find purpose in working for God's Kingdom, they live and breathe and find joy in serving their neighbours, and they are heading to the New Heavens and New Earth, for this is what Jesus has promised them.”

They are the Church born of bold confession. They are Lutheran Christians.

Amen.