
The sermon text for today is based on the Gospel, John Chapter 8, verses 31 to 36.
Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

Some 500 years ago a stocky, German monk with a love of beer and an even greater love of God's word, took a ten-minute walk from his cloister to the castle church in Wittenberg. On to this insignificant church door he nailed 95 theses – a list of teachings and practices within the church that he wanted to discuss. He'd come to believe on the basis of the Scriptures that there were some problems with the way the church was doing things. And Martin Luther only wanted to speak the truth of God's Word. So he asked the church to engage in a conversation about the truth.

Luther couldn't have dreamed of the stink his theses were going to create. The whole of Europe ended up in uproar. Excommunication followed for Luther and others. There was even a bounty placed on his head and princes and knights hunted him down like a common criminal. All because he dared to speak the truth.

The medieval church had strayed a long way from the teachings of Jesus and by 1517 their power and wealth depended on their man-made version of the truth. They'd come to believe that people had the ability and means to earn their salvation. That eternal life could be secured by doing good deeds such as paying money to the church. Luther had lived with this teaching all his life – he did more good works than you or I can imagine – and yet he still knew in his heart that he didn't match up to God's commandments. As he studied Jesus' teachings, he came to realise that the church had distorted the truth and that salvation was supposed to be the gift of a gracious God – not a reward for our good deeds. But as he reminded the church of the truth, he discovered that not everyone really wants to know the truth.

Nothing much has changed has it? Do you remember that famous line by Jack Nicholson in the courtroom scene in the movie “A Few Good Men”? He was in the witness stand and the lawyer demanded he speak the truth and Nicholson screamed “You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!” That's become a powerful line in movie history because it speaks to our desire to only hear those things that we are comfortable with, those things that don't challenge us too much. It's like the proverbial

question, “Does my backside look big in this?” It's not really a question that wants the truth. It's a question that seeks an answer to comfort and encourage. If the truth is something that confronts and rebukes us, more than likely we won't want to hear it.

But Jesus makes it clear in today's reading that the truth is vitally important – but not just someone's own version of the truth. We will know the truth, he says, when we hold to His teaching. In other words, if we stop and listen to what Jesus teaches, He will reveal the truth to us, and it will set us free. The question is, do we want to hear the truth?

In the Middle Ages the Roman church certainly didn't want the truth of Jesus' teaching because they were so committed to their own distorted version of religious truth – a version that filled their coffers and kept people under their control. And today most people don't want to know the truth of Jesus' teaching either, because it challenges our comfortable lives and reveals the reality of the struggles we suppress deep inside. If the truth first challenges us and forces us to rethink what's real and what's important before it sets us free, perhaps we'd be more comfortable just remaining enslaved to the lies we've bought into.

Central to the Reformation and to Jesus' teaching is the fact that we are born sinful and unclean and cannot save ourselves – no exceptions! Regardless of how good a life we seem to lead, all of us fall short of God's expectations – we sin. This is the truth. But when we see a beautiful, innocent little baby, we find ourselves challenged by this. How can he or she be a sinner? How can they need forgiveness? Such were the questions that the Roman church had allowed to shape their thinking and practice to such an extent that they believed we could co-operate with God in saving ourselves – a little bit of money here, an act of charity and love there, would make up for our lapses into bad behaviour. But how much money was enough? How many good deeds would make things right? The end result was that nobody could be certain about their forgiveness – consciences were enslaved to a never-ending treadmill of good deeds and Jesus' teaching became obscured behind a wall of falsehood.

Jesus' teaching reveals the truth. And one of the key things it reveals is that we are dead in sin – from the newborn babe to the convicted criminal to the gentle old grandma. In big and small ways, we rebel against the will and ways of God – not just in actions, but in our thoughts and words as well. We tend to think that we're not that

bad – that our sins are not as serious as other's. But Jesus' teaching proclaims that all sins have the same consequence, they separate us from God and leave us as good as dead. Now I ask you, can a dead man bring himself back to life? Of course not. And whether we are an infant or an adult, if we've inherited our sinful condition and are dead in sin, there's nothing we can do to bring ourselves back to life. Nothing we can do to free ourselves from this sin and death. Resurrection, new life, freedom from sin and everlasting death have to be a gift of God.

Unfortunately, many people hear the beginning of Jesus' teaching – they hear the truth about our sin – but don't hang around long enough to hear the whole picture. Because just as the Word reveals our helpless, sinful condition, it also reveals our help in the person of Jesus. The truth of God does not leave us enslaved to sin and death. It shows us the only way out. Not by our own efforts or understanding. But by the good news of our Lord Jesus, who loved us enough to allow himself to be sacrificed in punishment for our sins.

Luther's 95 theses nailed to that church door aimed to do one thing. To get the church to remember where our help lies. To open people's eyes once again to the source of our freedom. To deliver the comfort of the gospel to people in the pews so that they could rest easy knowing that Jesus had done everything to secure their salvation.

We are presented with so many different interpretations of the truth in this day. Everyone puts their own spin on things to try to sell their version. And we're tempted to pick and choose what suits us – what makes us comfortable, what allows us to do what we want, and what provides us with the least challenge. But in those moments of quiet when the rush of the world stops, there is always that nagging sense of conscience that makes us uneasy when we've moulded our own version of the truth.

It's into this discomfort that Jesus speaks today. Offering you His teaching – offering you the truth that reveals the depth of your sin on the one hand, and the magnificence of God's forgiving love on the other. There's no fudging things here. No making excuses. He sees things as they are. He owns up to the truth that frightens the daylights out of you and me, and He acts in water and Word, in bread and wine, in flesh and blood, to set us free from sin and death and hell, all because He offers us the free and undeserved gift of forgiveness in Jesus' name.

Why do we celebrate the Reformation? Well it's because you and I and the world we live in desperately need this good news just as much as the people of Luther's day did. We need to be constantly reminded of God's saving love in Christ. Of our sinfulness and the Lord's mercy. Of our helplessness and the Lord's promise to rescue us. We need to be reminded of the truth that when Jesus said 'It is finished' – he meant it – in that moment our salvation was secured. No more payment required.

So dear Lord, keep us and our hearts in your Word, that we may know the truth and the truth will set us free. Amen.