

## OCTOBER 2017

Dear Friends,

### 'Reformation'

Five hundred years ago on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517, a Dominican monk called Martin Luther published his famous 95 theses. He may not have actually nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenberg as people often suppose, but his protest certainly caught the public imagination. One of his chief complaints concerned the so-called 'selling of indulgences' (the payment of money to the Church authorities in return for an assurance of divine forgiveness), which not only distorted the fundamental nature of repentance and reconciliation with God, but also resulted in the commercial exploitation of the poor:

“Why does the pope,” asked Luther, “whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?”

His 95 theses were a devastating critique of the abuses and superstitions pervading the medieval Church at that time, and are widely regarded as the spark which lit the Reformation fire. The Reformation brought change on a huge scale. It split the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire, fuelled the struggle for political independence within Europe (Germany in particular), prompted the founding of numerous Protestant Churches (and the Church of England as well), prompted a Catholic counter-Reformation which sought to correct some of the abuses and initiate a different kind of renewal, and indirectly, throughout the whole process, affirmed the importance of the individual and his beliefs over against the received faith of the community or Church.

The Reformation could not have had such a major impact, of course, without the advent of the printing press. Leaflets produced in their thousands and distributed to the masses created a populist movement not unlike those spawned by our modern social media. It was a movement impossible for the authorities to control.

At its worst, it led at times to a pooling of ignorance and prejudice, crude fundamentalism and dangerous extremism. The wholesale destruction of images and artwork in churches and cathedrals, for example, resulted from certain puritanical groups denouncing them as idolatrous. But on the more positive side, it also led to a re-rooting of faith in Scripture. The Bible was translated into the language of ordinary people and during the reign of Henry VIII a copy was placed in every parish church in this country. Worship became more accessible. During the Reformation the first Church of England Prayer Book was printed, for example, so that people could worship in their own language rather than in Latin, and confess their sins directly to God (during normal Sunday services) rather than always having to go to a priest via the confessional.

We will mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October, *Reformation Day*, give thanks for all the positive changes that it brought about, and pray too for ongoing renewal. For 'Reformation' should not just be the name of a past event but a continuing process (2 Cor.3:18, Eph.1:15-19, etc).

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