

## **LUTHER'S LEGACY FOR TODAY**

Re: Paper by Ann Burghardt, Secretary for Ecumenical Relations, Lutheran World Federation.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

Roland Bainton, author of one of the best lives of Luther commented that in Germany Luther did all by himself what in England took Bible –Translator William Tyndaye, liturgist Thomas Cranmer, preacher Hugh Latimer, Hymn writer Isaac Watts, and several generations of theologians to do. Prodigious: that has to be a first Anglican response.

Last November I visited friends in Virginia who took us to see a large cave system that was a major tourist attraction. We reached a huge gallery deep underground and our guide suddenly announced, “ Now we are going to listen to the Cathedral organ.” In fact the “organ” worked by making the stalactites and stalagmites vibrate electronically. The slow sonorous tune was unmistakable: “ Ein feste burg ist unser Gott...” When I read that hymn in English I think of the basalt mass of the extinct volcano plug on which stands Edinburgh Castle – and with that thought we think of 2 countries and 2 very different Reformation experiences in Britain: one Reformed and the other Anglican –and of course a great deal of turmoil and bloodshed.

Notwithstanding, great hymn writing in the tradition of Luther, and Isaac Watts continues in the UK. “In Christ Alone” by Keith Getty and Stuart Townsends, a modern classic on the theology of the cross is one of Britain’s most popular hymns today.

### **God’s grace as a gift.**

Some years ago God’s Grace was the theme for the Birmingham Diocesan Clergy Conference. It included 3 very different key note speaker testimonies of coming to faith including Bishop Stephen Cottrell and Loretta Minghella, CEO of Christian Aid UK. These remain with me and give me to wonder about Luther’s own conversion experience. By his own admission Luther’s spiritual experience, mirrored that of many others, but it was the product of years of prayer and scriptural contemplation and it inspired prodigious writing which, with the new technology of printing led to the Reformation albeit coupled with the fact that politically and socially the mood music North of the Alps

was ripe for change. And would I be mistaken if I were to suggest that a cultural tension still exists between the Northern European and Mediterranean cultures?

Turning now to Grace as a gift, the concomitant of a Christian Life of intrinsic goodness, is counter intuitive, especially nowadays. By contrast the letter of James and its advice on good works makes sense, yet Luther referred to it as “an epistle of straw.” But it’s this interior journey, this turning inward, this spiritual surrender that follows conversion, that seems to be so important and how this is experienced, if at all, seems to vary from person to person. For example we have John Wesley’s rather coy account

*Someone read from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans. About 8:45 p.m. "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."*

In Europe we are in a post Christian age, and in post modernity truth itself is subjective. Established hard science is questioned and discarded, and the Church and religious faith are seen as irrelevant. Yet at the same time there is a great thirst for spirituality – and an unhealthy interest in the occult and paranormal. In fact it’s a Pagan world so are we not in a similar position to St Paul in the Acts of the Apostles –a ministry and mission initiated by a dramatic conversion experience? We could include the call of the Disciples in this category. The Welsh Anglican theologian Jeffrey John writes about Peter’s reaction to Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5:1-11

*One hopes all Christians will have shared this experience of suddenly feeling the reality of Jesus’ presence: the sudden collapse of the insides; the awareness not only of seeing but of being seen, entirely; the welling of tears; the sense of smallness, unworthiness, of needing to crawl beneath the nearest stone, as if before a great searching light. The strangest thing is that simultaneously the most gut wrenchingly awful part and the most wonderful part of the experience is realizing that one is loved as one is. Peters response, “go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” is his response to this unconditional love, yet having known it, he could never let it go. He will do anything to follow it.*

### **Critical Discernment and the relevance of education.**

Sola Scriptura is an enduring Reformation cry. The discussion on Luther’s hermeneutical principle of law and gospel is very helpful and the insight that there is gospel in the OT and Law in the NT is significant -but always the

underlying core biblical message of God's liberating grace. There is then the statement about autopisty- holy scripture has no other guarantors of its own authority other than itself.

You will be aware of the CofE exertions over gender and sexuality which have been going on for a long time, most recently at General Synod last week. However Anglican theology is not sola scriptura. We have the "three legged stool," Scripture, Tradition, Reason, based on the English theologian Richard Hooker's ideas. It would seem also that many Anglicans borrow from Methodism and so have a 4<sup>th</sup> leg: Experience. All of this is problematic since there are 3 distinct, movements within Anglicanism: those who emphasise scripture; those who focus on sacramental tradition, and those who look to new readings of scripture based on Reason and Experience –and of course overlappings of one or more of these. Differences in opinion on matters such as same sex marriage are sharply drawn. Archbishop Justin Welby is a pragmatist who recognizes that disagreement is inevitable, but that agreeing to disagree **Gracefully** by acknowledging difference, leads to accommodation and peace. That brings us back to grace and I recall some inspiring words from the US Lutheran theologian, Gordon Lathrop, in his book, Holy Things.

*There is a deep sense of praise within the liturgy of the Christians that always moves texts towards speaking a thing greater than they have contained. Ancient texts are used to speak a new grace: this is the liturgical pattern for use of the Bible.*

## **Christian Vocation**

A challenge today in England is that most people out there are removed from knowledge of the Gospels and churchgoing by 3 -4 generations. This, a short attention span, an addiction to continuous noise and social media, and the fact that people don't read, is deeply problematic for a church culture rooted in scriptural texts. One Lutheran avenue open to us is experience of the workplace and work as everyday worship of God. Some time ago I read Barbara Brown Taylor's *This Preaching Life* in which she asks this question: "When did you last hear someone preach a sermon on work?"

For many, work defines self and being busy to the exclusion of everything else is seen as a virtue. Or is it an escape? Be that as it may, how sensible of the French to legislate to ban work emails outside office hours!

At home, in the still United Kingdom, our fears are very much about our economic future and the prospect of mass unemployment. I was interested how the outworking of Luther's understanding of vocation has manifested itself in the welfare state in Germany and the Nordic countries. Recently I listened to a debate on BBC Radio 4's the Moral Maze about "a national income" –an

idea that originated in Finland. Luther says: “A Christian should work without thought of gain, without hope of reward.” It is an ideal I know, but a great evil in UK is the widening gap between rich and poor and the profound social ills that inequality generates. We see the Nordic countries as being egalitarian, with more social capital and a greater index of societal happiness. This comes at a cost, or rather, different policy and fiscal priorities.

## **Theology of the Cross**

Luther was caught in a violent thunderstorm and narrowly escaping being struck by lightning. Taking survival as a sign from God he became an Augustinian Monk. But I wonder what went through his mind as the storm crashed about him? Did he think of Moses on the mountain top ( Ex33:23) hiding himself in a cleft in the rock as the “Kavod,” the glory of God passed him by. Of course Moses knew that none could gaze upon the countenance of God and survive so instead he saw God’s back –or rather, God’s back was revealed to him. The Exodus passage and I Cor 2:2, “ *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified,*” are foundational in Luther’s Theology of the Cross. Other anniversaries being remembered around this time are the battles and conclusion of the First World War to which there were a number of theological responses ranging from a turning away from God on the one hand, to, on the other, a re-discovery of the Theology of the Cross: that Immanuel lives and suffers with us. Our God suffers – and his rearward visible part represents suffering. Those who see this, Luther tells us, are theologians. By contrast, those who look on the invisible parts of God as seen in visible things, do not deserve to be called theologians. Is this because it is so apparent, so easy, to see God in what is often referred to as the other book of scripture: creation? Greek Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware calls God’s book: “*It is to see God in all things and all things in God – to discern, in and through each created reality, the divine presence that is within it and at the same time beyond it. It is to treat each thing as a sacrament, to view the whole of nature as God’s book.*”

**Rowan Williams said:** “*I sometimes feel sad that a lot of our theology has lost that extraordinarily vivid or exhilarating sense of the world penetrated by divine energy in classical theological terms*”

I wonder how Luther would respond to today’s environmental crisis, itself a manifestation of structural sin stemming from our selfish human nature? I suspect he would be outraged in the same way that he found indulgences to fund the papal building programme offensive. . His Eucharistic theology of real presence might speak to environmental concerns, namely God through Christ in, with, and under all of creation, a creation not to be dominated or exploited, but offered back to God and resanctified.