

Reformation ... How it affected people

2. Forgiveness

22.10.2006

In doing this series of sermons on the reformation that occurred almost 500 years ago, I am very conscious that we have very little in common with the people of that time. The closest way to describe it would be like going to a distant planet, where people have never heard of electronics, or factories, and they are only just about to hear about the printing press.

Doctors were akin to magicians, who drain your blood with leaches, have foul smelling mysterious potions and no idea of hygiene.

The spiritual realm dominated their whole life. In many places, dancing was prohibited, because the town leaders knew God cursed their crops and created boils on children if anyone dared to dance in or near their town. Singing four part harmonies was a tool of the devil.

Demons were ever present. Everything you did, said, ate and thought of was dominated by a religious framework, and it was not uncommon to hear stories of witches being burnt and heresy trials.

This was not Taliban Afghanistan, but Medieval Europe and England. With no newspapers, the church door was the town notice board.

But after October 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his theses on the Castle church door in Wittenburg, Germany, a revolution, fuelled by the enlightenment, swept Europe that changed life even more radically than the changes that swept our world from the 1960's.

I want to focus on what ordinary people faced; the significant changes, the expectations and hopes. I will look at forgiveness, communion, dying, and clergy.

Today we look at forgiveness, and what changes the reformation brought.

How do you receive forgiveness?

Today, we know we have forgiveness from God when we trust in Christ's finished work of dying on the cross for us. The Reformation rediscovered and taught what the Bible said, so

we do not have to do anything to impress God to forgive us. We simply have to ask, believing it is true. God then forgives, because the sacrificial death of Jesus is the perfect offering. It is fully meritorious for us, meaning He earned it for us. We can not earn or deserve it. So with thanks we receive forgiveness directly from God, although we can remind each other that we are forgiven and we can calm the consciences of others by reminding them of the truth of His forgiveness.

But before the reformation, it was different. People were very religious, and receiving forgiveness was vital to every day life. A religious fervour had gripped Europe in the late 1400s, especially in many of the German states. Small hand-written manuals on how to live godly lifestyles were popular.

People knew God forgave, and that forgiveness lay primarily in Christ's work.

They knew Jesus had a store of grace merited through his obedience and death, which could be available to the everyday person. But the church hierarchy dispensed that grace and forgiveness.

As often as possible, but certainly at least twice a year, people were expected to confess their sins to the priest. The priest then dispensed forgiveness, by requiring proof that the person had repented and earned the forgiveness, which usually meant praying to Mary or another saint, lighting candles, and maybe donating to the church.

In a few weeks, when I talk about death, we will see that death did not release people from the need of forgiveness, and the living bore a big burden to enable the deceased to be freed from their hardships in the mythical place they called purgatory. In purgatory, the deceased were on their way to heaven, but needed to suffer until the penalty for their sins had been paid.

But I must stress again that all of life was surrounded and dominated by the spiritual. So people did not simply think "I feel guilty I should confess", or "it is my weekly habit to

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'fess up".

Because the explanation of life's joys and woes was spiritual without any thought of luck or fate or simply your lot in life, whenever anyone sneezed this opened their soul to receive Satan or one of his minions, so people said and meant "God bless you". Any mishap was obviously a result of your lack of faith or sin, so bad health or problems with aging, or death of family members was pinpointed as being the result of sin or a lack of faith.

The remedy was not a call to the doctor, but a trip to a particular shrine to appease the honoured saint there and ask the saint to pray for you.

Eg if you had gout, you went to St Quirin's shrine. If you had St Anthony's fire (a bacterial disease turning the skin red), donate a pig to the order of monks of St Anthony, the founder of Monasticism. For protection of your sheep donate one at the shrine of St Wendel, the patron saint of shepherds.

But if all else failed, a trip to the priest was needed. and the confessionals were appalling. Priests interrogated people expecting them to confess every sin since the last confession. They claimed a sin was not pardoned until it was named. A bad memory was no excuse. and the father confessor was trained to gain confessions.

Jacob Strauss from Eisenach wrote a condemning pamphlet about the abuses. In it he said "In the confessional, simple folk learn things about sin and evil which have never occurred to them before, and which need not ever to have occurred to them! The confessional is a schooling in sin. It is known and many thousands can attest how often mischievous and perverse monks out of their shameless hearts have so thoroughly and persistently questioned young girls and boys, innocent children, and simple wives about the sins of the flesh... that more harm was there done to Christian chasteness and purity than in any whorehouse in the world."

Not only did the confessional encourage sin, the confessional also held the power over the judgement of kings, princes and lords, and the pope used the confessionals to exert his political clout.

But one of the most awful horrors that inflamed many early reformation preachers was the selling of indulgences by papal delegates.

The pope was building St Peter's cathedral in Rome, and money was short. Many priests were commissioned to have letters of indulgences, which they could sell to people. An indulgence was a papal decree declaring that the owner had been forgiven, and could escape the horrors of purgatory.

Some of the sellers of these were purely fundraisers. One named Tetsel had a jingle he sang. "As soon as the coin clinks in the tin, a soul flies free from purgatory."

How could this indulgence bring forgiveness? The pope claimed that because of the eternal merit of Christ's death, the church had power to forgive sins on earth. So instead of declaring a word of forgiveness without cost because he paid the price for us, the pope authorised forgiveness to be a massive fundraising event.

So before the reformation, a Christian had to earn and pay for forgiveness. After the reformation, a protestant Christian rejoiced in the forgiveness freely offered. Confessionals were no longer the tyranny of the lecherous and power hungry priests, and people had more freedom to be thankful, without the fear brought by Medieval Catholicism

We stand in that reformation heritage, because we too believe God's promises in the Bible. Rejoice in our God-given forgiveness.