

Living by faith

Psalm 90:4 “A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.”

Tuesday of this week marks 500 years since Martin Luther, the German reformer, nailed his 95 theses on the door of a Church in Wittenburg, in Germany protesting various practices in the Roman Catholic Church at that time. One of the main points of contention was the understanding of salvation or what it means to be safe with God in this life and in the future. Luther's view is that the doctrine of justification by faith, which is God's unconditional acceptance of the sinner, is the sole basis on which a person can affirm that she/he is saved. Living out the life of salvation requires God's grace alone, scripture alone and faith alone.

From the Roman Catholic perspective, according to Luther, who was a Roman Catholic Augustinian monk before he left the order and got married to a nun, a person is justified or saved by God but must consult the priest as a medium or human agent, especially through the practice of indulgences. These indulgences were memorabilia such as rosaries and crosses available at a cost and the benefit is the assurance by the priest that a person is saved. Families could also buy indulgencies in order to secure the salvation of those who have died, if per chance

they were of the view such persons were not saved. Luther rejected this view and developed his 95 theses or points of debate which he wanted to have with the Roman Catholic Church. Though Luther requested the debate the Roman Catholics never agreed to participate.

Since the 16th century the debate between Catholics and Protestants has been raging in public and in academia. Thousands of books and journal articles have been written by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike with each seeking to justify its point of view. In other cases there were tragic consequences, such as the 30 years war of the 17th century in Germany. As noted by one source:

Perhaps 20 percent of Germany's total population perished during the war, with losses of up to 50 percent [in one area]. Villages suffered worse than towns, but many towns and cities also saw their populations, manufacture, and trade decline substantially. It (the war) constituted the worst catastrophe to afflict Germany until [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/thirty-years-war) (<http://www.history.com/topics/thirty-years-war>).

As a consequence of Luther's protestations and the Counter Reformation on the part of the Roman Catholics, especially with the Council of Trent, religion became a source of great division on the European continent. As is noted by one writer:

The Thirty Years' War (1618-48) began when Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II of Bohemia attempted to curtail the religious activities of his subjects, sparking rebellion among Protestants. The war came

to involve the major powers of Europe, with Sweden, France, Spain and Austria all waging campaigns primarily on German soil. Known in part for the atrocities committed by mercenary soldiers, the war ended with a series of treaties that made up the Peace of Westphalia. The fallout reshaped the religious and political map of central Europe, setting the stage for the old centralized Roman Catholic empire to give way to a community of sovereign states.

(<http://www.history.com/topics/thirty-years-war>)

It is this community of sovereign states that came together much later to form the European Union out of which the British are now seeking to extricate themselves in an activity called Brexit.

The peace brought about by the treaty of Westphalia, which is, European settlements of 1648, brought to an end the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Dutch, and, the German phase of the Thirty Years' War. Peace was negotiated from 1644 in the Westphalian towns of Münster and Osnabrück in Germany. The Spanish-Dutch treaty was signed on January 30, 1648. These wars (religious wars) ravaged Europe which left it badly in need to resources to rebuild the economies. Colonial expansion was the means by which Church and state moved across the globe in order to sure up the struggling economies of Europe in general and Britain in particular. None of these interventions meant there was settlement on justification by faith between the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans.

One could easily say the big quarrel between Luther and the Roman Catholic Church was the subject of faith. From Luther's side the position is that the Christian does not need an agent or a mediator to feel that she/he has made good on the promise to be faithful to God. From the Roman Catholic side the view is that an agent of the Church, a priest, can intervene on behalf of people of faith in order that they may have confidence in eternal salvation or feeling safe with God for eternity. For the better part of five hundred years Roman Catholics and Protestants have been at war, sometimes literally, as in the case of Northern Ireland, and the consequences have been devastating. Yet, the end result is encouraging for people of faith.

Thirty years ago things began to make a change for the better. Roman Catholics and Lutherans began a dialogue where both sat around the same table. Yes, it took a little less than 500 years for these two communities that were at logger heads to commit to sitting and having a dialogue. In other words, a mutual dialogue proposed by Luther in 1517 did not take place until just over thirty years ago. This length of time for a dialogue to take place should tell us something about the Church. As a Church we are not always in a hurry to do things. This delay is, in part, because we feel we have history on our side. The result of this dialogue

between the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans resulted in an agreement and a joint statement on justification by faith. You heard right. That which caused a major split in the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century has just been resolved on the stroke of a pen. Now it can be said that justification by faith is not just a doctrine stressed by Lutherans, it is also a doctrine affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church

(http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html). A Church divided for almost 500 years is now a united Church. The Church is indeed one foundation.

The question we must ask ourselves is this, why did it take almost five hundred years for these two world bodies to come together around the same table to have a conversation? I think the Psalmist can help us explore part of the answer to the question. In Psalm 90:4 the Psalmist says, “a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.” Here the Psalmist writes from a position of faith. In the context of challenges and differences people are invited to count. This is like the proverbial counting to ten when we are angry. Count your years and apply your heart to wisdom.

A good illustration of counting our years is the movie entitled *Boyhood*. According to one commentator, the film has,

...no plot or action. It is simply the succession of ordinary moments that make a life — family vacations, fights about homework, embarrassing haircuts, birthday parties, a first girlfriend, biking with your buddies, and good parents who make some bad choices while doing the best they can. As any parent of older children can attest, Mason's twelve years pass in a flash. Here we see the main character Mason Jr and his family not so much fighting time but embracing it in all its glorious and agonizingly fleeting beauty(<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20141020JJ.shtml>).

This is the view we get from Psalm 90. Time simply moves along. There is a sense in which we go with the flow, yet, there is another sense in which we make our contribution as we see fit. We may never know the full story of why it took these two world body's 500 years to come together. We know now that things may take a long time and some of us may not live to see the results.

I would therefore like to suggest two things as we take the time to count our days. First, act in God's time. To act in God's time means to not allow anxiety to get the better of us. Use the time you have to live in the moment and make the best of the time given to you. In acting in God's time we recognize we will not always win the competitions of life but like Luther we can make a significant contribution.

Second, do not be afraid to take on the challenges of life. Luther took on the challenges of his time. Because of his work I have material for the sermon this

morning. More than that, taking on the challenges of life allows us to leave our mark on the sands of time. I read a book recently which spoke to the five wishes of a dying person written by a nurse who worked in a hospice caring for patients living with cancer. One of the views the writer says comes up very often is those who say they regret not living life as they saw fit. They spent much of their time trying to live to please others rather than living according to the true self. Take on the challenges of life and live as the hymn writer says:

Through all the changing scenes of life
In trouble and in joy
The praises of my God shall still
My heart and tongue employ

Live by faith. This means to act in God's time and do not be afraid to take on the challenges of life. Martin Luther lived by faith. He acted in God's time and he was not afraid to take on the challenges of life. Go and do likewise. In the name...