Luther, prophet for modern Australians

Andrew Cameron

It falls to me to sum up some of the themes of our gathering today, and I will do so from an existential perspective, and with reference to my own journey with Luther.

Luther’s ninety-five theses begin with these words:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.

3. Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortifications of the flesh.¹

Even for those who don’t believe in God, there is a beautiful demand here for honesty, for a deep connection between life and words, something we all long for in another age sometimes characterised by the loss of Christian credibility, and the search for what can be trusted.

For the Anglican ethicist Michael Banner, “Luther’s point ... is not to reject the practice of confession, but a particular understanding of it, and specifically any understanding which fails to reckon with the fact that penance cannot properly be a matter of a single and discrete outward act, but only of a permanent transformation of inner attitude, through the agency of God’s grace.”²

---

¹ The Revd Dr Andrew Cameron is Director of St Mark’s National Theological Centre.

² The Revd Dr Andrew Cameron is Director of St Mark’s National Theological Centre.
So begins the public life of one of the church’s prophets. The next ninety-two theses are characterised by the same clear-cut distinctions—most of which are binary opposites that force the hearer to one side or the other, such as Thesis 37: “Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted... by God.” Yet, at the same time, he brings to us a knowing awareness of how unknown we can be to ourselves, as when in Thesis 30 he opines that “[n]o one is sure of the integrity of his own contrition.”

I first came to Luther, as many have, as a young man, when I found these distinctions bracing and clear, and when I also needed this search-light into my own motivations and self-deceptions. I also came to discover that, like us all, Luther could think he was standing on one thing when in fact he was standing on another. At the famous Colloquy of Marburg, he disputed with Zwingli over Christ’s Real Presence in the Lord’s Supper. The discussion turned on the scriptural text “This is my body”. “I have my text!”, declared Luther. “Is” simply means “is”; Christ was somehow truly present in the Supper, and any other games with words were mere compromise. Although Luther portrayed his position simply as about whether one believes Scripture, they were really discussing how words connect to reality, and how ontology really works. It was a miasma of competing agendas, not unlike church discussions today. Luther taught us to try to be clear and to try to be scriptural. He also taught us, unfortunately, to overestimate our powers of clarity.

Yet I thank him nonetheless for his final insistence that our lives in the present, and our real connection both to God and to our neighbours, call forth our attention in every moment. His colleague Philip Melanchthon wrote to him, fretting about whether the vows of pre-pubescent monks and nuns should remain binding, and whether the ministrations of a wicked priest nullified the efficacy of the sacrament. Luther responded: not binding; and, no, take the sacrament. Then famously, “God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.” In other words, act now for what you judge to be best in the world. Act now for the good of the other. Act now, trusting in God to make your best judgment. Then let God be the one who forgives you when you have made the wrong call.

One significant heir to Luther’s kind of thought was the the oddball Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote about the so-called
“knight of faith”—someone so completely at home in the everyday world that you could not easily spot them in a crowd, since they are not obviously religious. They jovially greet children in the street. They look forward to seeing their spouse. They enjoy a good roast. But these joys do not define them, because they have done business with the infinitude of God, in “fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), and with awestruck confidence in God. For Kierkegaard, the young woman who bore Jesus was just such a knight of faith. She attracts us because despite the constraints of her situation, her trust in God sets her completely free from the compulsions that so easily could have defined her, and so often define us.

For me, Luther’s prophetic clarity speaks loudly to modern Australia. We live in times where moral courage has become hard to find; where authentic connection to the needs of the present moment is drowned by processes that have become meaningless and that arise from fear; and where belonging to my tribe is paramount. The Reformation bears witness that it has ever been thus, and Luther continues to hold out the promise that an authentic connection through Christ with the God who made us all begins authentic connections with each another and with the earth. Even that determined enemy of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche, found words of praise: “Luther’s achievement is nowhere greater than precisely in having had the courage of his own sensualitv.”

That is why we plant a tree. We recognise that the so-called righteous can really only live by faith in God, while at the same time finding out how to bless the world that God has made.

May this 500th anniversary of the European Reformations signal reform in each of our lives, in our engagements with our neighbours, and in our engagement with our nation.

Endnotes

4. Ibid., 28.
5. For a reconstruction of events, see Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), 226–253.