

On the 31 October 1517, the young Augustinian Friar, by the name of Martin Luther, affixed 95 Theses to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenburg.

Thus began - or so the story goes - what has since been called the Protestant Reformation.

I must confess that despite everything I am in fact quite a fan. He was the classic angry young man, a natural rebel against the misuse of power, especially when that power was being wielded in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the medieval practice of indulgences. We still have indulgences in the Church today, and they are all based on the idea that although we are completely forgiven our sins by Jesus' death on the cross, we've still got to work through the effects of those sins by spending more time in Purgatory. An indulgence is a special favour granted by the Church to relieve us of some of that purgatorial suffering. What scandalised Luther, and what should have scandalised any Christian, was that these indulgences were up for sale. You could in effect buy your way into heaven

The problem and the tragedy is that what started as a perfectly legitimate protest against a clear abuse quickly took on a momentum all of its own. If the sale of indulgences could be rejected, then maybe some other church practices could be rejected as well. 'Justification by faith alone' was the war cry. In other words, our eternal destiny, our salvation, our right relationship with God, was no longer to be determined by the say so of a priest or a bishop, or by the totting up of the number of good works that we might have done. Our right relationship with God is always a free gift. All we have to do is to believe in it, to have faith in it. It's the work of Jesus on the Cross that takes us to heaven, not our work, however admirable it might be.

So why did all this lead to so much division and bloodshed? I think the answer to that lies somewhat beyond the scope of this homily. What I can say is that our very own Bishop William has recently presided over a joint statement of Catholics and Lutherans affirming that we no longer need to be divided by this thing about justification by faith alone. What we can all affirm, Protestants and Catholics alike, is that justification, our right relationship with God, is always God's gift. Our happiness, our joy, and even our good works are always the result of grace, God's great love poured into our hearts.

The Old Testament and gospel readings today are about the relationship between political power and spiritual power. And, of course, the ideas unleashed by Luther proved extremely useful to the likes of Henry VIII.

Let's finish with our New Testament reading. Faith must always be shown in action, love, not only as a gift from God but something that needs to be worked at, and hope, not just as a spiritual gift of utter conviction, but also something that comes through the very human virtue of perseverance. And all of this, only in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through Christ our Lord.