**Island Bay Presbyterian Church**

**Sermon Oct 1st 2017 – combined Luther service**

500 years ago on October 31st, a young monk a theology lecturer called Martin Luther is said to have nailed a piece of paper which contained 95 theses on it to the church door in a German town called Wittenberg. This was a common practice at the time, kind of like posting something to your wall on Facebook. The intention behind it was to advertise an idea, and to call for debate and discussion.

Martin Luther also posted a copy of his theses to his local Archbishop Albert of Brandenburg as well, for he was sure that the archbishop was unaware of the dodgy dealings that were going on in his corner of the church, and he thought that the archbishop would agree with him.

The dodgy dealings that Luther was objecting to were a thing called **the selling of indulgences**, a practice that was actually illegal in parts of Germany at the time.

The law against indulgences was enforced in Wittenberg so the indulgence sellers didn’t come to Luther’s town, but other places let it happen, and as priest of one of the two churches in Wittenberg, Luther saw his parishioners coming home and excitedly showing these shiny pieces of paper off to him…

*And what you may ask was an indulgence*? What might have been on these pieces of paper that people were buying that made them so controversial?

Well, basically they were ‘***get out of hell free cards***.’ By handing over money people were told that they could buy salvation and the forgiveness of sins for their deceased relatives – and who could resist the chance to do that for dear old granny? If you were unsure about the final resting place of mum and dad, who could pass up the opportunity to secure them a place in paradise?

But more than that, people could also buy these indulgences for themselves – buying themselves forgiveness and salvation. And Luther encountered parishioners telling him that they didn’t need to repent and listen to his sermons anymore because they were saved and they could just do what they want!

Luther was not the only one appalled by this; indulgences offended many in the Church in Luther’s day, and that is why they had been banned. But yet, people sold them anyway, and their sale was sanctioned by the highest authorities in the Church. Sanctioned even by Luther’s archbishop to whom he sent his theses, and sanctioned by the pope of the day, who (unlike the pope today) was very corrupt.

And so an appalled Luther studied the issue, asked other theologians for their opinions, and then laid out his 95 theses – 95 arguments for why indulgences were wrong, and for how they actually imperilled people’s salvation by teaching them to trust in money and pieces of paper, rather than in faith and God and repentance.

Each thesis was very short and the first one set the tone…

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

For Luther, **the inner attitude of repentance for our** sins was key in being made right with God and forgiven on our sins… not external religious acts.

Now, historically speaking, there is no one thing that triggered the Protestant Reformation - an event that split the Church and still divides us today. Luther was building on the writings and ideas of people who had gone before him, like John Whitcliff and Jan Hus, and there was no one date you can point to as beginning the Reformation. However, this act 500 years ago this month, brought things to a head.

Corrupt authorities were quick to try and shut Luther down, while enthusiastic students used the newly invented printing presses to make Luther’s theses the first mass-produced pamphlet in history, and it spread rapidly around Europe.

A new teenage Holy Roman Emperor tried to bring it under control but hesitated to have Luther burned as a heretic and didn’t have the power to force the German princes to hand him over anyway; while Luther’s own prince, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, found it to his advantage having someone rattling the pope and the Emperor’s cages, and so kept Luther safe to keep writing and publishing his ever more radical thoughts.

500 years later it’s good for us who are gathered together today at this combined service as the Protestant branch of the Body of Christ in Island Bay, to remember this history.

None of our churches are Lutheran; the closest Lutheran Church is near the Basin Reserve and I think it’s the only Lutheran church in Wellington. We have instead, Baptists who are from an Anabaptist tradition; Presbyterians who are from a Reformed Calvinist tradition; and the Anglicans who set out to be a middle path between Calvin and the Catholic Church. But all of our three churches were born out of the Protestant Reformation and the faith of Luther.

So, it is appropriate for us to *celebrate* his bravery and the insights God gave him, while also *mourning* the on-going divisions this brought to the Christian Church, as well as the blood that has been spilled over the centuries because of these divisions.

One of the ways the Reformation still impacts on us here in the Island Bay Presbyterian church, which may be the same in the other churches, is how the core doctrines of the Reformation still influence how we lay out the front of the church - this relates to the classic “**5 Sola’s**” (or solae) of the Reformation.

These aren’t Solar System, solar panel and solar eclipse… but rather are the Latin terms…

1 – Sola Scriptura (“by Scripture alone”)

2 – Solus Christus (“by Christ alone”)

3 – Sola Gratia (“by grace alone”)

4 - Sola Fide (“by faith alone”)

5 – Soli Deo Gloria (“glory to God alone”)

So…

1. **Sola Scriptura** means “Scripture alone” and refers to the Protestant doctrine that (although we do read and take seriously other books too) the Bible alone is our highest authority – and this is symbolised by the ***lectern*** up front here from which the Bible is read.

In Luther’s day tradition and theology had become more central to official Church teaching than the bible, which Luther sought to correct.

When Luther was tried for heresy before the Emperor, he challenged his accusers to prove him wrong on the basis of scripture alone – for while he did accept a place for tradition and theology, he saw the authority of the Bible as supreme in matters of doctrine when other voices sought to contradict the Bible. He wasn’t the first to say this, but he really championed this position.

And so up the front here we keep the lectern from which the Bible is read, and from which sermons are preached that usually, (though ironically not today), unpack scripture for our lives.

For the authority of scripture is central to our life as a Church.

2. **Solus Christus** means “Christ alone” and is symbolised by the ***cross*** which has the central place up front here, being up high and in the middle. The cross occupies the central place in the worshipping life of this faith community.

Now… as we give scripture alone the highest authority in our faith, but yet still read and take seriously other books, in the same way, saying “Christ alone” also doesn’t stop us admiring and learning from the saints of old or other inspiring thinkers.

However! Adhering to the slogan ‘Christ alone” *is to say that the cross of Jesus is the fullest revelation of God to us.*  The cross proclaims to us that God was willing to draw near to us and become one of us, and that in Jesus God was even willing to lay down his life for us. Nothing and no-one can tell us more about the nature of God and God’s heart for us than the cross.

The cross is also empty to remind us that Jesus didn’t stay dead but rose again, breaking the power of sin and death, and punching a way through death and out the other side. And so I don’t claim to understand the different paths people take to find their way to God and to life eternal, but I do believe that they can only get there because Christ opened up the way for them.

We can come to the Father because of Christ alone, the one who died and rose again.

3. **Sola Gratia** means “by grace alone” and I’m linking it today to the ***baptismal font***.

Unlike other denominations, in the Presbyterian church we have a choice of presenting babies to God either by baptism or dedication. Neither choice is seen as better than the other, but they do emphasise different truths.

*Dedication* emphasises the truth that God calls on us to respond to the gift of salvation, and the importance of discipling young people as they grow up, so that they understand what that means and desire to choose baptism as an adult.

*Infant baptism* however emphasises grace: That before we had done anything to deserve it, before we were even born, God has been pouring out his grace and favour and love upon us. Some of you may not agree with infant baptism, but for us it’s a sign of ‘by grace alone’ – that *we* can only draw near to God because *God* has drawn near to us in Jesus and welcomes us into His family, regardless who we are, what we’ve done, or how old we are. For it’s by grace alone! Salvation is God’s generous and unearned gift.

4. **Sola Fide** means “by faith alone” and is quite similar to sola gratia. It refers to the original argument Luther had with the Church authorities over the selling of indulgences, and it is symbolised by the presence of the ***communion table*** which stands here every Sunday (whether we use it or not), and which occupies the middle of the stage.

In Luther’s time, the idea that we could be saved by our *works*, by the things we do, had become very strong. This was shown by the fact that some in the Church (but not everyone), had gone to the extreme of encouraging people to buy indulgences thinking that they were purchasing their salvation.

This caused people to have faith in themselves and their own power, and not in Jesus - it therefore lead people *away* from God and not *to* God. For faith requires trust and surrender; faith means allowing ourselves to step out into the unknown and fall into the arms of the one whom we trust will hold us and keep us safe. Trusting someone howeverisn’t just assenting to an idea in your head! Trust needs to be ***demonstrated*** by our actions or it is worthless. And so faith results in actions, actions like coming forward to receive the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament of communion.

Faith comes first, the action comes second…

Therefore, it isn’t the action that saves us, communion doesn’t save us – we are saved by grace and by faith alone. At communion we demonstrate *our* faith in Christ by receiving him afresh into our lives, but we also remember *his* faith. We remember the faith Jesus had in the Father, and the extent to which he would go to save us – shedding his blood for our sakes.

So by faith alone! Our faith and Christ’s faith – a faith that results in actions.

5. Which brings us at last to number five, **Soli Deo Gloria,** which means ‘glory to God alone.’ I believe that this is the newest ‘sola’ on the list, that the old reformers didn’t actually use this phrase - but it sums up well what the other 4 ‘solas’ are all about… the glory of God!

Everything we do as Christians is to give glory back to God for the grace and favour he has poured out on us, and this is symbolised by our ***musical instruments***. For it is in the times of singing together on Sunday mornings when we most fully express with our whole bodies our love for God, and seek to give him the glory for what he has done.

So, these were the key teachings of the Reformation 500 years ago, teachings that influence us still:

1. By Scripture alone, symbolised by the lectern.

For we read other books, we have other sources of authority, but the Bible has supreme place among them

2. By Christ alone, symbolised by the cross.

For Jesus and his cross are the ultimate revelation of God to us, and Jesus is the one who broke the power of sin and death

3. By grace alone, symbolised by the baptismal font.

For God loved us before we had done anything to deserve it

4. By faith alone, symbolised by the communion table.

For it is faith that saves us - our faith and Christ’s faith, and faith calls us to respond in actions

5. And lastly*,* to God be the glory alone, symbolised by our instruments.

*Reflection…*

*Offering…*

The peace of Christ be with you,

**And also with you!**

*Greet…*

Song: Millennium Prayer

The Lord is here  
**God’s Spirit is with us**

Lift up your hearts  
**We lift them to the Lord**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God  
**It is right to offer thanks and praise**

Indeed, we offer you our thanks and praise, most loving God – as we remember our faith-filled Saviour Jesus Christ, who, while he was at table…

And so, in the face of such love and such sacrifice, we approach this table in humility, aware of our own sins and failings, and aware that we cannot earn the grace and salvation you offer, and so we pray together this prayer of confession…

**Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,**

**Have mercy on us!**

**Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,**

**Have mercy on us!**

**Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,**

**Grant us your peace…**

*Silence…*

And so, bread and wine, gifts of grace.

God does not leave us alone in our brokenness but came among us and Jesus of Nazareth, and comes again to us today in the sacrament of communion.

All who truest God or who wish to know Jesus better are welcome to come forward and receive.

Today we will be coming to the front, and then gathering around the table in groups of 12 to serve each other.

The gifts of God for the people of God…

The bread we break is a sharing in the body of Christ.

The cup of blessing for which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ.

**We who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread.**

**We are all the children of God.**