

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 25/26, 2008

Today we have come into God's House to celebrate Reformation Sunday. October 31st, "All Hallow's Eve, is the real anniversary of the Reformation but we typically celebrate it on the closest Sunday (or Saturday) and that's today.

For those of you who might not be all that familiar with the "when" and "who" and "what" and "why" of the Reformation and as a reminder to those of you who are, let me take just a few moments to share some historical information with you first.

The Christian Church was, of course, founded on and established by Jesus Christ himself. Built on his life, death, and resurrection and based on the Great Commission he gave before his ascension into heaven, the Church was created to be the vehicle by which every human being of every generation would become disciples of Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel – through baptizing and through teaching. To the extent that the early church, begun when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the first Pentecost, was faithful to Christ's Great Commission, the church was what Christ intended it to be and it grew. It grew by leaps and bounds. But as time went on the church began to lose sight of its calling and, in that, of its purpose and direction as well. It was no longer fully faithful to what Christ called it to be and as a result rather than transforming the world, it was itself transformed by the world. Others before Martin Luther sought to reform the church, that is, to bring it back to its New Testament foundation, but for one reason or another they were not successful. It wasn't until Luther posted his now-famous 95 theses or statements for debate on what was wrong with the church of his day on the church door at the University of Wittenberg in 1517 that the business of bringing the church back to what Christ intended it to be began in earnest. And to the extent that the church may not be what Christ intended it to be even today, the Reformation continues.

The principles upon which the Reformation was established were – "sola" fides – "sola gratia" – and "sola Scriptura."

"Sola fides" – by faith alone. Luther reminded the church that we are not saved by anything we do but rather by what Christ has done for us. No amount of good works, no attempt at keeping the law, no matter how noble or well-intentioned, can ever justify us or make us right with God. Only faith in Jesus Christ who kept the law for us, who died in our place on the cross, and who rose again for us, can make us right with God.

"Sola gratia" – by grace alone. All this God has done for us and for all without any merit or worthiness on our part. He didn't send His Son because we deserved him but rather because He loves us and we need him. "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son" is not only the Gospel in a nutshell, it's the story of God's grace for a sin-sick and dying world.

“Sola Scriptura” – by Scripture alone. It’s only through God’s Word as it’s contained in Holy Scripture and proclaimed through Word and Sacraments that anyone can come to this saving knowledge of God’s grace through faith in Christ. And that Word is our only rule and norm for faith and life.

What Luther discovered, or more aptly, what he rediscovered, was the pure and simple message of the Gospel – pretty much what Paul shares with us in today’s second reading. Obscured for a time and buried beneath a load of manmade rules and regulations, the simple message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ was once again proclaimed and, in that, not only was the church reformed, the world was changed as well. You see, the Reformation helped mark the end of the dark ages and the beginning of a new world.

But lest we miss the point, the Reformation we celebrate today is not a celebration of the man Martin Luther or of what he did. It’s a celebration of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and of what he did for us and for all. And, in that, our celebration is not so much a celebration of a past event that took place some 500 years ago as it is a celebration of the present reality of a risen and living Christ today. The Gospel of Jesus Christ which was at the heart of the early church’s life and ministry and which was the vehicle through which the Holy Spirit worked mightily in the world and which was obscured for a time is now the same Gospel which has come to us and upon which the Holy Spirit still seeks to build and extend the Church in our day and age.

If the Reformation tells us anything it is that there is no other foundation to be laid for that work than has already been laid in the person and work of Jesus Christ, God’s Son and our Savior. And that any attempt to obscure, neglect, or bury that Gospel under manmade rules and regulations must be avoided as well.

Is the church today everything that Christ intends for it to be? Well, insofar as it is faithful to its calling and the Great Commission, the answer is “yes” and, in that, it is still in the process of transforming the world one person at a time. But insofar as it is not faithful to its calling or to the Great Commission, then the answer is “no” and, in that, it continues to be in need of reformation.

It’s only through the truth of the Gospel that the Church is reformed and the world transformed. And it’s only as each and every one of us, in the tradition of Martin Luther, seek reform both individually and collectively that the Church will be what Christ intends for it to be in our day and age.

God stands ready to bless our celebration of the Reformation again today and through the power of the Holy Spirit, active in Word and Sacrament, to empower us to be the agents of what one theologian rightly called “the ongoing Reformation” in the Church and world today. May God bless us all to that end for Jesus’ sake. Amen.