

Martin Luther 's Discovery

Heaven is Not for Sale

Throughout history there have been some amazing discoveries – discoveries that have changed the way we think about our world.

Way back around 550BC a guy by the name of Pythagoras used mathematics to work out that the earth is not flat – it is a sphere. Using his discoveries, others were able to estimate with an amazing degree of accuracy, how big the Earth is, how far away is the Sun from the Earth, and so on.

Pythagoras and others revolutionised our understanding of the physical universe. No longer did we live on a flat Earth where, if you went far enough, you would fall off the edge. He had discovered that if you go far enough on a spherical Earth, you'll come back to where you started.

- Now, you may be wondering what this has to do with you and me here in church this morning.

Well, back in 500BC, people knew that the world was round. But in the course of time, for a variety of reasons, this knowledge was forgotten. It was lost. In Europe during the Middle Ages, people again believed that the world was flat – and if you went far enough, you would fall off.

– There was fear and superstition... Fear and superstition until the first part of the 16th century – from around 1515. It was at this time that some earth-shaking discoveries were made.

In 1520, Ferdinand Magellan set out to sail right around the world – without falling off even once! And at about the same time the Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus demonstrated that the world is round and not at the centre of the universe, as had been believed.

- People had known these things before, but for hundreds of years they had been forgotten. The truth was lost – and, for many people, fear and superstition had ruled instead.

But it is not only in the realm of Science that key truths had been lost. What the Bible says about how we can know about God and how to be saved had also been lost.

- This morning we're going to take a break from what we usually do on a Sunday morning – when we work our way through a passage from the Bible. Instead, let's step back into history to see something of how these great truths about mankind and God were recovered after being lost for so long.

Today we are going to turn to that great movement in history which you probably didn't learn about at school – the Reformation. And in particular, we're going to spend a few moments learning about one man who – as much as anyone else – started the ball rolling in this movement that changed the world Martin Luther. This year is the 450th anniversary of his death.

But it's not just history – because what Martin Luther rediscovered is of even greater importance than whatever shape the world is – or how far it is to the Sun – for Martin Luther discovered how you and I can be right with God and be sure of heaven.

- A bit of background might be helpful – That's our first point...

1.) A world ready for change

The world of 1510 was very different to our world today. It was at the very end of the Middle Ages. New discoveries and new technology was beginning to change the face of Europe.

Trade, which had previously only taken place on a local level, now stretched

right across Europe and as far as England. The first savings banks were established, so that the new middle class of traders might have somewhere to put their money.

And one of the important new commodities that was changing the face of Europe was the printed book. Until the 1440s, books were hand copied – so there weren't very many of them – but with the invention of the printing press, books and newspapers started to come on the market – and there were enough people who could read to create an enormous demand. People were hungry for things to read.

So, for the first time, there were books readily available to stimulate people to think about the world around them. The first book of any size to be printed was the Bible in 1446 – and by 1500 there were 40 printing presses across Europe churning out thousands of different titles a year.

The language of learning was Latin – which meant that if you wrote something in Latin, academics in every country could read it. As Universities began to flourish across Europe – ideas quickly spread. So, for example, the writings of an Oxford Professor could be quickly travel as far as Germany – and vice versa. (It was the 16th century version of the Internet – with ideas quickly spreading across borders.)

As well, for the first time in a thousand years, scholars started to study the old Greek manuscripts – including manuscripts of the Bible – and some of them started to think independently and to question the authority structure and system which had held Europe together – the Mediæval Church.

- At the beginning of the 16th century there was only one Church – the Holy Catholic Church, with its headquarters in Rome.

The problem was that the organisation had long since drifted away from genuine Christianity and it was corrupt to the core. Everyone agreed this was so – and in every country, people hated the Church – quite rightly, too!

Over the centuries, it had become a huge political system, for the pope claimed that he – as God’s representative on Earth – was owed the allegiance of every king, every prince and everybody else for that matter! He demanded – and got – taxes from the countries of Europe as well as from England.

- Now, let me pause to point out that there were, without any doubt, sincere people within the church – people who weren’t simply out to line their own pockets. But the hierarchy had, in the main, totally lost the plot.

Bishops were not appointed on the basis of godliness or a desire to serve others. To be a bishop was simply an ecclesiastical position of power – so bishoprics were sold to the highest bidder.

– I won’t go into some the abuses – but they would make any allegations made at the Police Royal Commission look like a Sunday School picnic. Things were indeed, bad. But nevertheless, people still turned to the church for the answers to the big questions of life.

And they were given the wrong answers – not the answers God gives us in his Bible – for, indeed, unless you were an academic with a licence to read it, no one was allowed to read the Bible. For the ordinary sods out there – people like you and me – it was a banned book. After all, you don’t want people thinking for themselves and questioning your authority, now, do you!

And so, secondly,

2.) Buying your way to heaven

Martin Luther was born into a peasant family in Saxony, in Germany, in November 1483.

His father worked hard to send him to university where he would study law. One one occasion a student friend was killed in a brawl – and another time he nearly bled to death after an accident. These things got young Martin thinking

about the meaning of life – and what would happen to him if he died.

After doing well at university, at the age of 22, Martin was out in a forest when he was caught in a violent electrical storm. And he did what many of us do when we get into trouble. He called on God for help – and he made a rash promise. (Ever done anything like that?)

“If you save me from this storm,” he said, “I will become a monk.”

God did, and so he did. After saying goodbye to his friends, Luther fronted up at the locals Augustinian monastery and asked for admission. They welcomed this young university trained man with open arms.

You see, Luther wanted peace with God. He knew that there was something wrong with the world – and that there was something wrong with him. He knew that he was unworthy of God.

- I don’t know if you have ever felt that way – but I suspect that many of us have. We have at least a nagging doubt that God could love us. We become acutely aware of the many ways we fail God. And we want to do something that will make us acceptable to him.

In Luther’s day, there was a whole system set up by the Church to deal with your sins. Some of this may sound familiar...

Certainly, you were supposed to go to the priest to confess your sins. Then the priest may prescribe certain acts of penance you would have to work off your guilt – to, as it were, prove to God that you were really sorry.

Then you could get extra points by going to holy places – shrines and the like, where you could perform rituals and see sacred relics – relics like one of the fingers of St. Anne – or a piece of the True Cross.

None of these things worked for Martin Luther. Even as a monk – where you spend a great deal of time fasting – and praying to the saints to help you. He tried

all this. He went without heating in the middle of freezing German winters to punish himself for his sins.

But as he read the Bible – which he was allowed to do as a monk, Martin read of God's righteousness – and that made things worse for him – for he saw clearly that God is so pure and good that our puny efforts could never make amends for the wrong things we've done.

– So Luther, at the encouragement of the head of his monastery, became a priest – and he eventually he became the head of his order, in charge of 11 monasteries.

But still he was acutely aware of his guilt before God. He had no peace.

As a priest he had an advantage over everyone else. He could do something that ordinary people could not do. He could offer the sacrifice of the Mass – turning, as he then believed, the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ and offering it to God to help pay for his sins and the sins of others.

Luther went to Rome – the very centre of the Church. He spent a month there – and while there he offered eleven masses. He climbed on his knees up what was known as Pilate's staircase. And on every step he stopped to recite the Our Father. – All these things, he was told, would win him favour with God.

But in Rome, not only did Martin become even more aware of his failures, he was horrified by the corruption and the immorality he saw there.

You see, you were taught that you could work your way to heaven by doing enough good works. Just as many believe today. But Luther knew it didn't work. He'd tried it and his guilt before God remained. Rituals and ceremonies didn't impress God. Just like that Bible reading we had from the OT prophet Isaiah this morning. God tells them he hates their festivals because they have become nothing more than rituals – and their hearts are far from God.

- But there was an easier way for Luther... or, at least, that's what people were told.

If you have ever been to Rome – you will be familiar with that huge example of Renaissance architecture, St. Peter's basilica – until last year the biggest cathedral in the world.

To pay for the building of that huge cathedral, the church authorities had to raise money – a lot of money. So instead of doing what we are doing for the Olympics, and issuing shares, they did the next best thing. They sold certificates called Indulgences.

An Indulgence was, to put it crudely, something that was worth forgiveness to a certain value. So, for example, if you had done something wrong – or if you wanted to do something wrong – you could buy a certificate to cover you for that amount of sin!

What's more, people, were taught that loved ones who had died had gone to purgatory – a mythical place of suffering before being allowed into heaven. And if you paid the cash and bought an indulgence for them – you could spare them that suffering.

It was a real money spinner! Salesmen were sent out across Europe to raise money this way – and that's how St. Peter's was built.

Now, you may think, "That's awful!" – but maybe you and I should not be too hasty to condemn!

Do you perhaps, rely on a certificate to get you right with God? A baptism certificate? A confirmation certificate? A Bible you won as a prize at Sunday School? – Something you – even subconsciously use to say to God – "Look at how good I am!"

So let's turn thirdly to –

3.) Luther's Discovery

Luther had tried it all. He'd been there, done that. He'd tried everything you could try as a lay person. Fasting, penance, and so on. He became a monk – and went through all the deprivations that involves. He became a priest and did all the things that are worth the most points. He even went to Rome and did them there. But still he was acutely aware that he had no peace with God.

By this time Martin was teaching the Bible at the local university – and as he read the Bible more carefully, he suddenly found himself confronted with something he'd never seen before.

Remember that earlier I mentioned he had been disturbed by the Bible's talk about God's righteousness – his righteous character. He knew that God is just and holy – that he cannot ignore sin.

He had taken it to mean that God's righteousness can only mean he condemns sin. – But when he read the Bible, he found there is something more. God shows his righteousness in saving sinners. God shows his righteousness by sending his Son, the Lord Jesus, to take the punishment I deserve and you deserve.

Luther was amazed! For all who entrust themselves to Jesus Christ – there is total forgiveness. There's no need to perform rituals – no need to punish yourself – no need to offer the sacrifice of the Mass – no need to buy Indulgences.

– Jesus has already paid the price – in full – once, for all. That's the point of that Bible reading we had from Ephesians chapter 2. The Bible says,

For by grace (i.e. by God's mercy) you have been saved – through faith – through trust in Christ – and this is not from yourselves – it is the gift of God.

That, friends, is the gospel of Jesus Christ – and all we can do is to put our trust in him.

4.) The Difference it Makes

Once you understand what the Christian message really is all about – and once you decide to hand control of your life over to the Lord Jesus – it makes all the difference in the world.

– You recognise that you can never be good enough – but God will count you as good enough on the basis of the sacrificial death of his Son for you. And it takes off your shoulders the intolerable burden of trying to be good enough – of trying to make it to 100% when that’s an impossibility.

– and it pulls the rug out from under the feet of any Church or anyone else who say that you must do this or that to get right with God.

- We don’t have time this morning to see what happened when Luther made his discovery public – but let me sketch it out in 2 or 3 sentences...

Once Luther had understood the gospel – he wrote a letter to his local Archbishop complaining about those who were selling indulgences. He didn’t realise that the Archbishop was getting 50% of the takings – and it was the first step in seeing Luther thrown out of the church.

On the same day he wrote to the Archbishop – 31 October 1517, Luther, as a university professor, nailed up a notice on the door of the castle church. It was an invitation to debate certain issues – certain statements which he wanted to make.

– It was the normal way an academic would get others to think about certain points of view. On Luther’s notice were 95 statements – about indulgences, what the church could and couldn’t do. And it was written in Latin.

But as soon as it went up, local printers copied his points, translated them into German, and started distribution.

– Within two weeks, it was being sold right across Germany – and within a

month it was all across Europe. Suddenly people felt that the authority of a corrupt Church was being questioned – and that here was someone with answers from the Bible.

The snowball of the Reformation had started – and neither Luther, nor anyone else could stop it.

- But what about you? Is this just a quaint history lesson – or are you fair dinkum about getting right with God? –

You see, one say we will all stand before his judgment throne – and you can be sure that if you are not right with God on this earth, you won't be right with him then.

Please, please look into Jesus – God's provision for you.