



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 18th April 2021

Readings: Luke 24.36b-48, Acts 3.12-19, I John 3.1-7

I can't help fearing how I might have featured in the passion story. As Jesus was betrayed and tried, denied and deserted, crucified and entombed, where would I have been? I have confessed to you only recently, how frustratingly I am able to see both sides of many an argument. It can suit one for mediation work, even for chairing meetings, but makes one perilously close to fence-sitting when there are at stake matters of principle, of conviction, of justice.

And such was surely Jesus's final week. Some shout praise and prayers at him as he arrives in Jerusalem, whilst others scream crucify him. Some gaze up at the cross adoringly, yet others mock and taunt him, offering a drink so unpalatable that he refuses it. Eventually, whilst some women remain faithfully at his side, as they have done all the time since the Galilee days, every man has faded into the background. He's sufficiently abandoned, that those who will his demise eventually face so little opposition that they get their way. 'They led him away to crucify him.' (Mark 15.20) A heinous plot? A sustained hate campaign? The defensiveness of those who see their authority and status threatened by the wandering rabbi? Maybe one, some, or all of those.

But when Peter's sermon about all of this is written down by St Luke in Acts 3, there is a remarkable phrase that might cast a different light on it. He says, 'And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.' (3.17) Ignorance. However weak or gullible or wrong they were, they were ignorant. How does that sound to you?

It is not a unique suggestion by Luke. There are other times when he seems to be understanding and merciful in his narrative because it might just be that Jesus' opponents were unaware of the complexity, the nuances, the implications of what they did. Of course, the most well-known example is when Luke alone amongst the four evangelists, tells of Jesus himself on the cross saying, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,' (23.34)

How precious this possibility is! If we act out of ignorance, even to the degree of offending God by crucifying Jesus, there may yet be hope. Peter goes on to say that as soon as his hearers realise what they have done, they are to repent, and then they will be forgiven, and become his witnesses.

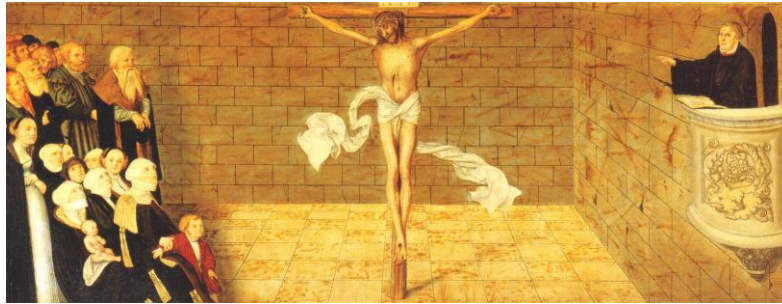
I treasure this thought. There is hope when we act out of ignorance – ignorance that might dull our senses to what is unacceptable so that we remain silent when we ought not to, or even do precisely the opposite of what we should. But ignorance is not the state in which we are meant to remain. And nor need we. The church – far from being a club for the self satisfied - is the community of those who respond to their ignorance with the desire to turn back to God, to learn, to grow, and to share what they have discovered of the God who came in Christ, living that we might know love and dying that we might live.

Come with me, if you will, to Wittenberg, in North Eastern Germany. I greatly valued an opportunity to go there when in Germany in 2019, representing the United Reformed Church at the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. After all too brief a visit to Berlin, when I went to a magical concert at the Philharmonie, I then had three days in Wittenberg, a little to the south west. It's where much of Martin Luther's most influential work was done.

At the Castle Church, the Schlosskirche, he is reputed to have posted his theses on the door in 1517, ninety five statements examining the teaching and behaviour of the church. Five hundred years ago this Spring, he then defended his views at the Diet of Worms, a hearing that lasted for the first half of 1521, where Luther's ideas were contrasted with those expressed by Leo X in his Papal Bull,

Exsurge Domine ("Arise, O Lord"). Luther was required to retract, but refused. 'I cannot and will not recant anything.' It led to the legend that he said, 'Here I stand; I can do no other.'

Instead, his preaching and teaching was strengthened, proclaiming Christ and him crucified. He was on the staff of the Stadtkirche, the Town and Parish Church of St Mary, just off the Market Square in the centre of Wittenberg.



The Altarpiece in St Mary's contains a painting (above) from 1547, the year after Luther died. It's by Lucas Cranach the Younger and is entitled *Martin Luther preaches before Christ*.

Essentially, in the centre we see Christ on the Cross, while to our right, Luther is preaching, and pointing to the crucified one. As we imagine Luther expounding the gospel of salvation – peace in us and through us because of the death and resurrection of Jesus - we are offered this startling juxtaposition of the Word on the Cross and of the Word being proclaimed.

Whilst we may not choose it as a painting to go behind the communion table of our renewed premises, it has a powerful message for us about our life as a renewed church in the centre of our own city. In an era of such ignorance of the Christian narrative, and even less understanding of the gift of faith in Christ and of following Christ's way, we exist to enable that to be explored, week after week, and year after year. It's not about dogmatic imposition of doctrine. Far from it. Telling the story of Jesus Christ, it's about creating opportunities for theological doors to be opened, so that we and all who experience us as an amenable faith community, might discover the very presence of God intruding into the midst of ordinary life as the answer to all their needs and desires and searching. And having unearthed that, to find ways into worshipping God, to serving God, and to enjoy God forever.

I give thanks to God for the church. All my life it has enabled me to face up to my ignorance, to turn to God and to receive God's peace. It also prompts me time and time again to get off the fence and to allow myself to be a channel of that peace into the world. May it be so for all of us, and through us for so many more.

The prayer that follows is from the works of Martin Luther, and prays for growth I knowledge. Let us pray.

Prayer after the Sermon

after the words of Martin Luther 1483-1546

Father of all mercy, you have begun your work in us.
Continue to fill us with all dimensions of wisdom and knowledge.
May we know in our hearts how the Spirit,
who has raised up our Lord,
also enlivens ... faith within us with the same power and strength.
Through him we have also risen from the dead by his mighty power,
which works in us through your holy Word.
Help us to grow in the knowledge of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
and to remain firm in confessing his blessed Word. Amen