MARTIN LUTHER
Let the Word Run Free

PETER MATHESON **situates Martin Luther in his historical context and discusses his contribution to the Reformation.**

Who was Martin Luther? What motivated him? How do we account for his massive impact on the world of his time? How has our understanding of him changed since Vatican Council II?

With someone as controversial as the Augustinian friar Martin Luther, it is impossible to be objective. I am an historian by trade and also a Protestant, so I cannot escape my own background and perspectives. Maybe the key question is: What can we all, Catholic and Protestant, learn from Luther today?

After a lifetime studying this early modern period of history when the very foundations of European society and culture were shaken, I feel less and less confident that there are quick and easy answers to the questions we pose.

The 1500s were a different world from ours. Unlike today, virtually no one doubted the Christian faith. The sacramental life of the Church, with its priestly and pastoral care, accompanied everyone from birth to death. Worship flowed from churches into the streets in processions, and pilgrimages and festivals gave shape to the year. In older European towns today we can still see images of the saints on every house corner and little chapels dotting the hillsides. In the towns every trade, from

candle makers to goldsmiths, had its brotherhood with sacred obligations to their members, living and dead. Personal piety flourished and this was long before Luther's vernacular Bibles circulated.

Understanding Luther's Role in His Time

The idea that Luther swept into prominence because the Old Church was dead and decadent is simply nonsense. Instead, we need to understand Luther and his reforms as part of a much wider reform movement, which coursed through the monasteries, lay people and clergy.

Today historians agree that there was considerable continuity between the late medieval period and the Reformation. Luther's theology and reformist ideas are inconceivable without considering his formation in monastic life and scholasticism (the theology of the universities), and the enthusiasm for biblical studies of Catholic scholars, such as Erasmus, Contarini and the French theologian, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples.

Luther — Monk, Teacher, Scholar, Preacher

Luther was ordained a priest in 1505 and lived conscientiously as an Augustinian monk and teacher. Luther has been described as a curious character, a bundle of contradictions: by turns charitable, priggish, humble and dismissive. His initial popularity lay in his little devotional writings. The fiercely anti-papal Luther who developed later was very different from how he began. Though he later left the monastery, married and had theological differences with Rome, he never lost his profound reverence for the Mass. He remained a life-long lover of the Psalms, of the Hebrew Bible and of the New Testament. He prayed, wrote and studied the Bible and preached and translated the Scriptures from Latin into German. His passion was biblical — to let the Word run free. Although he became a reformer, he never intended to found a new Church. Unlike others, for example Calvin, he did not think systematically about the structures of the Church. Indeed a legitimate criticism of him is that he was a poor planner. If we follow his progress from 1517 when his 95 theses about indulgences appeared, to 1521 when he defied the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet, or Imperial Parliament of Worms, it is clear that he did his thinking on the run.

Necessity of the Reformation

Today we can discuss the tragic necessity of the Reformation. We cannot close our eyes to the damage done by the intransigent response of the Roman Curia to the genuine issues raised by Luther about the true nature of penitence. While the Renaissance Papacy had many virtues, not least its patronage of the arts, under the Borgia and the Medici popes it had become embroiled in politics and lost touch with the Church's pastoral priorities. Therefore, a perfect storm arose when the theological issues raised by Luther melded with lay people's grievances about such matters as absentee priests. These were effectively voiced in the floods of pamphlets, vivid woodcuts and broadsheets issuing from the new printing press.

The unfortunate attempt to silence and intimidate Luther both radicalised him and made him into something of a national hero. For the first time in European history public opinion made its voice heard and the movement for a root and branch reform of the Church became unstoppable.

Luther's Insights Still Challenge Us

Today we have a remarkable convergence in Catholicism and Lutheranism around Luther's key doctrine of justification by faith. A growing number of Protestants are critical of many aspects of Luther, for example, his rather uncritical acceptance of social hierarchies, his intolerant polemic against the Anabaptists, his anti-Judaic writings. Perhaps, though, we can agree that his greatest contribution to us today is his courageous commitment to the truth of the Gospel as he saw it, and his marvellous skills as a linguist, translator and interpreter of the Bible. It will be exciting if we can move beyond demonising or heroising him to seeing him as a man of his time, yet also as someone whose critical insights transcend his time and are still with us. ■

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