

## Luther's Achievement

Years ago I was Dean of a Cambridge College  
A student came to see me,  
She was devout, going to the big Baptist Church where all the godly went  
She had been baptised as a child but now she wanted to be baptised again  
What did I think?  
It was Cambridge, we sipped gin and tonic  
We said *That's interesting* and *Do you think so?*, but we were both cross  
That was a Reformation argument.  
It is some of the difference Luther made  
We will come back to her.

Turn to what people say about Luther  
Luther is the point I knew I wanted to be a **historian**  
I have a book on my shelves, Gordon Rupp, one of the great Luther scholars,  
Great writer: Rupp called Erasmus, *the original flying Dutchman*  
An essay, it begins,

*Luther is to the Reformation rather like the opening notes of some great piano concerto, say Beethoven's Fourth, which states which is then taken up by the other instruments and finally lost in the developing pattern of music.*

Rupp possibly better at history than musical theory - but the point is a good one  
Luther really belongs in **context**  
We are going to put Luther front and centre this afternoon, we should  
But there are arguments / versions - lots of historians who could get very grumpy  
They would start writing angry articles *Luther in context: a counter view*

So, just in case one of those historians is your niece  
A quick glimpse of the bigger picture

He is **German** that is crucial  
Forget Angela Merkel and wurst and engineering and oktoberfest  
In 1500 Germany was part of the HRE – the map looks like a Kandinsky painting  
Baffling, imperial lands, duchies, free cities, territory of Bishops, Electors, Princes, Councils  
Much of Luther's life is spent in the Duchy of Saxony but that is Ernestine and Albertine  
The confusions are key as you will see. Reformation depended on that, reason it is *German*

There is a point about **new learning**, humanism  
Germany has universities and the new learning has taken hold  
Away from scholasticism and commentary  
**Nominalism** – deconstructionism also pure **texts**, Greek, Hebrew  
(not western in my time)  
Luther is professor, lectures all his life

There is a point about technology  
**Printing** does for Luther what social media does for Trump, the story gets out there

There have been other reformers, Hus (Bohemia), Wyclif

This is different – Luther writes

UL – 55 volumes, 5 printing presses

Woodcuts – vivid

- Pope as the devil himself in a tiara, -
- the devil playing bagpipes that look like Luther's head

And because there is printing **language** becomes standardized – spelling, description

That fuels **nationalism**, the idea of being German

And it plays into hostility to the church which sometimes seems Roman / Italian

And there is **economics** too, rents taxes, restraint of trade

Luther belongs in all that

That matters - the story is sometimes told of his magnificent **isolation?**

The *Here I stand, I can do no other story* (which may not be true)

Admirer argues *One man alone bore the hatred and violence of the whole world*

The Wartburg was isolation

but it was always more complicated

He belongs too in a wider argument historians have at seminars

Not Reformation any more, but **Reformations plural**

Different in different places, not once but often,

Now, Martin Luther

But really interesting question **where do you start?**

Greatest biographer, **Bainton**, starts in 1505 in a storm

*St Anne Save me I will become a monk* – passion, conventional faith

Makes Luther a little more Catholic

Patrick **Collinson** starts 1517 or 1519 (we are not sure)

With the experience in the tower – discovering the gospel

Makes him a real protestant

**Chadwick** starts with the pope and his finances

There is a whiff of the wider issues

Carlos **Eire** begins by thinking how close he came to being burnt at the stake

Wants us to know the risk, the stakes and the hint of heresy

These are **different stories - versions**

Lyndal **Roper** starts 'I am the son of a peasant'

Luther's birth, upbringing character

The **character** matters

Born 1483, Eisleben Saxony, family moved next year to Mansfeld

Peasant? But disingenuous, **father** was in mining – huttenmeister.

Oversight of seven smelters, strong character

And **mother** was a little more sophisticated, better connected, from Eisenach further south

Luther on his first encounter with bible - Hannah and Samuel (mother also a Hannah)

First son dedicated to God, but not a priest - a *prophet*.  
He liked that story, mother important, but so was his maverick spirit

Eldest son ambition, assumption was that Luther might be a lawyer  
Education, great scholar  
Mother moves him to Eisenach, her home, up through the gears  
Range of reference shifts, on to Erfurt and university  
Some edgy thinking – *via moderna* - nominalism

And we begin to notice his mood swings, exaltation and despair  
Deeply affected by death of another student  
Notice the intensity and the fact that it is deeply coloured by faith  
**Anfechtungen** – temptation  
It is an imaginative world, devils, saints, grace, sweetness, pain  
He dwells on salvation and damnation  
This is a Lenten story, reality of sin

Then comes that **storm** – fear - **Urgent and defiant**, this was never the plan  
He joins a monastery – Augustinians at Erfurt (1505)  
Intellectuals choice, good library  
Observant, disciplined, demanding

Luther feels the demand  
There is crisis around his first mass – unworthiness  
Still his own sense of **sinfulness**

*Then ~ I was the most miserable person in earth, day and night was pure howling  
and despair, that no one could steer*

Near obsessive commitment to confession  
Six hours at a time – after perfection, thin, made himself ill  
*If ever a monk got to heaven through monasticism I was that monk*  
Fortunate in his confessor Staupitz

There's a trip to **Rome**  
Devotion, but later critical of the lack of discipline  
The hurried masses the lack of reverence

More study, a year at Wittenberg, becomes a doctor,  
Reading St Paul  
Will **lecture** for rest of his life  
Psalms, the epistles

You have to notice this  
He's looking for **answers in books** – this is a particular faith – not hymns, or cocoa

And while he is doing that there is a bigger story unfolding  
The pope, Medici, Leo X, *God has given us the papacy...* is building **St Peter's**  
Luther saw the building site on his trip to Rome  
It is expensive

Nearer home Albrecht has just secured the **Archbishopric of Mainz**  
Your new Dean was appointed by the Holy Spirit  
The process was so beautiful angels wept  
It was not always so

Albrecht was a real prince bishop  
Son of Margrave of Brandenburg  
He was archbishop of Magdeburg at 23 and a cardinal at 28  
Even John's achievements begin to look modest  
But he was not satisfied, he craved the archdiocese of Mainz  
To get it, to hold two archdioceses he had to pay a fine  
26,000 ducats at high interest from Fuggers  
He needed **income**

And This is where we meet **indulgences**  
Now - suppose I was rude about your Dean  
There is not one problem, there are two  
My soul is at risk, I need to be forgiven  
But also he is upset - he is actually very sensitive  
There is a consequence and it needs to be put right  
Sins need to be forgiven and there has to be a penalty - a **penance**

Medieval church knew about **penance**  
Hair shirt, church door, pilgrimage  
And learnt to commute penance  
Rude to John I should go on pilgrimage to Compostella  
But I have tickets for the opera so I make a payment  
Church can **commute** my penance out of the treasury of merit

Indulgences are the **trade in that forgiveness**  
Not just for me and not just for the living  
As soon as a coin in the coffee rings a soul from purgatory springs  
Your picture

Albrecht licences a Dominican, Tetzl to sell indulgences  
8 years half to Pope half to Fuggers  
Startling preaching...

*Hear ye not the voices of your parents and the other souls calling out: Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, for the hand of the Lord hath touched me. We are suffering the most dreadful pains and tortures, from which you can release us for a pittance . . .*

Hideously offensive, mechanical, unorthodox, a plenary indulgence  
Not just the penalty but full forgiveness  
Think how that plays with Luther

That is what the **95 theses** were about  
Number 6 in paraphrase

*Only God can forgive -the pope can only reassure people that God will do this*

May or may not have been nailed to the door of the castle church

October 1517

That is what everyone wants to know

More significantly they are posted, Luther wants a debate

Should notice the **castle church** is full of relics an indulgence was attached

*Five particles of the milk of the Virgin Mary. One piece of the tree where Mary nursed the Lord near the Garden of Balsam. Four pieces of the hair of Mary... Three pieces of the Mount of Olives and of the rod of Aaron. Two pieces of the rod of Moses. One piece of the burning bush which Moses saw. One piece of an object sprinkled with the blood of Christ. Eleven pieces of Mount Calvary*

The Theses are what people get excited about

The Blue touch paper

Luther was more interested in his **tower experience**

Difficult to date very probably after 95 theses

Studying **Romans 1:17** – remember this is a man who does not feel forgiven

*For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written. The just shall live by faith*

It is a breakthrough

*There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives but a gift of God, namely by faith. ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.*

This is tricky stuff – he is saved

Two things to notice

- I. Luther is working on a **text** and that is exciting  
Erasmus *Novum Instrumentum* Greek and Latin

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew 4:17*

Specifically *repent* or *do penance*. Luther's lectures:

*When our Lord and Master said Repent, he meant that the whole of believer should be one of penitence*

This is scholarship and it is scripture. Scripture becomes critical

It is the authority for Luther

And Authority is a key issue in the Reformation

How do you know what is true? Pope, Council, Reason, Tradition, Scripture?

2. And remember what matters to Luther himself

This is all about **forgiveness**, how you live with a righteous God, the thing he struggled with

His answer is that you do *not* put yourself right with God - **justification**

God does that – it is not a controversial point – Augustine made it

Luther insisted God makes you righteous

God gives you the faith which God then recognises

We do not participate in this, it happens in spite of us

God overrules us

Luther is prepared to die for this

Eire – he could be burnt

Doctrine matters Christianity is conviction.

Four things then dominate debate

1. A stress on our **sinfulness** and on God given faith  
We do nothing , we have no free will - it is faith not works
2. A stress on **scripture** – *sola scriptura*, nothing human trusted, key for Luther
3. A rejection of anything that looked **mechanical** – prayer to saints
4. Authority

It changes things - it is decisive, dramatic

Collinson, as if groping up a tower in the dark grabs a rope

Finds he is ringing a bell that wakes up the whole town

Remember the young woman who came to see me

She had learnt the Reformation lesson, faith matters

She wanted believers baptism she wanted to celebrate faith

She no longer trusted the power of the sacrament

But strangely, she had misunderstood – she wanted to do something - testimony

turned faith into a work – her testimony mattered

Time is against us, John has been very strict

You can follow the story

The meetings with different theologians

1518 Cajetan at Augsburg

1519 Eck at Leipzig, - Luther denies pope alone can interpret scripture & accepts link to Hus

1521 Diet of Worms

It is at Worms we hear Luther at his most **uncompromising**

*Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.*

You notice the defiance towards the Pope

And insistence on Scripture

But notice also the **intellectual confidence** in man we know to be troubled  
The intellectual coherence, the passion. It is decisive  
This was an academic argument and it was personal salvation

On the way out of Worms on a safe conduct he is kidnapped  
By his own Elector (the point about local politics) and hidden in the **Wartburg**  
*My Patmos* A terrible period doubt, despair and illness – *my arse has gone bad*  
Another Luther theme!

But productive Hymns, NT, three **manifestos** - *It is as if he built pyramids in a year*  
*To the Christian Nobility* - priesthood of all believers  
*Of the Babylonish Captivity of the Church* – attack on sacraments  
*The Freedom of the Christian Man* – Christian vocation

### **The Achievement?**

By accident (MacCulloch)? Certainly by stages

Second image you have is 7 headed Luther  
It is Catholic polemic, meant to be dismissive  
But it catches the sheer achievement – **7 heads**

NT – Tyndale  
Hymns – Wesley  
Essays and polemic – Swift  
Catechism – Calvin or Bullinger  
Liturgy - Cranmer  
Sermons – Wesley again  
Table Talk - Johnson

All sorts of accounts of what Reformation does  
It shifts the centre of gravity of Christian practice *my faith*  
It releases language – liturgy, scripture, no accident Shakespeare is a protestant  
It may have prompted a different kind of enquiry – the scientific achievements of 17<sup>th</sup> C  
Impact on music and art – Bach, Rembrandt

*Come and inspire us* – Luther could

The link with scholarship, is that as central as it was?

A theology of divinity of God and a deep (if pessimistic) theology of the person  
Not simply a theology of conversion

Then there is Europe – English Reformation as Brexit  
A national narrative  
What Luther and the Reformation destroyed Christendom  
Nationalism, a shift in who you believe  
But Luther offered a shared narrative, not the despair of some modern populism  
Scripture, church, mass...

