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Reformation 500 – Set Free ...

Themes:

- 1) **Freed ... by the God whose promises give hope** (Robert Vosloo)
- 2) **Freed to serve with joy** (Gideon van der Watt)
- 3) **Set free ... for this life** (Pieter van der Walt)
- 4) **Set free ... to confess** (Elsje Büchner)
- 5) **Set free ... to see differently through faith** (Cas Wepener)
- 6) **Set free ... that is why we are good enough** (Henco van der Westhuizen)
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Freed ... by the God whose promises give hope

1) The Reformation – 500 years

On 31 October 1517, according to tradition, a young Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, nailed a protest document with 95 theses against a door of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany. With this deed of protest, Luther intended to begin a discussion about what he perceived as malpractices of the church of his day. His main concern was the so-called 'indulgences' – a practice by which a person could buy his or her redemption or decrease of punishment in the hereafter. Luther regarded this practice (which was based on the idea that you could buy God's favour) as directly contrary to the message of the gospel and he strongly disputed the fact that the church could proceed to enrich itself at the cost of the poor. No, Luther would henceforth undoubtedly argue, God gives us our salvation, by grace alone and solely based on our faith in Christ.

After 31 October 1517, Luther's writings spread throughout Europe like wildfire and the new technology of the art of printing (of which the impact is comparable with the internet today), played no mean role in this connection. In the process, a movement began which would be known as the 16th century Reformation. It will be difficult to overrate the impact of the Reformation. It is not without reason that a recent book by the historian Martin Marty carries the title *October 31 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World*. Whether these changes were and still are all for the good or not, are widely disputed, but that the Reformation had a powerful impact on the Western social and church life – also in South Africa – is without doubt.

Given the fact that 31 October 1517, can be seen as a symbolic marker of the beginning of the Reformation, Protestant churches worldwide will celebrate their Reformation heritage during 2017. Such a year of commemoration certainly opens the opportunity to think anew about the evangelical impulses that belongs to the heart of the Reformation. When we commemorate the Reformation in 2017, it is important to remember that there is also reason to mourn the fragmentation of the one body of Christ into different groupings of the church, a phenomenon that strongly increased in the aftermath of the Reformation. Luther most definitely did not want to split the church; he wanted to reform and renew it. Thus, a spirit of introspection, confession and humiliation is fitting, as well as accompanying celebrations that carry an ecumenical character. The celebration of the Reformation also certainly presents the opportunity to look back gratefully at the way the message of the gospel of salvation and freedom, by grace alone, came into focus in a powerful way. And to ask what the implications of that are for today.

2) Freed!

The overriding theme for this series of pamphlets is 'Freed!' It is a fitting theme, as the Reformation can be seen as the rediscovery that we are freed by the grace of Christ. The Reformation, we could claim, has been a freedom movement. We are freed *from* sin and guilt, freed from crippling moralism, freed from enslavement and suppressive systems. And we are also

made free *for* a life in which we, with joy and responsibility, serve God, our neighbour and the rest of creation.

Some Lutheran scholars point out that one can use Galatians 5:13 as a motto for Luther's theology: 'You were called to be free.' This freedom is not our own achievement, but Christ is promising it to us. We are *freed*. We are free because God *gives* us freedom by free grace in Christ and through the Spirit. This is the heart of the doctrine of 'justification through faith alone' – a doctrine which has been described as the principle by which the church stands or falls. Shortly before he died, Luther, looking back over his life and theology, wrote that as a young person he hated the phrase 'the righteousness of God'. He understood this description particularly in connection with God's punishment. God is the righteous Judge who gives judgement against us and for Luther it meant that in view of his own sin there was no hope for him. He deserved God's punishment. But, by reading the Scripture (especially verses like Romans 1:17) Luther began to understand this idea of God's justice differently. God's justice means *that God declared us righteous, freely and by grace*. This discovery ('justification by faith only') was for Luther like being born again and he wrote that hereafter he felt as if the doors of paradise opened for him. To the heart of Luther's theology, therefore, belongs the joyful conviction that God affirmed us to be free in Christ. The justification comes from outside us (*justitia externa*). It does not deal with us according to our merits and therefore, as 'a foreign justice' (*justitia aliena*), it is good news for us. We are indeed declared free – by grace!

Luther struggled with the question: Where and how do I get a merciful God? And in the process he discovered where this God could be found, namely in Scriptural testimonies concerning the good news that by faith in Christ we are freed by grace. It is said that Martin Luther changed the spelling of his name from Luder to Luther, because he discovered the Greek word for freedom (*eleutheria*) in it. He often signed his name as Eleutherius, 'the free one' or 'the 'liberated'.

3) Freed by the God who is rich in promises

We are freed! This is the message of the gospel and it is the message that Luther (like others before and after him) rediscovered in a powerful way during his time and with implications for his time.

There is certainly a risk that we can talk cheaply about being freed. In the process we underestimate the strength of oppression and enslavement in our own life and in that of others. Today if we speak about freedom or about liberation, then we do it mostly in the context where the freedom of people and communities are threatened, in the midst of experiencing being stuck, discouragement, as well as suppressive political and economical and even church systems that threaten people's dignity and rob them of their joy.

Luther was acutely aware of the fact that the message of justification comes to us amidst the hardship that we endure. In this connection, Luther often spoke about the temptations and afflictions that he experienced. Nevertheless, in this situation he kept talking about the fact that our lives are founded in God's promises. If we speak about being freed, it is in the first instance

important to notice *who* this God is that sets us free in Christ. For Luther the answer was clear. *We are delivered by the God who is rich in promises and whose promises that were pledged to us, are infallible.* The Bible is full of these promises. Luther would often refer to promises such as: 'I am with you always', 'Your sins are forgiven' and 'This is my body ... given for you.'

These promises have a creative force. These words come to us from outside ourselves. Faith is to make God's promises our own. As Luther put it: 'The language of faith speaks as follows: 'when you speak, Lord, I believe you''

4) To live hopefully as freed people by God's promises

Therefore, in the gospel it is about the promise (*promissio*) of God. We worship the God who makes promises and who stays true to these promises. This is the thought upon which Luther built his theology. In the midst of our own hardship, we can call on God knowing that this God is the God whose promises of caring and liberating presence are reliable. Our hope is not based on our own strength, or situated in our own person, our own conscience or our own senses, but it is founded outside us (*extra nos*) in the promised words of God. This God does not mislead people.

Luther did not write cheaply about hope. He often referred to the personal experience of the tension between God's promises and what he called 'this current winter'. But it is precisely in this tension where our hope, founded on the promises of God, originates from, even if it is our experience that we are in the wilderness or that God feels absent. Jacqueline Bussie sums up Luther's thoughts of hope in a striking way: "Luther makes clear the both-and character of hope. Both the world is filled with inexplicable suffering and the world is filled with inexplicable grace. God appears to be forcefully present and at times excruciatingly absent. God is love and life is horror; the Christian life is a curious mixture of terror and triumph, embrace and absence, laughter and loss."

In the midst of these experiences of the depth of humanness comes the creative word of God's promises to us with a message of hope that gives freedom. Faith means to allow the power of this word to flow over us.

5) Meaning for today?

We could very well ask what this idea of being liberated conveys to us today. Many people will justly say that we live in another age as Luther. We do not fear the punishment of God in the way people did during the Middle Ages. We do not fear the justice of God in the way Luther feared it. Our question is maybe not so much: 'How do I find a merciful God?' but rather: 'Where do I find a merciful fellow-man?' Nevertheless, the message of salvation and the justification through faith alone can be strengthening and hope giving once more. Today people also live with questions like: Am I good enough? Do I comply with the expectations? Why am I not reckoned with? How do I live amidst unemployment, poverty or marginalisation? What do I do about my anxiety for sickness or death?

In the midst of these questions and experiences, we can also hear the word today: We are freed!. And this word can, in faith, be accepted as truth that sets free, because it is founded on the

reliable promises of God. Therefore we have hope, a hope that is bigger than our fear and anxiety and which empowers us to express love.

Freed ... to serve with joy

Freedom is valuable

Freedom is one of humankind's highest ideals and most valuable possessions. Down through the ages nations fight for independence; people lay down their lives for liberation. Just think of the struggle for the emancipation of slaves, or for freedom of religion. Probably the most important symbol for America is the giant Statue of Liberty in the harbour of New York. This statue of the Roman goddess of freedom was a gift from the freedom-loving French people in 1886. But freedom can also be a risk; it can be misapprehended. *My* or *our* freedom could deprive others of their freedom. What we strive for as liberty can easily degenerate into a new slavery. When are we truly free?

The Reformation and freedom

Freedom was one of the core issues in the Reformation, 500 years ago. Thence the overall theme of this series of pamphlets: *Freed*. Luther and Calvin thought and wrote a good deal about it. One of Luther's first treatises, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, left an important impression on the Reformation as a movement. Therein he made the "revolutionary" statement: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Herein he associated himself with Paul: "*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone ...*" (1 Cor 9:19), and "*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another ...*" (Rom 13:8).

To be a Christian means to be free, freed, liberated. This freedom is valuable, we must cherish it, stand firm therein: "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery*" (Gal 5:1). This verse – actually the whole letter of Galatians about the Christian's freedom – lies at the heart of our Christian belief and is the profound meaning of the Reformation.

What is threatening this freedom?

Freedom – also freedom of Christians – is being threatened from two sides.

Firstly our freedom is threatened **from outside ourselves**. There is evil in our world, powers and fearsome forces outside ourselves that come to rob us of our freedom and paralyse our lives. It could be other people, despotic, megalomaniac people; it could be a dictator who suppresses people; or it could be my husband or wife, a parent or a child, my boss, or a bully who keeps me physically or emotionally a prisoner. But it could also be unjust political or economic systems, an ethos, certain cultural customs or role expectations that could rob me of my freedom. Yes, it could even be religion, when religion loads a yoke on us, adds an extra obligation, demands earnings, makes me the slave of a religious leader or a doctrine. Paul protested against this particularly in Galatians 5 where he warns against the Jewish tradition to burden people with all kinds of directives like a heavy yoke, thereby making them unfree.

Secondly our freedom is threatened **from within ourselves**. This happens if we live so self-obsessed, selfish and self-directed, so bent into ourselves (people refer to self-absorbed pursuits

as navel-gazing), similar to Narcissus in Greek mythology who fell in love with his own reflection in the water (his selfie) that he was unable to leave the river and eventually died there. It is then when our own skin becomes like the walls of a prison cell. It is then when we become slaves of our own desires and avarice, our ambition and vindictiveness, our lust that must be satisfied. We then become promiscuous because the only bond that binds us is the self, the old nature, the self-god who has the final say. We ourselves create gods by which we enslave ourselves – there are many such modern gods on which people place their trust and which they serve like slaves. In our rebellion against God, we create the *I*-god – Paul calls it our sinful nature in Galatians – who not only steals our freedom, but also that of everything and everyone around us. Eventually our total living space is consumed by it.

Christ has set us free ... to serve

Christ has come to set us free from everything that enslaves us. That's the good news! That's the real freedom, says John 8:36: *"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."* When Christ was crucified, our old, sinful nature was nailed to the cross with him. And when he rose from the grave, he gave us a new life, a life of freedom. We are no longer slaves, not of others or of ourselves. Professor Dirkie Smit writes that we confess it with rich consolation in the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 1: *"That we are not our own, that is the comfort and that is the vocation. We do not belong to ourselves. That is our deepest solace in life and death, thus we profess. We do not belong to ourselves, do not care for ourselves. We are freed, fearless, saved. We belong to our only Saviour, Jesus Christ. But this is also the heart of our vocation. We ought to live like people who do not belong to themselves, but to Christ and therefore to each other, to our neighbours. Freed, to love and to serve, willingly and wholeheartedly."* These freedoms are only honest and lasting if it forces us out of our self-concern and directs us to our vocation to serve others, carry each other's burdens, voluntarily and with joy. *"You ... were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love" (Gal 5:13).*

How should we serve one another?

- As Christ did, that is how we should serve one another. *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others"* (Phil 2:3-4). As Christ emptied himself by assuming the form of a slave, that is how we should do it. Luther said we should all become "Christs" to one another, priests...
- This means that we should learn to notice one another and others, should learn to listen to others, should stand in one another's shoes, should try to understand what the real need is for now and how to encourage and practically help one another. It can even also ask that we will fight together against injustice, against whatever threatens our freedom, that we will go to stand where God stands, with the aggrieved (Confession of Belhar).
- We should be able to distinguish those things that really matter, what love asks of us. This is precisely why the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit and gave the Word to guide us, to hold us in this freedom, in this relationship of love with God and our neighbour.

- Thus we do this service to God and our neighbour not to earn something with it, but because we are reprieved, freed; we do it with grateful joy. There is no greater joy of living than to serve God and our neighbour with love, as redeemed people.

Set free for this life

The other side of life

This life is not always easy. Christianity doesn't always protect you from the everyday problems all humans experience. A Christian can also become ill and have trouble healing. At times a Christian feels anxious too, worries about the future, struggles with regrets and feelings of failure and inferiority, with despondency and deep insecurities.

Exploitation of vulnerability

When Martin Luther nailed his famous Theses onto the city's notice board, the Wittenberg church door, in 1517, he took great issue with, among other things, the "cursed heresy" of the indulgence system. The indulgences exploited people's vulnerability. You could pay for the termination of your fears and doubts. ("As soon as a coin in the coffer rings / the soul from purgatory springs.")

In Thesis 86 Luther asked how it was possible that the pope, who was already so wealthy, could use the money of poor believers, rather than his own, to build the cathedral in Rome.

He confronted the powers of his day on the evidence of a dramatic discovery he had made. He became intensely aware that God came into the world through Jesus Christ by grace alone, and that he is not indifferent to our concerns, that he knows our struggle with temptations, our doubts, and our physical and emotional pain. God did not keep a distance. This has radical implications for our attitude and fears.

A letter of consolation for Margarethe

In 1531, on the basis of this discovery, Luther could write a letter about joy to his mother, Margarethe, when he heard the news of her illness. He encouraged her to persevere. He pleaded with her to embrace her illness, as it were, and to continue finding a deeper joy. The powerful significance of Jesus Christ's life and death, which was such a fresh discovery for him, was indeed in direct contrast to the doubts and anxieties of his time.

He wrote to Margarethe: "Death, you may bare your teeth, but you cannot bite. For God has given us victory over you, through Jesus Christ, our Lord." He encouraged her to let her heart concern itself with such words and thoughts, and none other. "Be joyful and thankful that God has brought us to such knowledge and has not left us mired in the error that taught us to rely on our works and the holiness of monks. Be joyful that we no longer regard Christ as a cruel judge and tyrant from whom we need to flee to the saints."

He continued: "We now know otherwise – that Jesus Christ is not a terrible tyrant; we know about the boundless goodness of our Heavenly Father; we know that Jesus Christ is not the One who prosecutes and threatens us, but the One who reconciles us with God ... so that we shall not fear him, but rather move toward him with all certainty."

On the basis of this, he then said: "Be of good cheer, Mother, and give thanks with joy for such great grace! For he who has started this with you will also end it graciously. For we cannot help

ourselves in such matters, we cannot do anything to ward off sin and death. For this purpose another appeared, One who can do it better. He gives us his victory and commands us to accept it. He says: 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world ... I live, and you too will live, and no one shall rob you of your joy.'"

Set free for this life

A wonderful freedom came. We need not flee from Christ, and we need not flee from the intimidation of neighbours and the heavy sides of life. We no longer need to live in the "godly seriousness" in which we stay in control and try to improve the world according to our own ideals. We can live in "godly love" (Anton van Ruler).

When everything got stranded, when it became clear that man couldn't solve the problems, insecurities, anxieties, evil and pain of the world, God intervened and sent his Son.

Herein lies the power of the Reformation, and its significance for us today, 500 years later. The Spirit teaches us to live in such a way that we see God in everything in this life, not only in our successes, but also particularly in our suffering and helplessness.

The popular religious goal is to have a good time, to gather possessions on earth and to escape from anxieties and problems. Christ rather sets us free that we might embrace and love life with all its sides.

Blessed are those who know their need of God

Luther summarises this when he talks about the power of Jesus' message on the Mount of Olives: "The significance of all this is to say that, while we live here, we should use all temporal goods and physical necessities, the way a guest does who spends the night in a strange place and leaves in the morning. He needs nothing more than a bed and a roof over his head, and he dare not say, 'This belongs to me, I shall stay here.'"

It is this basic insight of the early believers that the church of Luther's time had lost. "Their doctrine and life is only based on having enough; that is why they gathered all the possessions of the world, as everyone can see. They merely follow the biggest and most universal religion or faith in the world."

Following Christ sets you free from the pressure of popular morals, and therefore it has great value, not only for the future life, but particularly also for this life (1 Tim 4:8).

Set free for this life in 2017

Can we still believe this, 500 years later?

Well, Luther believed it 1500 years later. The early church believed it radically and society thought they were pretty weird. However, their way of life earned respect. They were set free from the determined preservation of themselves. They did not put their lives in the centre or first, but cared

for those who suffered, and comforted those who were discouraged. They brought simplicity and joy, because their Master loved exactly this world and this life, and entered it.

Precisely what is needed today.

Set free to confess

From one extreme to the other

The Reformation set us free from the chains of a life in which we literally had to pay for our sins with money. This opened believers' eyes for the radicality of God's grace. However, does this insight mean that the confession of sins is no longer necessary or that it has mitigated to a quick sentence at the end of a prayer, "Lord, forgive me my sins"?

After 500 years, we can ask two questions:

1. Have we moved from one extreme to the other? From pay-for-your-sins to a lifestyle where anything goes?
2. How do I confess my sins honestly and sincerely before the Lord in this day? Martin Luther said: "As a Christian you must live in repentance for life" or to put it differently, "Confess your sins". But confession does not come easily nowadays because in 2017 many things are just okay. People do not easily offer their apologies and do not easily confess their sins.

A glimpse back in history

In the film *Luther* we see how Martin Luther, in rather disturbing scenes, struggle with the devil. Luther did not ask, "Am I going to sin?" but "When am I going to sin?"

He also discovered that, to live as a Christian, means a lifetime of confession and repentance. He understood something of the truth that we have ceased to understand. Grace is not cheap. Grace is in fact expensive.

To live before the Triune God in all sincerity, does not mean that anything just goes, but rather that we live with our brokenness and in honesty before God. We cannot separate our frailty from God's grace. We have to come to God in equal honesty about our flaws and sinfulness.

Luther was not willing to pay for his sins with money, but he still knew that God's grace was sufficient for his sins. God's grace sets us free to live honestly and repentantly before Him and to confess our sins. Only then can we grow spiritually.

Scripture helps us with this. Read 1 John 1:5-10 and 2 Corinthians 7:9-11.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us." (1 John 1:9-10).

How do matters stand in 2017 – exactly 500 years after the Reformation?

If one looks at the 95 Theses that Luther nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church, one sees that he repeatedly emphasised the grace, but at the same time says that we are sinners. This means that we have been set free to stand before God in our brokenness and to confess our brokenness to him. Because that really sets us free! Modern people have forgotten how to confess. To say you are sorry takes more than a few pretty words.

What does an honest confession, one that sets us free, look and sound like?

1. Be prepared to pronounce your regrets in all sincerity – before God and your neighbour

This is the first step that we need to be prepared to take. In many situations people are not able to rectify their mistakes and it is the proverbial water under the bridge. But if people would just say that they are sorry, it would already make things better. And mean it; let your eyes and body confirm your words!

2. Accept responsibility for your deeds

People will believe the sincerity of your apology better if you are prepared to take responsibility for your mistakes. It is not a sign of weakness; it is actually a sign of spiritual maturity. Your husband, your wife, your child, your friend or colleague will think more of you if you admit that you too could be wrong and make mistakes.

3. Be prepared to remedy your mistakes

In close relationships trust needs to be restored. Someone told the story of how, one Christmas Eve, a car drove right into their lounge when the driver couldn't make it round the corner. The lounge literally shifted off its foundation! Sometimes our relationships hurt as much as when a car drives right into our lounge! Then one has to rebuild the relationship again, one brick at a time. The grace is that it will be a better, prettier lounge if one works hard and correctly. But then one needs to take responsibility. Sometimes, there is only a crack in the window and the mistake is easier to correct. If you made a severe mistake, if a truck hit the relationship, you will have much to repair. You will have to rebuild the relationship once again, one brick at a time. If the foundation has shifted, you will need to remind the person anew of your love. But this does not take away the grace. Grace and responsibility are not opposites.

4. The other person must be able to see that you are really sorry

"Yes, I'm sorry, man!" and then he/she does the same thing over again. If you offer your partner/friend an apology and do the same thing again and again, your partner/friend will only get one message: You are not really sorry.

5. Ask forgiveness and pardon one another

Sometime, when we were small, we learnt the words, "Forgive us our trespasses", which we said and quickly ran on. We need to learn to be more specific in our confessions of our sins and direct these words to one another and to God. If we understand that God set us free, we can stand before the Lord in our rags. But then we also need to pardon one another.

6. Let us be gentler with one another

In Matthew 18:21-38, we read about a servant who begged the king for mercy, but who himself was not prepared to show mercy to his colleague. We can be so harsh and impatient towards one another. If someone makes a mistake in front of you while driving, smile. Next time it may be you who makes the mistake. Let us help one another to create a gentler culture in our environment and our country.

God is the One who forgave us; that is why we need to forgive one another too. Sometimes it is difficult, but forgiveness sets free. It is not only pleasant or good to live without chains – it also fills us with joy!

7. Set free to confess my faith

A liberated person, someone who was set free from his or her sins, has also received the grace of the Holy Spirit to be able to confess his/her faith and to say, “Jesus is the Lord!” Our confessions of faith help us to articulate the core truths in our faith. But the most important is that you, as a liberated person who can confess your sins sincerely before God, also have to confess your faith to the world, in word and deed. In this way we proclaim to a broken world that we really live by grace and that we want to share and live out this grace.

“... and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’, except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Questions for further reflection:

1. How can we teach our children to confess their mistakes before God and to one another?
2. Make 1 John 1:8–10 part of your daily devotions. Stand before God in honesty – The Lord is faithful and just.
3. Read Philippians 3:8. Talk to one another about how you can live out and confess your relationship with Jesus Christ in public.

Freed to see differently ... through faith

Cameras and mobiles give us a new perspective on the world

Nowadays, most of us have a mobile with a built in camera. And we take shots of *everything*: people and dogs and sunsets and flowers and stones. We are taking photos all the time. It was not like that twenty years ago. Then there were cameras and photos were taken, but the entire life was not an occasion to be photographed. Few people realise that these cameras on our mobiles radically changed the way we look at each other, at the world and even at real life.

Today people look differently at the world and see a stone or a blossom or a teardrop or a smile they would otherwise not have seen. Even more than that, we are constantly looking for the best shot of a particular stone. The entire life becomes such a photo taking event, consequently we look differently and we see things that we otherwise wouldn't see. Emile Zola commented that you cannot claim you saw something if you haven't taken a picture of it. Without that mobile camera in their pocket, many people wouldn't even have glanced at that stone or blossom or smile or teardrop, but now they are constantly looking for it until they find it.

Indeed, it seems as if something happened in the last few decades. Actually, it happened nearly two hundred years ago with the invention of the camera. Since the first cameras the way people observed the world changed a lot. Initially, cameras were only meant for a few elected ones who could afford such an expensive instrument. Today, thanks to the global technological revolution, we all have a mobile camera and all we have to do to take a shot is to approximately point and shoot. The fact is that the camera has become part of our everyday life and profoundly influences the way we look at the world.

The Reformation also taught us to see differently

2017 is not the year wherein we celebrate the invention of the camera, but the year wherein we commemorate the Reformation.

The art of printing and translation of the Bible allows us to see differently

Reformation together with the invention of the art of printing had a comparable influence on people like the invention and distribution of the camera, although the influence of Reformation was more profound. When, in the Western world, the printing press was invented by Gutenberg during the 15th century, it became possible to make copies of handwritten material by means of a printing press. Consequently, there were more books and more people who came in contact with these books that naturally included the Bible. During this time various translations of the Bible made their appearance in languages such as German, English and French that native speakers could understand better than Greek or Latin. As the camera allowed people to look differently at the world, so did stories of the Bible allow people to look differently at the world. Just as a technological revolution makes it possible to spread camera mobiles, so does the influence of the Reformation, by way of the printing press and translations, make it possible to spread knowledge of the Bible. And people were liberated to see differently, to look and see through the frame of the Bible and discover anew values of faith.

We see creation like a beautiful book

As the camera frames the world in a constant search to whatever you and I regard as “beautiful”, in the same way the Bible frames the world with what is “beautiful” to God. In the tradition of the Reformation we cannot say we have seen something, if we have not seen it through the camera of the Scriptures. Then we see in the words of Elisabeth Eybers, “the webbed stirs underwater”. Then we see in the words of Isaiah, “A shoot will come up from the stump...” Then we see, in the words of the Belgic Confession article 2, “before our eyes creation like a beautiful book”. Then we see in the words of Luke in the Emmaus story the risen Lord Jesus in bread crumbs. We see in the words of prophets like Martin Luther King Jr, John the Baptist and Isaiah that hills become level, every hillock a pasture. Some look back and see, see that the “lake” of God in former days were around and with them. But there is also the cloud of witnesses from Hebrews who look into the future, they look from afar but look with faith and thus as pilgrims on earth saw a better fatherland. Through the lens of Scripture we, as believers, look round us, but also backwards and forwards and become part of the cloud of witnesses that reaches through the ages.

We see “God the Poet” in his creation

Susan Sontag compares the way photography taught man to look intensely with modern poetry, not necessarily with the art of painting. According to her it is eminently the poets who guide us to look, to look deeper, to look differently and to see more. According to TT Cloete, a well-known Afrikaans poet, God is a Poet. Cloete writes in “God the Poet”:

there is more poetry in the snowflake
as in literature and much more poetry
in the dung beetle, in the desert beetle
in the meteorology and entomology
in the misty morning and the mountain peak
the horizon that disappears in the skies
in the rose cloud there is much more lyric
the earth is made by a Poet.

The Reformation understood the world was made by a Poet and helps man to understand anew that to look at the world with eyes of faith is to look poetically at the world.

We learn to see with eyes of faith ... and discover a deeper beauty

We are all called to look and see. We are called to search, to wonder round with our mobile cameras and search for a once in a life time photo, also to search for God’s once in a life time photo. But what does it look like, the “beautiful” photos that God wants to shoot? One of the truths that we inherited from Reformation is that we are liberated to see, in faith, *differently*. From Genesis right up to Revelations we see how those who are the world’s last ones, become God’s first ones. Can you imagine whose photos will be in God’s *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan*? Of course we see something of God in the beauty of a waterfall, in a perfectly created body, in a herd of zebras or a sunset in the Highveld or clouds over Table Mountain. However, it is faith in Jesus Christ which allows us to see the beauty of a bruised reed, of a smouldering wick, of a crucifix.

It is not easy to look at and see the world in this way. We are bombarded and indoctrinated with the world's standard of beauty. An assignment you can do is to simply ask: where can I see God today in my town or city? If you, as a group, are reading this flyer, it would be a good assignment for the members if, in the coming week, each one with your mobile take a stroll through your area in the footprints of God the Poet. Report back to the group and share it with each other. Where did you find God's "beauty"? No one takes the same photo of the same subject; no one sees the world in the same way through the lens of Scripture. Together we discover and help each other through faith to see deeper. Maybe someone will come back without a photo because he or she saw nothing. No matter, because that experience is also part of the Bible's testimony.

The Bible teaches us that where your treasure is, there your heart will also be. Remember, where your treasure is, is to where your mobile camera will turn. Indeed, to believe is to see.

Set free ... that is why we are good enough

1. Grace alone!

In 1545, a year before his death, a Latin version of Luther's works was published in Wittenberg. Luther was given the opportunity to write a preface for one of the volumes. He used it to reflect on his life and theology.

In retrospect, he said that he used to hate the phrase "the justice of God". He had set his whole life apart for the Lord, but was nevertheless often overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. "Although I lived blamelessly as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God." It was then – only by a gracious God – that he discovered, or rediscovered, the core of the good news. He realised that "justice" was not something he could earn; it wasn't something that he could achieve by what he did or did not do. This justice was rather a passive justice; it was a gift from God, and it pointed to God's justice. It was *He*, and *only* He who justified him!

2. Grace becomes a new pair of glasses

In these words, Luther discovered a new hermeneutics (a key to unlock). "From that moment the whole face of scripture appeared to me in a different light." What he rediscovered was a hermeneutics of grace. And this became his foundation, his basis, that on which he built his understanding of theology!

He received, as it were, a new pair of glasses – grace-glasses – through which he could see himself.

Thus, he received a new identity! Because through these grace-glasses, he now saw who he really was! And this was who he was: someone pardoned! That is apparently why Luther changed the spelling of his name to Luther, which is derived from *eleutheria*, which means "freedom" or "the free one", the "one set free", the "liberated one".

Of this pardoned Luther, is told that, in times of despair, of worry and anxiety, he would scratch out the words *baptizatus sum*, "I am baptised", on his desk. In times like these, he could be reminded of his identity – not only of who he was, but also to whom he belonged! Through Him – as he now knew by the grace in which he shared – he was good enough!

But he didn't realise that of himself alone.

3. At the same time justified and sinner

This hermeneutics, the grace-glasses, changed his whole life and theology! For him it was like looking through three-dimensional glasses and seeing everything anew. Grace became the golden thread that ran through his whole theological endeavour. This becomes clear in the well-known phrase *simul iustus et peccator*. At the same time justified *and* sinner! For Luther, this was true of himself – he was justified and sinner at the same time.

But that is also true for all others who were pardoned!

He – and we too – are righteous! We too were justified by the Lord who gave himself to us and died on the cross for us.

But to understand this, we need to know why justification is necessary, and therefore, what sin means. Because, of all people, *we who are sinners*, are justified. For Luther, sin is a condition; it is to be encapsulated, entangled in such a way (like in a labyrinth, a web) that we cannot free ourselves. One of the ways in which Luther talks about this, is to say that sin is being retired into oneself. It is precisely from this confinement that we need to be *set free*. And that is precisely the point! The Lord did not justify those of us who *were* sinners, but those of us *who are sinners still*. It is exactly the sinners, those of us who are encapsulated, entangled, retired into ourselves, that the Lord has set free, declared righteous.

But then, we are not only sinners who are righteous now! For Luther, we are in fact the righteous ones who are sinners! For him we are righteous, *yet sinful*. Today, especially, this insight is of great value, as it warns that humanity – we – are capable of nothing. Nothing! We are not good enough! It is only through the grace of Jesus Christ that we become good enough!

That is why Luther said, “the more holy, the more *sinful*”. It is so different to what we would think: “the more holy, the less sinful”, or perhaps “the less holy, the more sinful”. But Luther indeed said the holier we are, the more sinful we are, the closer we are to the Lord, the closer we move to his light, the better we see our own brokenness, our dependence, our fragility.

4. The cross alone is our theology

In his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Luther says that we should rather be “theologians of the cross” than “theologians of glory”. For him all Christians – those who think and talk about God – are in fact theologians. But, he said, we should not be theologians of glory. That is a theologian for whom the bad is good and the good bad, for whom the law is good and the suffering and the cross bad. These are the optimistic theologians of our time, those who think that they – through their works of law, that which they succeed in – can be justified! These theologians are optimistic about themselves, about that which they are capable of. They look past the cross, as if the cross were just a step on the way to that which they think they could at any rate have done on their own. In short, theologians who think they are good enough!

For Luther, there is only one way to do away with this pursuit of glory: “The thirst for glory is not ended by satisfying it but rather by extinguishing it”. That is why we need to be theologians of the cross. *Crux sola est nostra theologia*, the cross alone is our theology. Theologians of the cross see

all things through the suffering and cross of Jesus Christ. They see themselves in the suffering and cross of Jesus Christ! The identity of the crucified Jesus Christ also *becomes their identity!* These theologians question that which is often seen as the best in religion! “It constantly seeks to uncover and expose the ways in which sinners hide their perfidy behind pious facades” (Gerhard Forde). These theologians see themselves as they really are, for who they really are. They know that – on their own – they are not good enough!

5. Grace – is enough for you!

This reminds of the words: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect *in weakness*. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For *when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (2 Cor. 12).

And that is Luther’s point – perhaps also for today: That we are not good enough, that we – only by the grace of God – are *made* good enough. That is why we are good enough!

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Set free ... that is why we care

Love, care, showing compassion, taking care of, and providing shelter are inextricably part of being a Christian. In our 2017 celebration of Reformation, we are once again reminded in which theological beliefs these life virtues are embedded and from which place we live being of service for God and our neighbour – the place of freedom.

The Good News

The Reformation was not a time in history during which believers invented something new. It was a time when, in a specific context, people listened anew to the Good News of the Gospel. One of the essential truths that the Reformers once again discovered in the Scripture is that we are free in Christ. Our freedom is then the place from which we serve God and our neighbour.

Why do I take care of others?

In the time of Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic Church and other Reformers put themselves through a lot of trouble for the poor. The giving of alms was deeply imbedded in the ecclesiastical institute and society. We must remember that the feudal type of society (rich landowners and poor subfarmers) of the sixteenth-century Europe, as well as incidents like natural disasters, plagues and wars, placed the great majority on the periphery of society. They were dependent on these alms. But, behind these alms, was a certain motive that had become part of the religious atmosphere of the day. The giving of alms was woven into a theological frame that declared that it contributed towards salvation. You would be rewarded. It was, as it were, an investment in the hereafter. Beggars were helped because, inside the bigger religious scheme of things, this help helped the giver to earn more points for salvation.

It is precisely in the sphere of motives that the Reformers found a different perspective in Scripture: I do not help to be rewarded. I give because I am free to serve and because I can see the image of God in others. This became the actual motivation.

Is it not true that, when we are concerned with ourselves, we overlook those around us? We can be focused on ourselves in different ways: Disgruntled with circumstances, comparing ourselves to others or thinking in our secret heart that we are not good enough. We can think that we will be found lacking by God or by our neighbour. Actually, we can only care if we look away from ourselves and focus on God and others. Calvin wrote: "This freedom means that we can be assured that our attempts will be 'approved by our most merciful Father, however small, rude, and imperfect these may be.'" (Institute 3.19.5)

To care then becomes one of the faces of this holy freedom. There are many words that can be replaced by "care". We love, have compassion, we are merciful, we console, we serve, we help. However, it also involves firm action and compiling means and arrangements to ensure the service.

A community chest

Luther, for example, established a *Beutelordnung* in 1521. This was an order for a common purse – a community chest – wherein the church, guilds and other fraternities put money, which was then used to help those in need. Begging was, for example, not just accepted as a given. People were encouraged to work, and only those who could not look after themselves, were helped. Interest-free loans were given to people of poor descent who wanted to carry on a trade, and they went through trouble to send poor children to school. Luther's theological motivation was that all good things flow from Christ so that it could again flow from us to those who need it.

The beauty of God's image in my neighbour

John Calvin had a heart for refugees. Sometimes we forget that he was a French refugee and served a community of refugees in Genève – people who, on account of their Protestant beliefs, could not return to their country of birth. In his writings, Calvin also proved to have a good insight into human nature. He knew that we become weary of doing good and that doing good cost effort. Yet, he reminds his audience that we do good because we recognise Christ's image in the other: "The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it. But Scripture subjoins a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love. But in those who are of the household of faith, the same rule is to be more carefully observed, inasmuch as that image is renewed and restored in them by the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, whoever be the man that is presented to you as needing your assistance, you have no ground for declining to give it to him. [Institutes 3.7.6] He puts a lot of effort to portray the stranger as someone who might annoy you. However, when we see the image of God in him or her "the image, by its beauty and worthiness, attracts us to love and embrace them."

Concrete service

The Reformation helps us to make the grace-message of freedom and salvation the place from where we serve. The goodness of God flows through us to the other; the other's beauty in Christ is recognised. Caring is not an obligation or something to be rewarded. It is exactly in our brokenness that we find freedom in Christ. That is why the Protestant tradition has always taken education and the founding of social organisations seriously. We set up programs, people and buildings to relieve distress. This concrete service is born of a composure and freedom that is rooted in the certainty of God's goodness and Christ's forgiveness.

Thoughts for reflection

1. Read Ephesians 2:1-10. See how Paul reminds his audience that their status was that of dead people, that God, by his mercy, saved them. That is why we can do the good works that God created us to do (verse 10) as free people. Think about caring as part of your congregation's "intention".
2. What is the concrete social distress in your neighbourhood? How does the lens of freedom and service help you to think anew about, and to react to this?
3. Why do we struggle to see God's image in people?

4. What is the place from which you serve? A place of freedom, or of guilt and obligation?
5. Pray for concrete ideas to set up programs to relieve distress.