

Andrew Cook:

In our series marking 500 years since the Reformation began, we've heard about some of the early reformers like John Wycliffe, an Englishman from the fourteenth century. He was best known for translating the Bible into the common language of the people. Wycliffe is often called 'The Morning Star' of the Reformation because he prepared the way for this huge change in the history of the church.

Then in the last few programmes, here on *Serving Today*, we concentrated on John Huss, the preacher of Prague. He was burned at the stake because his views were in direct conflict with the traditions of the church.

Huss is also seen as the link between Wycliffe and today's subject, the man who in human terms was at the very centre of the Reformation. This is of course Martin Luther. He was instrumental in bringing the church to rediscover the Bible and its basic truths.

To tell us about Luther, we welcome back Trevor Low.

Trevor Low:

Martin Luther was born in Saxony in Germany in the year 1483; he was the eldest of a family of seven children. His family was a very ordinary working class family, his father worked in the copper mines. Early in life Martin showed signs of being a brilliant scholar and a gifted musician and indeed it was expected of him that he would become a lawyer.

When he was 21 he gained his Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Erfurt and one year later he gained his Master of Arts, so at that time it was thought certainly by his father that he would become a lawyer.

Andrew:

But what kind of personality did the young Martin Luther have?

Trevor:

A very serious minded young man, a very conscientious young man, and a young man who was very aware of God and had a deep consciousness that so much of his life was not in keeping with God's requirements. So he was very much aware of his own weaknesses.

Shortly after he graduated from university a close friend of his was killed in a fight and this caused Martin to ask of himself, 'What if that had been me? What if I had been killed?' And just after that, one day he was out and he was caught in a fierce thunderstorm and he interpreted that as the judgement of God, so at that point he said 'I will become a monk' and he did. The very next day he applied to the Augustinian monastery to become a monk, which he did much to his father's disapproval and a couple of years later then, he became a priest.

Andrew:

Trevor mentioned that the young Martin Luther was a very sincere and conscientious young man. This continued even after he had become a priest.

Trevor:

And yet he had no peace of mind. I think God was teaching him gradually that we cannot earn God's favour. We can't merit God's forgiveness. And Martin, he would try fasting and he would try hours of prayer and so on and yet he still had no peace in his mind.

Andrew:

So when did and how did Martin Luther's conversion actually take place? Trevor continues the story for us.

Trevor:

In 1508, then, he became professor of moral philosophy at the Wittenberg University and then a couple of years later he became professor of the Bible at that university. And this was really a crucial time in his life because in order to teach the Bible, he himself had to read it! And he began to teach such books as Genesis and the book of Psalms and Paul's letter to the Romans. And it was while he was teaching Paul's letter to the Romans that he came across the verse, '*The righteous shall live by faith.*'

And that suddenly became like a blinding light to him, that he saw that he, himself up to this point in time had been trying to earn God's forgiveness, but that the righteous shall live by faith. And he actually wrote

following that, he said, *'I felt reborn; all scripture took on a new meaning.'* So I think we can really trace Martin Luther's conversion to about the year 1513.

Andrew:

Martin Luther's discovery of what scripture actually taught about how we can be right with God led to certain difficulties with the church authorities and eventually to a significant event on the 31st October 1517. Trevor explains how Luther arrived at this point.

Trevor:

As a professor he also was invited to preach in church pulpits and of course, now that he had found faith for himself, the sermons that he preached would include this message: that the righteous shall live by faith. But that brought him into conflict with the church over the subject of what was known as indulgences.

Indulgences were where the church said that if you confessed your sin, you could make up for your sins by paying money and you would be forgiven, which of course was not found in scripture at all.

So this brought Martin into conflict with the church. [...] On the 31st October 1517 Martin Luther nailed 95 discussion points, 95 propositions for debate, on to the door of the church at Wittenberg and really that was when the Reformation began. That was Martin Luther declaring, something has to be done to change the wrong teaching of the church and help us to get back to what the Bible says.

Andrew:

We've been hearing that as he read and studied the scriptures, Martin Luther grew increasingly unhappy with the church's teaching, especially with regard to the practise of selling indulgences. When on that 31st October 1517 he put up a notice on the church door where he was minister, Luther was setting out the issues which, in the light of scripture, he thought needed to be changed.

Within a month Luther's views had been circulated all over Europe and the church authorities eventually decided to take action against him, as Trevor Low explains. In 1521 he was summoned to a church court.

Trevor:

He was asked, 'Do you repudiate the books that you have written?' And Martin Luther made what has become a very famous reply. It was something to this effect: he said, 'I am subject to scripture. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.' That was Luther really declaring 'I cannot move my position. This is what the Bible teaches and that's what I am basing my life on and that's what I'm basing my writings on and I can't move.'

Well that of course brought him into conflict. There were some people who sought his life but other friends hid him in a castle for some months and eventually the fuss died down. Martin spent the remaining twenty five years of his life translating the Bible into the German language and also writing books and commentaries.

By 1522 the New Testament was translated into German. By 1534 the Old Testament was translated as well and Martin's writings on the Bible and on biblical subjects actually stretched to fifty five volumes in all, so he wrote a great deal.

Andrew:

Martin Luther did a lot to bring church teaching back in line with scripture. As well as being a very special man indeed, he was also a devoted husband and loving father, a keen gardener, a gifted musician who wrote some well-known hymns and tunes.

But what lasting influence did he have on others in the Christian church? Back to Trevor.

Trevor:

When you read for example the life of John Bunyan who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, you realise that Bunyan was greatly influenced by Luther.

When you read of the two very well-known brothers, John Wesley and Charles Wesley, they were greatly influenced by the writings of Luther. Indeed it was while the preface to Luther's book on Paul's letter to the Galatians was being read in Alder's Gate Street in London that John Wesley was converted, when he made the famous statement that, as he heard Luther's writings being read, he felt his heart strangely warmed and he knew then that he had become a child of God.

So Luther himself, he was a great man of faith. He was a great man of prayer but the wonderful thing is not just that he started off the Reformation. I really don't think that Luther ever intended to start off a great movement, but it was simply that as the truth of scripture became known to others, it grew momentum and it became much bigger, I think, than Martin Luther had ever thought of it as being.

Andrew:

Martin Luther died in 1546 at the age of 62 in the small German town where he was born. His importance in the history of the church cannot be overstated. This is how one writer describes his significance.

Trevor:

'It is impossible to sum up Luther and his work; he was not just one of the greatest of God's servants, just one of many. In God's purposes he was responsible for changing the whole situation of the church of Christ and ushering in the greatest work since the days of the apostles.'

Andrew:

And Trevor concludes this brief survey of Martin Luther's life appropriately in a place where Luther's whole life was centred, grounded, changed and reformed. This is of course Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verses 16 and 17.

Trevor:

Paul writing about himself says, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."'* To me that sums up the life of Martin Luther.

Andrew:

About the expression, the 'righteousness of God', Luther wrote this a year before his death:

'This sentence, "the righteousness of God is revealed" refers to a passive righteousness by which the merciful God, justifies us by faith as it is written, "the just lives by faith".'

This straightway made me feel as though I had been reborn and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment I saw the whole face of scripture in a new light and now where I had once hated the phrase, "the righteousness of God", I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me.'