

**Reformation service Northrand Congregation
Central Circuit, 29 October 2017**

(This service was attended by the congregations of the central circuit, and included a baptism and communion - the baptism was already the introduction to the message)

Baptism of Annamarie Faith Müller:

“Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46,10

Introduction

Dear sisters and brothers,

As the planning for the Reformation service progressed, the question arose whether it would be advisable to have baptism and communion at a circuit service. Would that not be an overload? Especially since this is not just another circuit service, but a once-off, unique commemoration of 500 years Reformation. Should one not then focus on the essentials?

That was then also the deciding factor for me to say: It makes total sense to include baptism and communion - since they focus in a most tangible form on the essence of Reformation: We are saved by Jesus Christ through grace in faith! We see it, feel it, taste it, even if we don't understand it!

It is wonderful that the little child has as second name: Faith. How appropriate! (The fact that it is my grand daughter is a personal bonus!)

I do, however, have to keep my inputs short in view of the total service, which is good. So I really have to focus on what matters, rather than giving a long sermon, as fascinating as it might have been!

First part

Baptism is a moment where the attention of the creator of the universe is focussed on one person. Wonderful! But this is not the first time. Jeremiah marvels that God had known him (us!) even before we were conceived. (Jer 1,5) None of us a just a number, you were born because God made it possible, because the creator wanted YOU!

Now, at today's baptism, the saving attention of God is focussed on Annie by name. We do not have a sprinkler system where water is sprayed on a crowd with the words: You all are baptised. Whether baby or adult, baptism is always individual, by name: I baptize you, Annamarie Faith, in the name of the Father, of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, and the Holy Spirit!

When Christ died on the cross, he died for the salvation of the world.

At baptism this salvation is proclaimed to you: I am your Saviour!

This is the heart of the gospel, the heart of God: Christ came for you, is with you! You are his!

The baptism verse from Psalm 46 (It is taken from the Psalm on which Martin Luther based: Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott /A mighty fortress is our God - but I am sure you as parents did not realise this, when you chose the verse!) It invites all of us today to be still, to become quiet and know: He is God, he is our saviour, he is my saviour!

Later in the service, at communion, we again experience: I am seen by Christ! Take, eat and drink, my body given for you, my blood shed for you. You are mine! Taste and see that the Lord is good! Although at a service such as today you might feel as if you are just a number, at communion YOU receive, YOU taste and see that Christ is YOUR Saviour!

When we baptise a baby today it reminds many of us of the promise made to ourselves at our baptism: Jesus Christ is my Lord, my Saviour! I belong to Him! This is the core message, not only of the Reformation, but of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Sermon

Matthew 10 26b-33

So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. 27What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. 28Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. 30And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

32“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. 33But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Dear sisters and brothers,

I believe that Martin Luther would be quite unhappy about many aspects of the Reformation jubilee, and certainly most unhappy about the fact that his face appears on so many posters. Time and again he said: it is not about me! It is

about Christ!

But there is another reason why he would be very uncomfortable to be chosen as the face of the reformation. Let me explain.

When, after the publishing of the 95 Theses, Luther became known beyond the walls of Wittenberg, he was quickly associated with Johann Hus, John Wyclif and Peter Valdes. He vehemently denied any connections. As theologian he had been taught about these despised heretics. To be associated with them was an insult, since many ecumenical councils had agreed that these were heretics, deserving eternal damnation. "I am not a Hussite, not a Waldensian" Luther emphasised.

But only a few months later he stated: "I am a Waldensian, a Hussite, my message is the same as that of Wyclif!"

What had changed? Not his teachings. Rather he had realised that what he taught and believed was in many ways identical with the teachings of these so called heretics. How can people call themselves Lutherans, when many before him already taught as he did? Why should he be the face of the reformation, and not any of those before him? I can respond: It has to do with the date 31 October 1517, when Luther published the 95 theses.

But even this would not convince Martin Luther.

Already a hundred years before him another professor, Hieronymus of Prague, had travelled to Constance. There the church's ecumenical council was gathering and deliberating and judging Hus. Hieronymus posted theses on all major church doors in that city, challenging and criticising the church. He was captured and eventually burnt on the stake a few months after John Hus.

31 October 1517 was not the beginning of the Reformation, nor the first time that theses were posted on church doors. It was an important event, yes. But the Reformation had been rumbling underground for more than three hundred years before that.

Should we thus rather have Hus, Wyclif, or Valdes as symbolic figure of the reformation? No, they too were not the most important role players of the reformation - like Luther they were just the ones that stood out. Rather, the real power of the reformation, the most important role players, were the hundreds, thousands of ordinary Christians who not only followed the teachings of Hus, Wyclif, Luther etc, but in that followed Christ, to whom all of them pointed.

After Johan Hus was burnt on the stake the ecumenical council received countless protest letters from Bohemia (in the current eastern Europe) and

subsequently decided to excommunicate the whole country. These notices of excommunication had to be posted on Church doors for every body affected to see. They were posted, but nowhere near Bohemia. The closest that the Church dared to post them was more than 500 km away - because hundreds of thousands of Christians in that region did not depend on John Hus for their faith. They would not accept these postings. They had become confessing Christians, well taught, and committed to follow Christ, no matter what. They had become living examples of the passage of Matthew 10: The teachings that they had received by night, whispered into their ears by priests, teachers, parents they now openly proclaimed.

They were not afraid of those who could kill the body. They decided to follow the one who was stronger than death- Jesus Christ.

By the time that Luther posted his 95 Theses countless people had already lost their lives all over Europe for believing similar teachings: that the church did not control salvation, but that it was given by Christ; that forgiveness was not a commodity, possessed by the church, but a gift from Christ that wanted to transform people and communities.

Dear sisters and brothers, when we celebrate this service, let us not make the mistake to celebrate Luther and an event 500 years ago. Let us do what he and many others before and after him did: re-focus on Christ as Lord, and commit to follow Him - no matter what!

Do not be afraid to live out your faith! Do not be afraid to speak out against wrongs. Do not be afraid to stand up for what you believe!

Just now we will celebrate communion. You are invited to come, not only to receive His promise of forgiveness for YOU, but also to recommit yourself to Him!

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

This promise kept Christians going through the darkest centuries of the church. This promise holds true for us, in our time, in our country.

May the Reformation continue through us! May we proclaim with word and deed: Christ is Lord and Saviour! Amen!

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