

## Homily 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022

In the 16th Century, The Reformation in Europe, headed by an Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther, denounced some pretty dodgy practices within The Catholic Church such as payment for indulgences which would enhance the donor's chances of heaven. Lutheran theology also taught, based on St Paul's Letters (Rom 5,7 etc.) that believers were justified (saved) by faith alone and therefore belief in Jesus Christ, his salvific actions and Christian Baptism were sufficient for salvation. It is my belief that what Luther was really saying was, in the context of a historically corrupt De Medici Church, that you cannot pay your way into heaven by 'good works' of charity directed to The Church. Thus arguments that Luther taught that doing good is not an essential part of Christian life is, in my opinion, a distortion of his position.

Today's Second Reading to The Hebrews (11:1-2, 8-19) could be used to support this inaccurate interpretation of 'justification by faith alone' when he states that Abraham, 'by faith obeyed God's call.... It was equally by faith that Sarah was made able to conceive..' and 'It was by faith that Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac.' If we do misinterpret such passages and take an extreme, and arguably mistaken, view on Luther's 'justification by faith alone' (which was certainly the case in my Catholic seminary education in the early 70s) we are adopting a theological position which makes humans passive onlookers who can in no way participate in God's salvific plan, our salvation is done to us and not in relationship with us.

Piet Fransen SJ, my old theology professor, in his classic book on 'New Life of Grace.'(1971) explains how to square the circle in this debate. Fransen uses the analogy of the prostitute who is loved unconditionally by a determined young admirer (didn't The Old Testament Prophet Hosea use the same imagery and indeed live out the same reality?) The harlot declines all his advances, at times abusing him and in spite of her rebuffs when he continues to love her, she rejects his forgiveness and compassion. She continues in her sin but he continues to offer her his unconditional love, at times suffering ridicule and humiliation which caused him much pain. Eventually, the young man's unwavering love begins to weaken the woman's defences and resolve and she eventually falls in love with him. She furthermore repents of her sins and turns away from her previous profession. She then begins to act lovingly towards her suitor but certainly can claim no credit for her loving actions as they are simply a response to the love, he first lavished on her.

It is thus in our relationship with God. In Fransen's allegory Jesus is the young man. We, in our sin, are the prostitute. Despite our continuous sinning Christ in his Passion and Death shows us only love and compassion. In response to such persistent love, we cannot help but love in return and express this in love of God and love of our neighbour. In so doing, whilst God allows us to actively participate in the relationship of salvation, we can claim no merit of our own for our actions, surely a bridge in positions held by both Catholics and Luther.

In today's Gospel of St Luke Jesus urges us to 'be vigilant and stand ready for we know not the hour nor the minute of the Master's return.' Our readiness for the Master is expressed in responding to God's infinite love by entering into a loving relationship with Him and with our neighbour. As St James said 'Faith without good works is dead. (James 2:15-18).

I do believe more importantly that Luther's voice, on the past ills of Catholicism, has lots to contribute to much needed open and honest discussion on some of The Institutional Church's practices today.