

“Pondering the Solas, Part III, Solus Christus”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 22nd 2017 (20th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Psalm 8

There is a certain irony—a delicious irony—in the fact that we arrive at the third of the solas—*solus Christus*, by **Christ** alone—that we arrive at the third of the *solas* on a Sunday that we, here at Trinity, have designated as what might best be described as a “stewardship awareness” Sunday. Why ironic? Because of an essential aspect of the path that led Martin Luther to his break with the Roman Catholic Church. While it may be true that Luther’s personal faith-struggles were a key component of the theological and spiritual unease Luther had no choice but to work through, I don’t believe those struggles—in and of themselves—would have led to the creation of a separate Church, had it not been for a further factor. Minus that further factor, Luther would—I believe—still be remembered as a brilliant theologian and a passionate spiritual teacher. Because of that further factor, however, Luther found himself on a collision course with the Roman Catholic Church’s establishment, a collision course that sparked the Reformation. As you may well by now be asking: what further factor do I have in mind?

Indulgences! Indulgences. A practice of the Roman Catholic Church in which the power is granted to the Church, in particular the Bishop of Rome (i.e. the Pope)...the power is granted the Pope and those who serve under the authority of the Pope...to lighten the burden of punishment (we’re talking purgatory here)...the burden of punishment for those—or for the loved ones of those—who have been forgiven those sins, but who seek to lighten the consequences of that sin through some special further prayer or action. The practice of granting indulgences had a long history prior to the sixteenth century, but it was the commercialization of the practice that raised profound concerns, and not only for Martin Luther: critiques of the practice of granting indulgences—and especially the commercialization of that practice—had been offered by many others. In 1517, however, when Pope Leo X offered indulgences for anyone who donated to the rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, Luther took notice; he was especially alarmed by the aggressive marketing practises of Dominican Friar and Preacher Johann Tetzel to whom was attributed the claim “as soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs”! Martin Luther was not amused, and he was prompted to create his Ninety-Five Theses condemning the practice of indulgences, subsequently sending those theses to the Archbishop of Mainz on October 31st 1517, 500 years ago. Although he did not know it at the time, with the publishing of those 95 theses—and his subsequent refusal to back down—Luther ignited the Reformation.

And yes: given the extent to which the practices to which Luther was objecting were undeniably linked to what might rightly be described as the medieval Church’s money-culture, it’s hard for me to stand up here this morning and pretend that there is nothing in that painful episode from which we, here at Trinity, might learn as we ponder our own money culture. At a bare minimum, it ought to serve as a sobering reminder of

the grotesque irresponsibility on display anytime a Christian religious organization or a Christian religious leader, leaves the impression that salvation hinges upon gifts of cash, no matter how worthy the cause for which that cash is being sought. When stewardship turns into that sort of theological and spiritual manipulation, something is taking place utterly unworthy of the Gospel. And it seems to me...it seems to me that we can best start to recognize the deeper problem with that sort of manipulation, when we consider...when we consider at least a few of the nuances housed within the third of our solas. *Solus Christus*. By Christ alone. **By Christ! Alone!**

* * * * *

When I ponder that third *sola*—especially in light of the conflict over the Church’s practice of indulgences—it seems to me that a helpful word is the word “distraction”: distraction. Placing to one side, for the moment, the additional questions raised when an indulgence is granted on no firmer basis than that of a financial gift, the deeper spiritual problem Luther came to identify was the way in which not only indulgences—but many other practices we now think of as characteristically Catholic—appear to distract from the main event, namely Jesus Christ, which is to say “what God has done, is doing, has promised still to do” in and through this Jesus.

Given the extent to which we human beings like to boil just about any dispute, no matter how complex, down to a few bite-sized talking points, the tension I’m describing can readily be thought of as the tension between those for whom salvation is of Christ—and those for whom salvation is of Christ **mediated** by the Church. As is so often the case with that sort of bite-sized talking point, it represents a terrible over-simplification. Catholics, at their best, are far more grounded in Jesus than we Protestants are sometimes prepared to acknowledge; we Protestants, at our best, are far more able to recognize the inescapable importance of the Church. In other words: as Catholics they know there can be no Church without Christ; as Protestants we know there can be no Christ without a people—a gathered Christian people, in other words a Church!—to represent Christ in the world. And so those distinctions are potentially misleading. Nevertheless!

Nevertheless: those distinctions are not entirely imagined. Roman Catholics—of every stripe and description—take their Church, and their hierarchy, far more seriously than we Protestants tend to do. As Protestants we often look at the elaborate structure of the Roman Catholic Church and wonder how the faithful are able to recognize Christ amidst the ornate Church practices and traditions which—to our eyes—threaten to overwhelm him. As Catholics they often look at our far looser approach to corporate life, and shake their heads at the undeniably bewildering variety of theologies and spiritualities that have burst forth from the Reformation during the past 500 years.

That goes a long way, incidentally, to explaining why such practices as the adoration of the saints do not have the same currency in most Protestant circles that they have in Catholic circles. While it is true that high-Church Lutherans and Anglicans (the latter don’t even regard themselves as Protestants) still maintain a lively adoration

of the saints, the vast majority of Protestants have little use for such practices: that's why, here at Trinity, the statue of the Blessed Virgin is on wheels, so that she can make a discreet exit before we get underway on Sunday mornings! Again, the key word here is distraction. The Protestant critique wants to claim that Catholic spirituality places Jesus at such a remove from ordinary believers, that it is only through intermediaries (such as Mary) that we can reach out to him, thus distracting us from a firm connection to his unique role as our mediator and Savior, the one in whom we are called to place our trust. The Catholic critique, in return, tends to claim that we Protestants have emptied heaven of its occupants: in the process diminishing rather than enhancing our ability to fathom the full extent of Christ's saving love and saving power. That's a dispute I will not try to mediate this morning! Then again!

When I ponder—500 years down the road from Luther's launching of the Reformation...

...when I ponder from the perspective of 2017, the **contemporary** implications of *solus Christus*, by Christ alone, I sense that the tough corners we face with that teaching, are different from the tough corners Martin Luther needed to negotiate 500 years ago. The very fact that we can comfortably share this building with a Catholic congregation which—in addition to its Mary on wheels—can boast an unmistakably Catholic chapel, tells you a great deal about the sense in which most United Church folk have adopted a comfortably “live and let live” attitude where Roman Catholic spirituality is concerned. No. I suspect when many of us—perhaps most of us—hear the words “by Christ **alone**”, the red-flags thereby raised lie in another direction: namely in the direction of the non-Christian religions, and the not inconsiderable wealth of spiritual teachers and spiritual teachings of which **they** can rightly boast. What does it mean, some 500 years after the Reformation, to speak of “Christ **alone**” in a Nanaimo in which our neighbours are likelier to be practicing “atheists” or practicing “new agers” than they are to be practicing Christians? And what does it mean to adhere to a stance of “Christ alone” in a world in which we have ready access to the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita, a world in which a good English translation of the sacred texts of Taoism and Buddhism—as well as the sacred teachings of First Nations' peoples—are but a click of the mouse away? For that matter, what does it mean to be part of a denomination in which many congregations will hear a Sunday morning reading from Charles Dickens or Leo Tolstoy to accompany a reading from scripture...or in some instances **instead** of a reading from scripture?

* * * * *

Well! That's a pretty big can of fish I just opened! And it raises a series of questions I can only answer in the most deeply personal of ways. Suffice it to say that I am uncomfortable with both extremes of the conversation that tends to take place in Christian circles, when we ponder the meaning of our *solus Christus*—by Christ **alone**—in the context of a multi-faith world. On the one hand, I simply refuse to accept the notion that there is no wisdom to be found outside the bounds of the Christian Church. Indeed, I consider it sheer idiocy, when I hear Christians wanting to argue (as I have

heard some Christian pastors wanting to argue) that a teaching that comes from the lips of the Buddha—even when it is identical to a teaching that comes from the lips of Christ—ought to be considered a work of the devil, meant to sow confusion, rather than a truth worth the hearing. I don't know how one could even begin to live in such a world, in which the same teaching can be both true and false depending upon who has done the teaching! And yet—on the other hand—I believe that the Church is only the Church when it is the Church of Jesus Christ. Without needing to disparage the genuine insight and wisdom that can be found outside of these doors, I could only regard it to be a devastating failure, were we prepared to relinquish our foundational mandate, which is nothing more but nothing less than to permit our lives and our life-together to be shaped by the magnificent truth that has been entrusted to us in and through Christ. For what it's worth...

...for what it's worth, that explains my conviction that the very heart of what we are called to do and to be in this place, Sunday by Sunday, needs to be shaped by the Christ **story**: story of his birth at Bethlehem, his pilgrimage from Galilee to Jerusalem, his dying on the Cross, his rising from the grave, his sharing of the Holy Spirit. When the psalmist puts that most poignant of questions to God—

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is the human person, the human being, that you are mindful of them,
and the son of man that you care for him?*

...when that question is subsequently placed within the context of the New Testament, what that question receives is not so much an answer, rather a profound deepening: because it is in the pages of the New Testament that we learn that the maker of heaven and earth is committed not only to caring for humanity, but was prepared—in the fullness of time—to become one with us, in and through the **incarnation**, in and through Christ's birth...and all that subsequently transpired as a result of his birth, as the result of the "Word having been made flesh". To proclaim *solus Christus*—by **Christ** alone—500 years after the Reformation...

...whatever else that means...

...surely it means that we Christians are bold enough and foolish enough to cling in solemn stubbornness...to cling to the conviction that "God was in Christ making peace with the world"...and that the Church's gift for the world, for the whole world in its wisdom and in its folly...our unique gift-offering for the whole world, is this precious story, this precious Gospel of a Saviour whose coming proclaims the reality of the God who so loved the world, that He gave His only Son. Out of love for the world. Not the world as it ought to be. Not the world as it might have been. But this world. Bleeding...broken...mired in conflict and willful blindness: and yet precious in the eyes of its Creator. Precious in the eyes of its Saviour.

* * * * *

I suppose...I suppose that brings me pretty much back to where I came in: to this whole question of stewardship. This whole question of what it means for us to be good and faithful servants, for us to be good and faithful stewards. And I am reminded...

...reminded of one of the sayings Luther adopted in response to the whole indulgence controversy: a defining response, really, in which he came to insist that the Gospel—that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen—is the real treasure, the true treasure of the church. Amen to that! Because what was true 500 years ago is no less true today. The Church's treasure is its Gospel, and the fundamental stewardship challenge we face—generation by generation—is the stewardship of **that** treasure, the stewardship of the Gospel. And yet...and yet...

...from that foundation flows the many other stewardship challenges we face: especially in a culture that is not going to do our job for us. For us as Canadian disciples—some of us are in favour of this, others of us are appalled by this, either way the stark fact is—here in Canada, it is long past the time when we can pretend that the wider culture is going to carry the Gospel on our behalf. Our schools won't do it for us. Our other public institutions won't do it for us. The entertainment industry is unlikely to do it for us! No one else is going to do that for us. Which is why I hope and pray that I will always be able to offer something of my time, my talent and my treasure to the life of the gathered community of those who name the name of Jesus: playing my small part, in sustaining the ministry of the Church...

...the Church of *solus Christus*. The Church of Jesus Christ. The Church that loves to tell the story!

May **His** story and **His** name be glorified, on our lips and in our lives, now and forever more. Amen.