

Sermon for the 50th anniversary of the LCA

Reformation Sunday 2016

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What extraordinary things 1 Peter says about Christians! '*... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...*' Isn't that a little 'over the top'?

Before we get any fancy ideas, however, let's think about the audience. Peter the apostle wrote to small churches scattered around the western end of the Roman Empire around the time of the emperor Nero. These were marginalised groups in social and religious isolation. Peter calls them exiles. He wrote to tell them that no matter how isolated or alone they might feel, they still belonged to Christ, they were still part of the church, and they should be confident in living out their faith.

During those early days, it was important for Christians to stay together. Personal contact and continuity of teaching were critical. 1 Peter, then, emphasises unity in Christ and the gospel, and the shared life and discipline of the church. God chooses the church. As Christians, we can live the faith confidently, because we are God's own people.

Those were early days. The whole church was younger than the Lutheran Church of Australia is today. There was no New Testament. They were still sorting out how Jewish and Gentile Christians could co-exist despite centuries of division. There were no confessional writings to unpack the faith. They had the Hebrew Scriptures, the lived experience of the risen Jesus, letters like 1 Peter, and the gift of faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. The first generation, those who had met Jesus in the flesh, were dying – though rarely by natural means. Many, even most, died as martyrs for the faith.

And that's how it is. There have been many tough times. Yet Christians have endured. Faith and the church have always God's work, not ours, right from the beginning.

On the 50th anniversary of the Lutheran Church of Australia, this puts things into perspective. Like the early Christians, it's not our size, institutions, organisational prowess, wealth, or position in society that are most important. Christian unity and faithfulness in confession and life matter most. We depend 100% on the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is gift, received by faith, against the odds. It is never our work, our church. It's always God's work, his church. It all hinges on that.

When Lutheran Christians first came to Australia, they came for a number of reasons. In the 1830s, a major 'push' factor was a church union forced on them by the Prussian king. For a short period, the Lutheran faith was illegal, so they looked for somewhere else to live and worship. Those early settlers were united in their stance against the king's new law, but they were not so united on how to teach and practice the faith in their new land. Inevitably, then, there were divisions. Those

divisions afflicted the health of Australian Lutherans for the next 120 years, all through the next waves of migration and settlement.

Over the years, however, the people pleaded for unity. Occasionally, it would break out. They could agree, for instance, on sending missionaries to Central Australia. Local congregations cooperated. But the leaders argued. Divisions continued.

Eventually, the plea for unity overcame the scandal of division. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church declared altar and pulpit fellowship in 1965, it sealed the pathway to union. Symbolically, on Reformation Day 1966, the divided Synods ceased to be, and a united Lutheran Church was born.

The concept of one church spanning two countries, Australia and New Zealand, is rare in global Lutheranism. In North and South America, Africa, and much of Asia, there are multiple Lutheran bodies. A handful of our pastors and congregations did not join the new church, but the vast majority chose a common life as one body in Christ. We believe that what unites us – God's call to a shared faith and witness – is much greater than what could divide us. When we don't agree on something, we turn to the Word of God and our Confessions. We it out together, because we are committed to one another in Christ.

For 50 years, we have repeatedly shown our commitment to one another. Our theologians, pastors, and Synods have carefully worked through issues, sometimes more than once. As they do it, we choose to stay together and pray together. We give each other time, space, and grace. We treat each other with compassion.

For decades now, as we well know, one of the issues we have confronted is the ordination of women. It is still a sensitive matter. It is testing us as a united synod. Another test for us is Renewal. How does the Holy Spirit work among God's people? What does that look like? How do we understand baptism, faith, and spiritual gifts? As we explore these important questions, we will do what we have always done. We will go back to Scripture, re-read the Confessions, pray, talk and worship together, and sort things out. That's just what we do. It's who we are.

Unity of faith and witness is not just important for us, but for the world. In the present age, materialism and apathy are widespread. People are also hostile to faith. The church is not trusted as it once was, sometimes for very good reason. Christians must work together to address these realities. We a message of hope for society in a time when many people, despite their affluence, live in despair and meaninglessness.

Whatever difficulties we confront today, St Peter brings us back to basics. Let's remind ourselves of what those basics are:

- Belonging to the family of faith does not depend on where you live, what you have, or who you are. God elects you. God says 'yes' to you because of Jesus. God makes you holy. He sets you apart as his people. God says 'yes' to you. (1 Peter 2:9a)

- We can tell the world about the great things God has done for us. That God's plan. The world needs Jesus, and he asks us to introduce him to others. We are to tell the world how we have been called out of darkness and into his marvellous light. God's 'yes' to us means we can say 'yes' to others. (1 Peter 2:9b)

These are Peter's basics. Once we were nobodies, but now we are God's people. Once we were under the law, but now we are under the gospel. God really has had mercy on us. (1 Peter 2:10)

The Bible is quite clear that the work of salvation, of becoming and remaining God's people, is God's work. The Lutheran Confessions back that up. Justification and faith are pure grace. That's why the Lutherans were so radical during the Reformation 500 years ago. Many people in the church had forgotten this basic truth. It's still easy to forget it today. That's why we are a confessional church. That's why we hold to God's Word – so that we will not forget. Every day we learn to live in the free grace, love, and mercy of God. Every day the grace of baptism turns us away from sin, and God teaches us once more to trust him.

We are here today because millennia of Christians have passed this on to us. Through good times and bad, times of ease and times of hardship, times of growth and times of persecution, times of wealth and times of poverty, times of certainty and times of doubt, and even times of genocide or apostasy, Christians have endured. Against all the odds, the faith continues. The church of Jesus Christ endures, and we are parts of it. Our witness includes all who have gone before us, and all who will follow us.

And like them, we have the immense privilege and task of telling the world about the mighty acts of our God. At 50 years old, the LCA is in its early days. We so much growing, so much living, and so much witnessing, still to do. We have barely begun. Jesus is alive. We are resurrected in him. We have the Holy Spirit. We are rich in everything we need. God has called us, set us apart, and made us his people. We are free to live in the promise of God, and to experience the new life of Christ.

So we are ready, ready for the work God has prepared for us to do. Let's go on confidently. Let's share in Christ's mission to the world. Let's tell everyone how he has brought us out of darkness, and into his marvellous light.

In the name of our Saviour Jesus.

Amen.