

## **St Edmundsbury Cathedral**

### ***Lutheran Vespers, Saturday 30 September 2017***

Sermon preached by **Dr Kathrin Oxen**, Director of Wittenberg's Zentrum für evangelische Predigtkultur (Centre for contextual preaching) and Lutheran pastor in Bützow, Germany.

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#### *The dearest word.*

I have already been given the most beautiful gift for the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation, last year on October 30th. On that day, at the Wartburg near Eisenach, the 2017 edition of Luther's translation of the bible was introduced to the public. And when I saw this beautiful book and opened it and smelled the irresistible smell of a newly printed book, I thought of the bibles of my life.

I thought of the children's bible with its pictures and stories that made me wish, lying in my bed in the evening, that one day God may speak directly to me as he did to all the people in the Bible. Calling me to leave everything to follow him.

I thought of the small red edition of the bible that finds its place in my rucksack and which I once could read without glasses, even in the evening at the camp fire.

I thought of the big fat Old Testament in Hebrew and the slim blue New Testament in Greek and of the two years I spent learning vocabularies to be able to read these in the language they were written in.

And I thought of my last bible which has fallen into pieces because I put it in my bag in a hurry or left it with it open face down on my writing desk so many times. I know that I should not do that, but I do it very often, because the bible is like a tool for me which I use so often that I will not stow it away every time like a good craftsmen would do.

This new bible reminds me of the bibles of my life. And of the time, Martin Luther spent at the Wartburg in autumn 1521, like a prisoner, with the crows as his only companions. Where he decided to spend his time translating the New Testament so that all people could read it in their mother tongue. It took him only a few months until in September 1521 the first edition could be published.

I take this bible and open it, reading Paul's letter to the Romans, Martin Luther's favorite letter "which cannot be read too much or too often" and therefore it is good that we do so this afternoon. And I am polite and open the bible at his favorite passage and read it out loud to him. Perhaps he will hear it, even though he is dead. His favorite passage. His dearest word.

*Friends in Christ, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*

And here I stand, with all my bibles, thankful for his life. And it is like I hear him saying:

"Day and night I thought incessantly about it, until God had mercy upon me. There I began to understand the righteousness of God as a righteousness through that the righteous lives out of God's gift, out of faith.

There I felt like I was newborn and entered paradise through open gates. And with the same intensity of that I hated the word "righteousness of God" before, I began to love it as my dearest word. So this passage of Paul's letter became a gate to paradise for me."

This letter and also other books of the bible he has read before as thoughtful as possible, explaining it to his students in Wittenberg. He opened the bible every day, turned its pages. But this was the first time the book opened itself up to him.

It was like he could see God who no human can see. Like a shadow you can see behind a wall made of paper, thin paper, like the pages of a bible. Seeing God, hidden even there.

But close to him, with the silent sounds of his presence, like a breath close to him.

And he opened the book again and turned the page around and read: *For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.* And the book opened up and behind this words he found God, not to behold closely but near to him. And he understood: This is the door. This is the gate that brings us back to the beginning, to the paradise where we lived next door to God.

And he noticed that it was different from what he thought for years. God is different. His righteousness is different. God loves us. And I have to do nothing for that. The fear in his neck vanished. The fear that he could not have done enough for God and will not be loved by God.

Some people say that this happened a long time ago and has nothing to do with us today. I do not believe that. Because I know the fear not to be good enough as I am. Also the many ways I try to do something to be loved and respected. And I think that I am not alone with that. There is this fear not to be loved and respected. There must be someone who loves and respects me without demanding something. For most people, this is a silent fear, like a little grey corner in their hearts. And they may have someone or something that helps them to get over it.

But sometimes, when this fear becomes too big, it is cried out on the streets. In Germany, in front of refugee homes or in the last weeks of the electioneering, all over our country. The big fear not to be loved, to be missed out. It makes them crying against others, the politicians who allegedly do nothing and do not look after anyone. Against the refugees who allegedly get everything for free and take away everything from everyone else. This big fear is a deep faith and it is not accessible to arguments. It is about the feeling deep in the heart not to be respected and loved. A sad, grey faith that many people believe in. Like a shadow it hangs over our country.

But real faith is something different. I know that from Martin Luther. He discovered that faith took away his fear and made him free. He said:

“Faith is a lively and keen trust in God’s mercy, so true that it could die for it a thousand times. And such trust and insight in God’s mercy makes one cheerful, defiant and passionate for God and every creature. Therefore, one becomes willing and passionate to do good to everyone, suffer everything, for the love of God and to praise him who showed such mercy for us.”

Here I stand with all my bibles. I brought them with me because I need them as Martin Luther did. I could always see God behind the thin paper of their pages, contured, but close. In the children’s bible, the red one, the big Hebrew and the slim Greek edition, in the one which has already fallen into pieces and the one that smells still new.

God was near: To the child that wished to find a place in the world and a purpose for its life. The teenager looking for community and orientation. The student looking for insight and the pastor who uses the bible every day like a tool but at the same time as the source and the core of all her work. It is my dearest book. My dearest word.

And if I am thankful for the life of Martin Luther, I am thankful for his love to this book and his trust in the power of words, just words written on thin paper. I am thankful for all the work he did and the effort he made with this book, at the castle with the crows and later on in Wittenberg looking for the right words for his translation.

And I wish that he would never have stopped reading this book as carefully as he did in the beginning. Then he would have read that the meek shall inherit the earth. He would not have favoured the war and the violence. And he would not say these terrible words against the Jews, against those from whom we got the law and the prophets, and from Paul, the Jew, who gave him the letter with his dearest word in it.

Here I stand, with my bibles and I have already been given the most beautiful gift for the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. But I still have wishes. That we may get rid of this sad, grey faith in my country and also in your country, the fear to be missed out. And my wish is that we understand: We are needed as Christians. We have a purpose for our life. We have community. And we know what is good and what is evil. Our faith shall be cheerful and defiant and full of keen trust in God. So we become passionate for doing good to everyone. It is easy to love others. Because God loves us.  
Amen.

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