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The Gospel is the power of God

Rom 1:16-17

Introduction

What does it mean to commemorate the 500 anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation for us Hong Kong people? I have seen so many activities that were held in the name of the 500 years anniversary of Reformation. But whether it was relevant, it is hard to say! Frankly speaking, I am not a German, only through my grandma and my parents, who received the faith and joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong that I became a Lutheran and later on a Lutheran pastor. If the missionary work ever happened, I have nothing to do with this commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Yes, I joined the Lutheran Church in my early years of childhood. But I did go to a Catholic secondary school. I loved to join the mass in our school, but I am afraid to take part in the Bible knowledge class. Maybe you wonder how an Old Testament professor afraid to go to Bible Knowledge class in the secondary school. It was only because we had a rigorous teacher, a Catholic priest, who was so serious to his students that he drilled his students every class session. In the seventy's, we used to have a class of 45 students and our Bible Knowledge class is doubled 90 students of two classes together. When the Catholic priest come to our two classes, he started with question of spelling. He just point to the noisy students in the back and said to a student, "How to spelling Synagogue?" One of the student answer with uncertain manner, "sin...", the Father just said, "next to the left." and the student on the left side of that standing student continue to spell, "si...", Father said, "next!" After a few minutes, almost half of the class of the students were standing up. They were punished to stand the whole session of 80 minutes. Frankly speaking I don't like that Catholic priest and I did think that they were harsh people. Until I studied in the seminary, I had a chance to visit the Holy Spirit Seminary of the Catholic Church, played with their students and faculties, spent days in Trappist Monastery to learn the monastic life and studied the Church history. My view to the Catholic Church changed. I would say it was from conflict to understanding.

When we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, we worship together, we reflect on the Reformation and its consequence, we have to think how Christianity should witness her faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Maybe there are still few Christians who have a mentality for celebration of the 500th anniversary and express the Protestants victory over the Roman Catholics. I would like to borrow the wording of Prof. Dr. Timothy Wengert who was the speaker of this year of the annual theological lecture in Lutheran Theological Seminary, he said, "If all the 500th anniversary becomes for Protestants is an opportunity to bit up on the Roman Catholics, then we celebrate the Reformation to our shame and, worst yet, to the benefit of no one." As this document "From Conflict to Communion" stated, "In 2017, when Lutheran Christians celebrate the anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, they are not thereby celebrating the division of the Western church. No one who is theologically responsible can celebrate the division of Christians from one another." (FCC 224) Then, how should we commemorate the anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation? I would like to use the words of St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 1 verses 16-17, "16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." I wish that we, who are now commemorating this anniversary, know also the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God in which God has reconciled the world that we could from conflict to communion.

1. The Gospel is the power of God

Whether we are Protestants or Catholic Christians, we do believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We witness to this Gospel. But what is Gospel? Through baptism we have experienced the power of this Gospel that our sins are forgiven, we are the children of God and we received the Holy Spirit and be renewed. We have such saving faith, we could confess as St. Paul did that "we are not ashamed of the gospel, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." In which way can we know the power of God? Somebody may know the power of God through the greatness of the created world, others would witness that they are cured by the power of God. But the Bible told us the message of the cross of Jesus Christ is the power of God. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8) We were enemies of God but through the cross we are the children of God. And this is the gospel. For we could not have peace of this world and eternal blessings. We were under the curse of sin. But God in Christ grant us this gospel. This is the power of God.

Maybe we have to ask why the cross? Why the death on the cross of Jesus Christ is the power of God? It is because, if the curse of sin leads to death, our human beings deserve only death! For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But our God is the God of love. He desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. But at the same time God is righteous. He does not leave the guilty unpunished. That means, God's love against God's righteousness. The gospel expresses God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

What does it mean for us today? If God reconciled the world with Him through the death and resurrection of His Son, so that we could be from conflict with God to communion with Him, this reconciliation should also be in us with our divided sisters and brothers of the Catholic Church. For the work of Martin Luther called us to go back to the gospel of Jesus Christ. As His Holiness Pope Francis stated on the Reformation day of 2016 in the Lutheran

Cathedral of Lund, “Here in Lund, at this prayer service, we wish to manifest our shared desire to remain one with Christ, so that we may have life.”

2. The Gospel call us to repent

If the message of the gospel is from conflict to communion, this communion should not only be to God and human beings, but also among human beings. Jesus called, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” The first theses of the so-called 95 theses of the Reformation stated, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” The gospel is the power of God, which calls us to repent and believe in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

There is no way we could find a culture of repentance or apology in today’s society like Hong Kong. On the contrary, through the social media and internet, we condemn other’s wrong in order to strengthen our ‘right position’. The society of Hong Kong as well as many societies of this world is ripped off. But I am lucky to witness a wonderful moment in 2010 when the leaders of the Lutheran communion apologized to the Mennonites for what had happened in Sixteenth century. During the time of Reformation and thereafter Lutheran had persecuted the Anabaptists under whom, Mennonites were also victims. During the full assembly of Lutheran World Federation in Stuttgart, the Lutherans officially apologized to the Mennonites and asked for forgiveness. They finally, washed each other’s feet and be reconciled. I was a little bit confused when they asked for forgiveness because it was happened almost 500 years ago and secondly, the persecution were not led by them. But as I thought of communion of saints meant also through time and space, what the Lutheran at that time had done, concerned also us.

I give thanks to God for Hong Kong that we have finally a bill on apology has passed. It really help to create a space for apology and repent without legal implication. When we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, we could also start a spiritual journey. We give thanks on one hand for our denominational achievements and on the other hand ask for forgiveness for sometimes overemphasizing our denomination at the expense of the other. The gospel of the power of God leads us into a spirit of repentance as the first theses of 95 theses had shown. We ask for forgiveness and we go to a spiritual journey from conflict to communion.

3. The Gospel call us to care for the world

When Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” The doctrine of Justification by grace through faith should not divide the Church. For Paul stated out clearly that it is for salvation to everyone who has faith. It is only how we can connect people to Christ saving love, so that the world share in its blessings (1 Cor 9:23).

I am amazed by His Holiness Pope Francis when he shared in TED talk a theme, “Why the only future worth building includes everyone.” He was talking about “the future ‘you’.” He said, “Life is not time merely passing by, life is about interactions, in search of a brighter future. Whenever I am with others, to a migrant who face terrible hardships or youngster who cannot find jobs, I often find myself wondering: “Why them and not me?” He continually said, “Power is like drinking gin on an empty stomach. You feel dizzy, you get drunk, you lose your balance, and you will end up hurting yourself and those around you, if

you don't connect your power with humility and tenderness. Through humility and concrete love, on the other hand, power the highest, the strongest one becomes a service, a force for good." Pope Francis has shown us the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which save everyone who has faith. This gospel is not only for Christians. It is for everyone. Christ's death and resurrection is for the whole world. We heard this gospel and have faith, but we are still in debt of this world. When we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of Reformation, let us not lead by fear or prejudice, or see our denomination is stronger than the other. Neither should we be the judge of history. We know what had happened and we could not change it. But the future is before us. The grace of our Lord is sufficient. Let us moved by the Holy Spirit that we engage in preserving the created world, in this wars and hatred terrified world and in this ripped off society with humility and tenderness.

Conclusion

The Reformation which happened 500 years ago, called us back to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. This gospel leads us from conflict to communion. And we could be communion with everyone. This gospel is also given to us. Let us share it with other with humility and tenderness. Amen!