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Sermon at the Evangelical Lutheran church of Budapest–Kelenföld

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He must become greater; I must become less. (John 3:30)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Jesus Christ – here in the Kelenföld church and all over the world. As on 31 October, the Lutheran World Federation will also broadcast our today's service, may I greet the Lutherans on six continents in English.

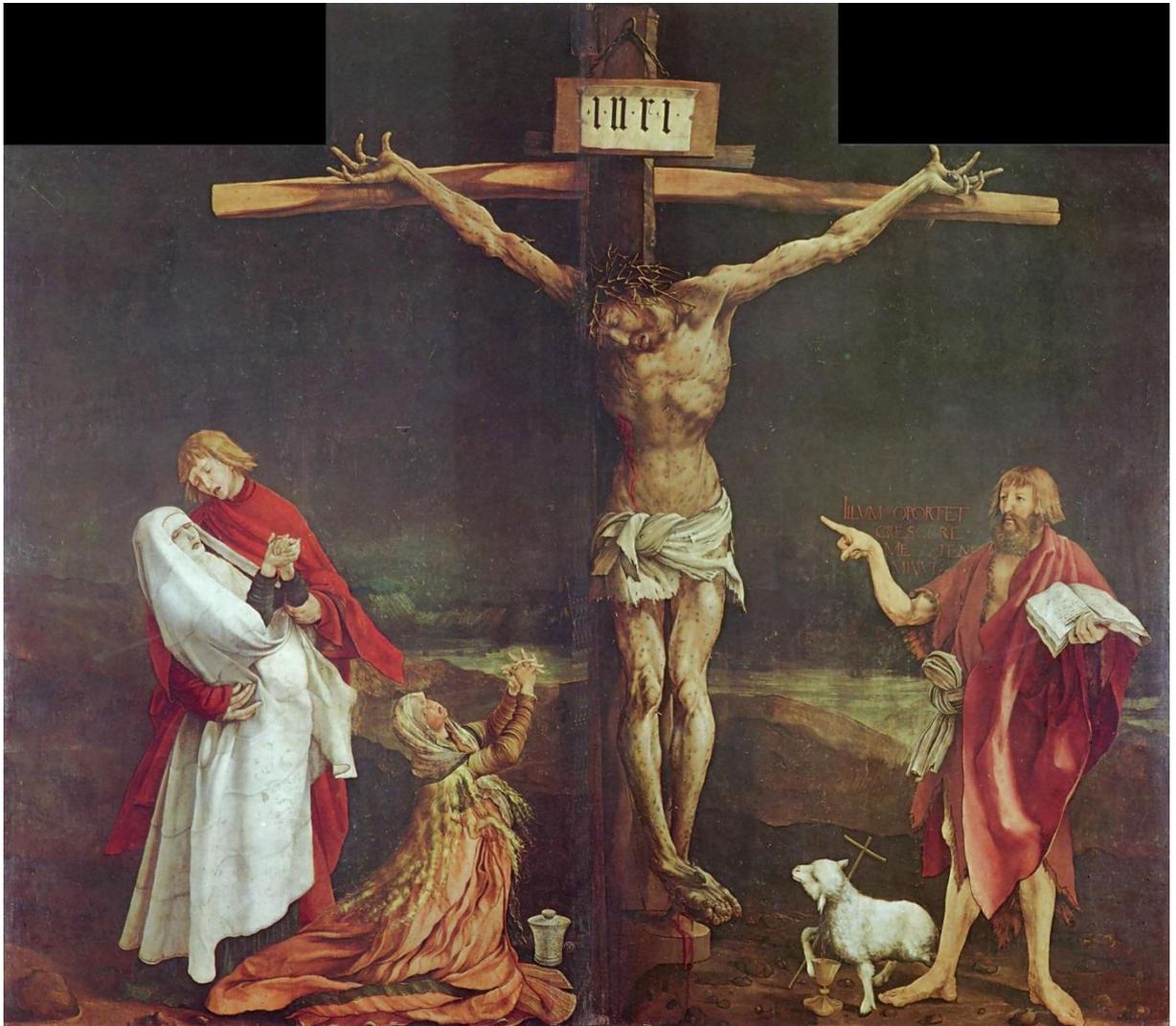
Dear Sisters and Brothers! I greet you on the occasion of the Reformation anniversary from Budapest, Hungary. May God bless you all. With the help of four images, I am going to preach about the cross: how one can point to the crucified Jesus Christ. That leads us to the heart of Martin Luther's teaching, the theology of the cross.

Dear Sisters and Brothers! As the Reformation opted for preaching in the mother tongue, I will continue in Hungarian.

Luther's activity as a reformer did not start with the publication of the 95 theses but with a heroic struggle with God, a struggle for God. How can I find a gracious God? – was the question he faced, still as an Augustine monk. The birth of the Reformation can be summarised in that struggle and I believe that a passionate search for God may start a new Reformation also today. How can we find that God who came to the earth in the fullness of the time, was incarnate and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even to death on a cross?

Who points to this Jesus, suffering on the cross?

At first, John the Baptist whose often quoted sentence is our text for today: “He [Jesus] must become greater; I must become less”. For me personally, this sentence is very meaningful. It has also been depicted on a painting by Matthias Grünewald, on the altarpiece of Isenheim.



In the centre of this monumental picture, we see the crucified Jesus, on the left the mourners, on the right John the Baptist. At his feet, there is a lamb as he said about Jesus: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”. Behind him, the Latin text says: *illum oportet crescere, me autem minui* – that is, he must become greater; I must become less.

John the Baptist points to Jesus. Please take note of the index finger of his right hand which is anatomically disproportionate in order to draw the attention to Jesus.

And Jesus opens his arms even in his suffering. As if he was hugging those under the cross. His mother and the beloved disciple to whom he said: “Here is your son. Here is your mother”. He is also saying that to the sufferers and mourners of today. And he hugs the crying Mary Magdalene and also John the Baptist himself.

The altar of Isenheim was made between 1512 and 1516, directly before the start of the Reformation. But it already depicted the most important ‘solus’ of Martin Luther: ‘solus Christus’ – Christ alone!

We testify to Christ alone in whom God’s face was revealed to us.

Christ alone is the mediator, not the saints, not even Virgin Mary.

Christ alone is the way and the truth and the life. He is the sole way to salvation, not any religious action like procession, indulgence or good deeds.

Congregation of the Reformation: Solus Christus, Christ alone!

I also brought you a second picture. I must tell you, it was also new to me. It is part of the Reformation exhibition at the National Museum (which you can still visit until 4 November). The painting Law and Grace by Hans Kemmer was painted in 1540 and it is worth looking at because there are already two persons pointing to Jesus.



On the right hand side, we see persons from the New Testament – most importantly Jesus on the cross. it is again John the Baptist who turns the naked sinner towards the cross and points with a large gesture towards the Crucified. On the left hand side, we see persons of the Old Testament, at first Adam and Eve. We can see Moses who also lifts his hand – and point at Jesus! This wonderful

painting tells us that the Old Testament is preparation for the New, as it testifies about Jesus. Not only Moses but also the prophets point to the crucified Jesus.

As an example, I only refer to Isaiah who testifies about the suffering son of God:

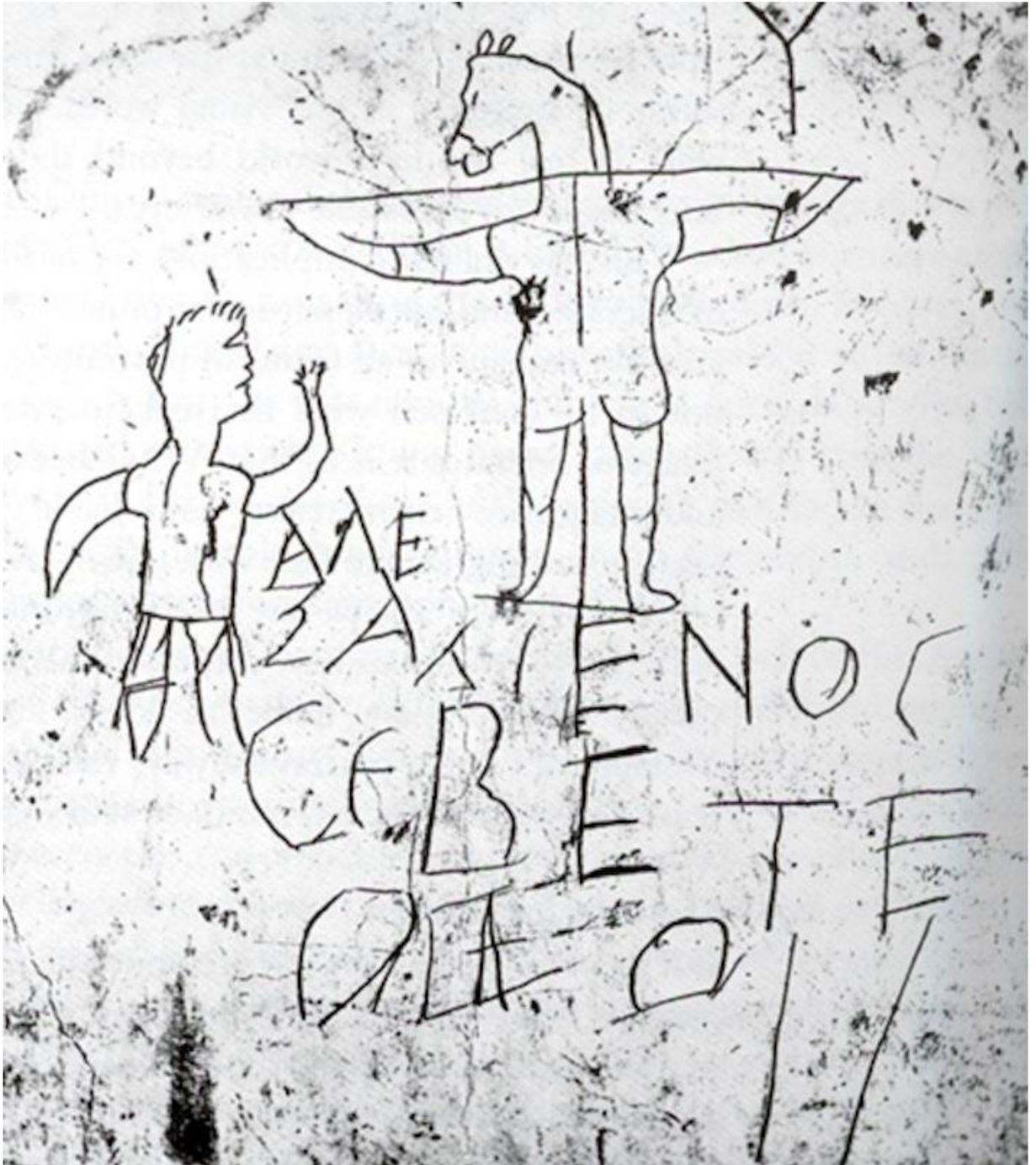
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. [...] He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent.

The Old and the New Testament harmonise with each other. Together they make up the Holy Script. And this leads us to the second 'sole' in Luther's sense: Sola Scriptura, by Scripture alone. Nothing can substitute God's Word. As the Hungarian poet Sándor Reményik writes about the word which is the living bread:

"It is Gospel and nothing else,
not knowledge, art or common sense..."

Sola Scriptura, by Scripture alone. Let us be thankful that we may hold the Holy Scripture in our hands and read it daily – also in our mother tongue. There are still countries in the world (for example North Korea) where owning or spreading the Bible is a grave sin. I have also met elderly Christians who told me how in the Soviet times while deported to Siberia it was not allowed to have a Bible. They wrote down the gospels from their memories, with their own hand and there were no pastors, the midwives baptised the children...

The reality of persecuted Christians leads us to the third picture that I would like to show you.



This graffiti (as we would call it today) was found on a wall in Rome and it depicts the crucified Jesus with a donkey's head. The text says: Alexamenos worships [his] God. The drawing from the 2nd or 3rd century has a brutal message: This fool lets himself to be crucified. According to the proud Romans, he can only be a fool and also his followers are fools. Yes, it is also possible to point to the crucified Jesus in this way.

It is possible to make a satire of the life and death of Jesus. It is possible to humiliate Christians and dishonour believers. Many of those who are here today, can well remember scenes from school or workplace when they were let down because they went to church or to Bible studies. Mockery is also today often aimed at Christians. But at the same time, I would like to caution against mixing one

thing with another: A mere vicious hint, a mocking article or an abusive comment is far from what many Christians have to suffer for their faith. We may be despised for our confessing nature but others are also today stoned, crucified or decapitated if they dare to mention the holy name of Jesus Christ. They are the real confessors who – as Luther in his time – can do no other. In this context, they illustrate the third ‘sola’ of Luther: Sola fide, by faith alone. Those persecuted sisters and brothers testify to what apostle Paul wrote in the 2nd letter to Corinthians:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. [...] It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak.

I would also like to bring the third ‘sola’ to your special attention: Sola fide, by faith alone!

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

It is possible to point to Jesus as John the Baptist or Moses did and it is possible to ridicule him as the author of the graffiti did. As a fourth point, let’s see how Martin Luther pointed to him. On a picture by Lucas Cranach which can today be seen in the city church of Wittenberg, the crucified



Jesus is in the centre.

From the pulpit, Luther points to him, to the Crucified with a definite movement – as he did in his more than thousand sermons in that church. On the left hand, we see the congregation (among others, also Cranach) and the inhabitants of Wittenberg. There is naturally also the loyal wife, Catharina Bora and one of their children – possibly the tiny Johannes. We know how important family was for Luther.

I play with the thought: What is Luther preaching about here? Maybe about the topic of our today’s epistle: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”. Or possibly he is quoting today’s gospel, the word of John the Baptist: “He must become greater; I must become less”.

Along all the wonderful opportunities, the 500th anniversary also brings temptations. One of those may be if we praise the heroic deed of Luther and his courage to publish his theses. But let me put it like this: When we happen to hear strikes of a hammer, let us rather think of nails from Jerusalem,

not from Wittenberg. Historically, the door of the castle church is important but the Golgotha became the fountain of blessing, the door to the heaven. For there, God closed the doors of the hell and opened the gates of heaven.

If we recognise this, we may also avoid the temptation of praising Luther's person and letting him grow above everyone else. Sándor Reményik, the poet I already quoted today does exactly that when he writes about Luther as the Giant:

Can you see this solitary shadow grow?

The shadow of a monk surpassing all the world?

Can you hear the decayed empires

crunching under his heavy feet?

And he ends the poem:

Come with me today,

come, let us hold on to this giant!

Otherwise I like Reményik very much but in Luther, I do not see a giant but a tool of God – one like John the Baptist – pointing to Jesus and saying: He must become greater; I must become less.

The French composer Gounod said: when I was 18, I said: Me. When I was 25, I said: Me and Mozart. When I was 40, I said: Mozart and Me. And now, at an old age I say: Mozart.

John the Baptist did not say: “Me” or “Me and Jesus”. Not even Jesus and Me. He said: Jesus. Just as apostle Paul did: only Jesus, only the crucified.

Luther said the same: Christ alone.

We know several excellent films about Luther and reformation. At the Hungarian days in Wittenberg this August, we showed a silent film on Luther from 1927 with excellent live accompaniment by László Fassang. In this film, Luther visits Rome and he is quite stunned how the pilgrims climb on the stairs of the St. Peter's cathedral in order to gain merits. Suddenly, Jesus appears in a vision, with the cross on his shoulder. The message of this expressive moment is: Salvation cannot be earned with human deeds, it can only be given by Jesus, by grace alone. This is the fourth 'sola': Sola gratia, by grace alone.

The scene quoted from the silent film also reminds us of the famous dialogue in the book and film *Quo vadis?* The fleeing apostle Peter meets Jesus on his way to Rome and asks him: Where do you go? (“Quo vadis, Domine?”). Jesus says he is going to Rome in order to be crucified instead of Peter. Peter feels ashamed and goes back to Rome where he is crucified but according to his wish – not to be equal with Jesus – with his head down.

Independently from the novel – and the apocryphal acts of Peter the scene is based on – and looking at the Peter of the gospels we may conclude that Jesus' disciple had a long way to go until he undertook the way of the cross. He was the loudest to disagree when Jesus said: “The Son of Man must suffer”. Peter was at his best on the mount of transfiguration, when

Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. "Lord, it is good for us to be here", said Peter. But after that – according to Luther's terminology – he got from the theology of the glory to the theology of the cross.

What is Luther's theology of the cross?

He says, God can only be recognised in suffering and on the cross, through Christ's cross. Not in glory and majesty but in humiliation and shame. The meaning of the cross only becomes clear to those who are themselves bearing a cross and sufferings. The theologian of the cross knows that real theology and the true knowledge of God is in the crucified Christ.

As followers of Luther, apostle Paul and before all, Jesus, we must get rid of the temptation to seek glory as a church. We should become a cross-shaped church. Which is able to resist the temptation of power, glory and magnificence and remain on the shadowy side – together with those who suffer, those who are dispossessed, persecuted and humiliated.

Jubilant congregation, dear sisters and brothers!

Four pictures helped us today to become closed to the cross of Jesus. Let us stop in its vicinity.

Remembering Matthias Grünewald's altarpiece, we can say as a creed: Solus Christus, Christ alone.

On the basis of the unified gesture of Moses and John the Baptist pointing to Jesus, let us rejoice of the gift of the Holy Scripture and say: Sola Scriptura, by Scripture alone.

Following the courage and confessing nature of the martyrs of the first centuries, we may say: Sola fide, by faith alone!

And upon the basis of the Wittenberg sermons and testimony of Martin Luther, we may say with a grateful heart: Sola gratia, by grace alone.

I began with saying that the Reformation started from a passionate search for God. I am sure that also today there are many people looking for a gracious God. Do they meet gracious Christians who are able to point to the crucified Christ?

From those I mentioned, no-one was the theologian of the glory: Not John the Baptist, not Moses, no the confessor humiliated in the first centuries. John the Baptist undertook prison and martyrdom for pointing clearly to the sin of Herod the tetrarch. Moses would have liked to see the glory of God but could only see God from the back. Luther uses strong language when saying God was showing his ass to him. Moses not only suffered from the pharaoh but also from his own people. Alexamenos from the graffiti may have become a martyr along with many others in the Roman empire persecuting Christians. Instead of a brilliant professor's career, Luther fell under church and empire curse.

All of them went through suffering in order to be able to point to the suffering Jesus, as theologians of the cross.

The theologian of the glory mainly deals with him- or herself and becomes an exhibitionist. He or she always says: Me. Or in the best case: Me and Jesus. The theologian of the cross on the other hand points to the crucified Jesus and says: Jesus. Jesus alone. Solus Christus.

This is our task: To point to Jesus. To let him speak. To live what we have learnt from him. In proving situations, sympathising with the dispossessed and humiliated, not as giants but realising our smallness.

Not against Christians from other confessions but acknowledging with joy that what unites us is far *greater than* what *divides* us. Most importantly that we may all be disciples of the same Master.

And about him, about Jesus we testify, now in ecumenical cooperation. To him we point and can do no other.

Solus Christus.

We must become less and Jesus must become greater.