

A man and his son were once going with their donkey to market, and the boy was riding upon the donkey. When they passed a group of men, one of whom said: "See that lazy youngster, he lets his father walk while he rides."

So the man ordered his son to get off, and got on himself. But they hadn't gone far when they passed two women, one of whom said to the other: "Shame on that lazy lout to let his poor little son trudge along."

Well, the man didn't know what to do, but at last he took his son up in front of him on the donkey. But soon one of the passers-by said: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself for overloading that poor donkey?"

The man and boy got off and tried to think what to do. They decided to walk along by the donkey's side. They hadn't gone far when they met a number of girls coming from the town. "Look at these three donkeys!" said one of them. "They are walking when one of them should be riding."

The father and son thought and they thought, till at last they cut down a pole, tied the donkey's feet to it, and raised the pole and the donkey to their shoulders. So they went along amid the laughter of all who met them till they came to market.

This is not a story from the Bible. It is found in the Medieval collections of the fables of the Greek poet Aesop. Martin Luther knew this story. And with its help he could have explained the message of Reformation "*justified by faith*". For life is no less complicated than leading a donkey to market.

How do I please God? Martin Luther wondered. How can I be a good person? How can I spend the life I have been given by God in an appropriate way? And we might ask: How can my life be useful for the people I love and for the world I live in?

Luther's father said, You are good, if you obey me and fulfil my expectations. Because this is God's commandment.

The church taught: You are good, if you belong to the church and adhere to its rules. Because there is no salvation outside the church.

The monastery, where Luther lived, stated: You are good when you live a simple life and worship several times a day and at night. Because then you are focussed on nothing else but God.

The principal, who employed Luther as a lecturer at the university, was convinced: You are good if you fulfil your professional assignment and spend your time with the students. Because this is your duty.

Whatever Martin Luther did, he could not fulfil all these expectations. So he could not be a good person. He could not please God. He was lost.

As a theologian, he knew the Bible very well. He knew the many Old Testament rules which one had to adhere to. He knew the much more challenging commandment of Jesus *Love your neighbour*. It was obvious to him that nobody could please God. There were really no good people, there were only those who were worse than others. Therefore the Apostle Paul was absolutely right stating in his Letter to the Romans:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

But what is the logical consequence? If there is no chance to be a good person then salvation can only be possible with God's help. Therefore Paul continues:

being justified freely by His grace

That means quite simply: We are accepted by God, without being good people. Simply out of grace. Because God acts like the loving father of the prodigal son in the parable of Jesus. Therefore it is not important how we behave but that we trust in God's love.

This concept of the Christian faith was from the beginning in contrast to the religious ideas of many Christians. To them it was important that Christians were the better people. With their exemplary behaviour they should convince others to follow Christ and to work for his kingdom. Mission seemed to be a method of making good people out of evil people, and the church, the Christian community, was commissioned to create a better world. - It sounds attractive. But it doesn't work.

Therefore Luther invited people to trust in God's love instead of following the rules of the Medieval church. With the words of Paul:

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

This re-discovery of the Christian faith changed the world. It destroyed the united European church and led to the formation of various Christian churches. Above all, however, it initiated a reform process which could not be stopped. And if we seriously commemorate 500 years of the Reformation today, then we should not focus on the person of Martin Luther or on the clashes between Protestants and Catholics but on the consequences of *justification by faith* for our present world. And I see five consequences today:

Firstly, I am righteous with God, even if I do not follow the rules of my family and if I am not the good son or good daughter. We know these kinds of expectations that can be a heavy burden. But Christian life is possible even if the parents or siblings do not accept my way. This might be a difficult message for people who want to keep the family together. But a comforting thought for those who see that they cannot succeed. The Kingdom of God can cope with the difficult people who belong to the family, even though they cannot live together.

Secondly, I am righteous with God, even though I do not follow the rules of the society I live in. Christian life is possible, even if others cannot accept my lifestyle. I need not to be a good person in their eyes. This might be a difficult thought for people who are committed to living together in a civic-minded way. But a comforting thought for those who see that they cannot please their neighbours. The Kingdom of God can cope with the difficult people around me.

Thirdly, I am righteous with God, even if I do not follow the rules of the Bible. Christian life is also possible if I am told: The Bible calls what you are doing "sin". Maybe, I can reply, but that does not bother me. God does not judge my life with the moral of an ancient world. Jesus has given me responsibility for my behaviour with the words *Love your neighbour*. Now it is up to me what this means for my life and how far I can follow this commandment and where I struggle. And I will struggle and depend entirely on the grace of God. This is, of course, a very difficult thought for people who make an effort to live a decent life and who appreciate many rules from the Bible. But the Kingdom of God can cope with people with a different moral.

Fourthly, I am righteous with God, even if I do not satisfy my own objectives. Even if I am not a good son, brother, father and grandfather, even if I cannot organise my private life in the best way and even if I struggle with the many duties of my profession - and even if my faith is weaker and my doubts are stronger than I would like, God will bring my life to a good ending. In the end it is all in God's hands. This is, of course, disappointing for people who believe in the possibility of a successful or holy life. But even they might notice the burden taken from their shoulders if they are justified by faith and not by their abilities.

It is not important how we behave but that we trust in God's love; this is the starting point of the Reformation movement . It was not easy for the Medieval church to admit that faith alone is sufficient, that Jesus and not the church has the keys of Heaven and that it is impossible for all people to live a holy life. But it was not easy either for the new churches to take this principle so seriously that they were tolerant of the other churches. Together we must always draw the fifth consequence of the Reformation:

The members of the other denominations are righteous with God, even if they do not share our views of the Christian faith. To take up the story again: Ultimately, every denomination leads its donkey on its own way to market, and every form is ultimately inadequate. That the others are not as consistently reformatory as we are from our point of view, does not prevent God from loving them as well. And because he loves us and them, that is why we belong together - one day in the kingdom of God and therefore even today.

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