

Prayer of the Month • October 2010

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent that my love may go out to my neighbour. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasures of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fulness of righteousness. Therefore, I will remain with you of whom I can receive but to whom I may not give. Amen.

Martin Luther, 1483–1546

It is a common thought in Christian prayer to ask to be filled – filled with the Spirit, filled with God's love ... but it is not so common to recognise the emptiness to begin with. Martin Luther recognises his weakness, but it is not a weak prayer. He recognises his coldness, but it is not a cold prayer. It is a prayer full of strength of feeling, of heartfelt passion. Perhaps he exaggerates, but in any case he knows deficiency, and he does, positively, ask, implore God's help. He shares uncertainties and doubts. Doubt and faith are not opponents but companions. Luther is pointing up differences between himself and God. The more we know of God the more difference we become aware of, but in the end Luther chooses to remain with God, despite the difference; this is the God who provides, the God who gives, though Luther admits he has nothing to give in return. Is this great faith or great pessimism?

When Luther writes about himself, he writes about all people: God is everything, we are nothing. Martin Luther was the son of a miner in Saxony. He was educated at the cathedral school in Magdeburg, at Eisenach, where he sang in the choir, and at Erfurt University. In 1505 he entered an Augustinian monastic order. He was sent by the order to lecture at the recently established University of Wittenberg in 1508. In 1511 he became doctor of theology, and in 1515 vicar of his order, which involved oversight of eleven monasteries.

Luther had a passionate and melancholy nature, which influenced his outlook and religious convictions. The structure of the religious life failed to give him confidence and he was anxious even for his own salvation. Some time in the period usually dated 1512–1515 he had his 'tower experience' when he became convinced that faith alone justifies, without works. He gradually came to deny the mediatorial role of the church and this led him into conflict with the religious order to which he belonged (Augustinians) and the wider church. His views, however, were welcomed by would-be reformers. As a result of his expressed views, Luther was excommunicated and banned; he sought refuge in the friendly states of Wartburg and Wittenberg. He composed hymns in German for greater congregational participation, and produced the first full translation of the Bible into German from the original texts. In 1524 he discarded his religious habit and the following year married Catherine von Bora, a former Cistercian nun. Luther wrote a great number of works, many with deep religious feeling, but these can sometimes be intemperate, peppered with abuse and obscenities. His last work, published the year before his death, is a bitter attack on the papacy. Lutheranism since Luther has been dominated by its eponymous founder more than any other Protestant denomination. The Church commemorates Martin Luther on 31 October.

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