

The Distant Rumble of Battle

There is a noise of war in the camp

Exodus 32:17

Wittenberg, 1517 – the Elector’s fear – Tetzel – Luther’s resolve

It is the 31st of October, 1517. Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, makes his final preparations for the great festival which he has arranged for tomorrow, All Saints Day. The festival will take place in his Church – the Castle Church at Wittenberg – the Church which Frederick has filled with precious relics. Why, he has even managed to obtain some pieces of the actual cross of Christ! And tomorrow... tomorrow... Frederick can picture it all. The relics will be carried out... with due solemnity, of course... paraded in public with massive pomp and show, to be set before the believing masses for their adoration. The precious, holy relics, so carefully collected on his instructions, will be adorned with twinkling gems, gleaming in gold and silver to be displayed before the eyes of the faithful. Oh yes, Frederick can picture it. The thronging crowds, all agog, dazzled by the splendour of the day. And it’s to take place in Wittenberg... in his Church... in his town... under his patronage... He allows himself a little smile.

What is more... the faithful will not only be dazzled. No! For all who come to Wittenberg on All Saints Day, see the relics and confess their sins – will they not be given a large indulgence to take away with them? An indulgence? Yes, indeed. A certificate with the pope’s own seal upon it; a certificate, guaranteed to reduce the punishment for sin, both in this life and in the next. Guaranteed! And by the pope himself!

Already the pilgrims are streaming into Wittenberg – hordes of the faithful have flocked to the town, all eager to set eyes upon the precious, holy objects. Have they not been assured that if they look upon the relics and confess their sins, an indulgence will be theirs? The pope himself has said so!

Happy pilgrims! Happy Frederick! He smiles again.

But slowly the smile fades, and his face grows dark... For Frederick is not altogether at ease on the Eve of All Saints. The truth is he cannot rest. He is disturbed and troubled in his mind. There is a fly in Frederick’s ointment. It is that priest... that Dominican priest... Tetzel... he is in the region. Tetzel! The pest! For fifteen years now he has been a religious travelling salesman. Selling what? Selling indulgences, no less! The pope, Leo X, who lives in luxury and squanders vast sums of wealth, stands in

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particular need of ready cash at this time. He wishes to complete the project started by his predecessor and build a huge basilica topped with a massive dome to house the so-called remains of Peter and Paul in Rome, since the ancient wooden structure had been falling down and needed replacement. But lavish papal schemes have outrun the amount of money the popes are willing spend out of their own purse. Hence the selling of indulgences. Herein lies the root cause of Frederick's disturbance.

The trouble is... Frederick can picture Tetzal in his mind's eye. Tetzal in the pulpits of Saxony, Tetzal's wooden cross lifted high in front of the altar, the pope's banner and insignia dangling from it. Not only that, Frederick can hear Tetzal's thunderous voice booming over the congregation:

Indulgences are the most precious gifts of God. This wooden cross has as much efficacy as the cross of Jesus Christ himself. Come and I will give you letters furnished with seals, by which even the sins that you may wish to commit hereafter shall be forgiven you... there is no sin so great that an indulgence cannot remit it. Repentance is not necessary. Indulgences save not only the living, they save the dead also... Listen now, God and St Peter call you. Consider the salvation of your souls and those of your loved ones departed... Visit the most holy cross erected before you and ever imploring you... Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends beseeching you and saying: 'Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance'. Do you not wish to? Open your ears. Hear the father saying to his son, the mother saying to her daughter: 'We bore you, nourished you, brought you up, left you our fortunes, and you are so cruel and hard that now you are not willing for so little to set us free. Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory?' Remember that you are able to release them for the very instant the piece of money chinks at the bottom of the box, the soul is freed from purgatory and flies to heaven.

Frederick knows that in the confessionals which follow, the faithful – rather, the duped! – will be told that in order to receive forgiveness for sin it is not necessary to be contrite nor even necessary to confess. Just give money. And be quick about it!

Yes, Frederick, Elector of Saxony is uneasy. His great festival of All Saints at Wittenberg will be ruined... ruined by Tetzal with his indulgence peddling. This Tetzal undermines the proper use of the traditional system of indulgences. Why can't something be done about it? Why can't he be stopped?

Nor is Frederick, Elector of Saxony, the only man in Wittenberg this day who is troubled by the gross scandal of Tetzal's trade in indulgences. Another man – one Martin Luther, monk, priest, theology lecturer and preacher – he also is greatly disturbed on the Eve of All Saints.

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Luther has been appalled to have to listen to the excuses of those who have attended his preaching, when they have refused his calls for repentance. ‘Unless you repent you will all... perish’, he has warned. But the people have not listened. They would not! The people have refused him on the grounds that they do not have to abandon their sins. Why not? Because they have bought their indulgences from Tetzal! In vain has Luther declared that contrite sinners must ‘bear fruits worthy of repentance’. The people have no need of that kind of talk! The indulgences which they clutch so lovingly have effectively blocked their ears to the calls and warnings of Scripture.

Luther is determined to bring this scandal out into the open. His patience is exhausted. He will deal with this superstitious nonsense, this wicked traffic in indulgences. And he will deal with it once and for all. His mind is made up. There is a way open to him. The people have not listened to his preaching, as during his sermons in the past year he has urged caution over indulgences. According to Luther’s present thinking, indulgences could – perhaps – be used. But only in certain specified circumstances and under special conditions. These conditions have not been met in the particular case of Tetzal, whose abuse of the system has reached horrendous proportions. And Luther has preached about it. Nevertheless, the people have not heeded his warnings. Right! Enough is enough! He will resort to the usual means. He will call for an open debate on the matter. He will invite all and sundry to answer him in public dispute. He will force the issue to a head.

Luther makes his way through the throng to the Castle Church. He is determined and resolute. He nails a document to the north door of the building – a document which he has written out in Latin. It contains ninety-five theses or propositions. By nailing it to the Church door, he calls for a public disputation. He invites public debate with anyone and everyone on this matter of indulgences.

On this day, the 31st of October, 1517, Luther is a loyal Roman Catholic, he is a faithful Papist. As I noted above, he himself believes in some very restrained use of indulgences, as long as they are properly administered. Nor has he any wish to attack the Roman Church. He does not question papal authority. All he wants to do is call attention to the abuses of indulgences by their sale, and to correct the dreadful scandal which Tetzal has brought into Saxony. He does not intend to break with Rome. He has no other concept of the church in his mind than the One Holy Catholic and Roman Church system which has dominated Europe for twelve hundred years. He is no political rebel. He is no rabble-rouser. The Church and the State are one, both to Rome and to Luther. He has no thought of interfering with the political or religious system when he nails

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his theses to the door at Wittenberg on the 31st of October, 1517. It never even crosses his mind. He is not anti-papal. He is only thinking of the eternal welfare of those who listen to his preaching. He wants a stop put to Tetzl. That is all.

Nevertheless, although he does not realise it, the sound of Luther's hammer blows upon the door at Wittenberg will never die away. The blows will echo throughout Germany, throughout Europe; what is more, they will be heard throughout the world. For even though he has written his theses in Latin, they will be quickly translated into German, whereupon they will spread like wild-fire to become the talk of Germany and the wider world beyond. Nor is it a small issue which Luther has raised. It is no passing difficulty which he is about to deal with. The 31st of October, 1517, is a date which will never be forgotten – no! not to the end of time. The Reformation has dawned. Luther does not know it, but he has just opened a crack in the sluice gates of truth. A tiny trickle is just beginning to flow. Soon the trickle will become a stream; the stream, a river; the river, a flood.

To change the figure, Martin Luther does not realise it but he has just declared spiritual war on Rome. He thinks he has called for a debate on the sale of indulgences. But in reality he has just begun a war to be fought with the weapons of the Spirit of God. He has unleashed the battle for the reformation of the Church, the consequences of which he could never have imagined.

In fact, although Luther did nothing to spread the knowledge of his arguments generally among the people but merely called for a scholarly debate, others acted very differently. They took the matter into their own hands, and in a short time the world heard all about it. It became the common talk of the day. For the truth is, of course, the ninety-five theses were – and soon came to be seen as – a three-pronged attack upon the very fabric of the Papacy. *First*, the theses questioned the raising and spending of money to build a magnificent building in Rome in order to house – according to papal myths – the bones of Peter. *Secondly*, the theses were a contradiction of the papal claims to be able to remit sins. *Thirdly*, they were a direct assault on indulgences altogether. Luther himself would come to see that indulgences are 'most pernicious because they induce complacency and thereby imperil salvation. Those persons are damned who think that letters of indulgence make them certain of salvation'.

The question was: What would be the outcome of this threefold attack? Not so much: What would happen to Luther? Rather, what would happen to his protest?

Now Martin Luther was not the first man to see that the Roman Church needed to be reformed. He was not the first to raise his voice against the

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pope and all the errors, superstitions and corruptions of the depraved papistical religion. Down the centuries, again and again the cry had gone up to God for needed reform, and many had attempted it. All through the long years of spiritual slavery, many had given their lives in the cruel struggle for liberty.

For instance, three hundred years before Luther, the Waldenses, high in the Piedmont Alps, had protested against the superstitions of Rome. One hundred and fifty years before Luther, John Wycliffe in England had preached the Scriptures against the pope. A hundred years before Luther, John Huss had been burned at the stake in Bohemia because of his attack upon the scandals of the papist clergy. In addition, thousands of men and women, known and unknown, all down the long years of the Dark Ages, had made their protest against the Papacy and sealed it with their blood.

No! The thirty-four year old monk at Wittenberg was not the first to protest against Rome. But this time it would be different, for it was God's appointed time to reform his church. God, who had been working down the centuries, dramatically brought his purpose to a head in Luther's simple act. When he nailed the ninety-five theses to the door at Wittenberg on the 31st of October, 1517, Luther was the human instrument chosen by God to set in motion the titanic struggle. It was God's time for the battle for the church. Thousands would have to give their lives in the bitter, long years of war required to recover the truth. Many hardships would have to be borne. Much blood would flow. But the truth would conquer. The church would be reformed. If Luther had only realised it, he might well have addressed God in the words of the Psalmist:

You will arise and have mercy on Zion; for the time to favour her, yes, the set time has come (Ps. 102:13).

The battle had begun. Truly there was 'a noise of war in the camp'. The hosts of God were on the march.