

There is a Witness (Love Divine) "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea" — this hymn is from England, and a 100 years ago: but I feel (without being an expert in the matter) that it could well have come from longer ago and from the pen of one of Europe's most known and remembered figures from the past. I'm referring to Martin Luther who (it happens) was born exactly 500 years ago today — his birthday, in fact. So this year, and especially this autumn in Europe, there's been an amount of special remembrances and celebrations of a man whose name is intricately linked with the history of Christianity, and who's had a profound influence on the modern development of Christianity almost everywhere in the world. You may have read, or heard, that the Pope's accepted an invitation to go and preach to a Lutheran church community in Rome next month, the first time ever a Pope'll have done so. And on the announcement of this visit last week-end, the Pope's reported as praising especially the "profound religiousness" of Luther. These words, and these gestures and signs would have been unthinkable a 100 yrs ago in Rome, or indeed even more recently still: there weren't too many Catholics with a good word for Luther, in those days — you could say he got a very bad press in Catholic circles, and maybe that too was understandable given the history and the circumstances ^{there were}. But the other day, Pope John Paul also acknowledged ~~that~~ faults and failings on both sides in the split that developed in Western Christianity in the 16th century and which has been a cross for Christians since then, and a counter-productive sign (at least to some extent) of the message of Christ to the world and of this seamy work. Just as the different churches which have grown from that 16th century split have begun to re-discover each other, with a fresh appreciation of each

other's particular graces and charisms, in an atmosphere of more sympathetic understanding of differences, so there's been a re-evaluation of Martin Luther going on in the Catholic Church, as well. Like many another famous controversies, or even ordinary domestic quarrels, and tiffs between friends, time and changed circumstances, different attitudes and perceptions eventually allow you to recognize and acknowledge the positive and good sides of an argument or adversary that had been opposed because of the perceived bad or negative sides. It is not just the history of the Church that is littered with examples of such divisions — most of us do similar things with the prejudices and conflicts we have in our own lives, and it goes on all the time in political, business and professional life. But in the life of the Christian community, it's a particularly tragic situation because of its counter-witness to the unity of the communion of saints, of the one baptism & faith we share, the one Lord who is our Master. Jokes about Catholics-Protestants arriving before God in heaven are one thing [tho' it's a healthy thing to be able to laugh at oneself]: the divisions between us are still too real, and even in some cases painful, despite the greater sympathetic understanding that has developed. But if serious committed Christians of different traditions can still have such problems and misunderstandings, even tho' they worship and pray to the same Father of us all, are we surprised to find the same kind of human failings at work in other spheres of human life? Someone has said that perhaps there should be a picture of Luther on every office wall: he is a sign and a lesson in himself, from whom, not only in religious life, we can learn. Now before our formal prayers today, let's listen to this hymn in the Lutheran tradition.

PIL(e)5:16

another valuable & important legacy (by the way) of Martin Luther: Luther's own "A Safe Stronghold" ('Ein feste Burg') sung by the Linn Choir
 7 Glasgow MUSIC - PRAYERS

Martin Luther, I was getting round to saying before, can be in himself an object lesson for us not only about Christian or religious life but also personally and in all areas of human life and concern where different opinions are likely to emerge. It certainly was not his original purpose to split the Church, to set up a separate church. He wanted to reform, correct many and various abuses and errors and bad practices going on in the Church: and he went alone in this desire which came from his deep religious commitment and his evangelical zeal and devotion to the word of God. And there certainly were scandals and abuses and corruptions that needed correcting & reforming and which were obvious to many other people in the church as well. Luther tried to do sth. about it all, and not with resistance and opposition. His initial honest outrage eventually became destructive, and the unity of Christendom was damaged on a scale that hardly anyone could have foreseen. For want of a stee, the horse was lost: and clearly Luther should have been listened to more openly and practically..... by the time reforms were made, it was too late and the damage already done hindered further reforms. We've had to wait over 400 years for the dust to settle enough to tackle again some of the questions that shd. have been cleared up all that time ago. We still have to learn, each new generation and each of us personally, as Christians, as people how to change = reform ourselves, without self-destruction and self-inflicted injury, in harmony and honesty and understanding both in seeking the kingdom of God and in listening to His voice calling us to repent.