

From Monk to Statesman

A life of Dr. Martin Luther
(10 Nov 1483 – 18 Feb 1546)

The population of this earth increases by about 70,000 a day, and the current estimate of people that have lived stands at approximately 60 billion. The overwhelming majority of these have lived and died virtually unknown but, the subject of this paper is a man who has left his footprints in the shifting sands of time. The effect of his life and the principles for which he fought have left an indelible mark on the history of the world. The thoughts that troubled his mind sent a seismic change throughout the political, aesthetic, social and religious development of Europe. For me, he would be a contender for the European of the last millennium. His name is Martin Luther.

To chart the life of Martin Luther in the course of one short talk is no easy task. One could focus on a single point of the many aspects of his life and write a whole book without much difficulty. Yet, it is my intention to focus narrowly on the life of Luther and to ignore the important historical analyses of both what led up to and what led from his life.

We begin in the insignificant German village of Möhra, in the region of Thuringia, in the late Middle Ages (the early 15th century). Germany at this time did not exist in the national form we see today. It was a collection of independent, almost feudal dukedoms, underneath an emperor who was underneath the Pope. This vast collection of land spanning the centre of Europe was called 'The Holy Roman Empire'. The Luther family of peasants had lived in Möhra for generations and, as was the custom in that area, the family land was passed down to each youngest son. Consequently, the young Hans Luther (the German for John) and his young wife Gretha (the German for Margaret) had to make their own way in the world.

Hans became a miner and moved from Möhra to the town of Eisleben, which was known for the copper deposits in the surrounding hillsides. Eisleben is one of the oldest towns in that region and sits between the Harz mountains and the River Elbe. There in Eisleben on the 10th November 1483 their son was born. As the following day was the feast of St. Martin, Hans named his son after that saint.

Although the house, that currently stands on the site of the birthplace, is not original (it is of 17th century origin), the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul would clearly have overshadowed the house. Here in the Gothic splendour, Hans' son was baptised on November 11th 1483. The Luther family did not stay in Eisleben for long. Hans was eager to make the most of his abilities and about 6 months after the birth of his son he moved to Mansfeld, 6 miles to the north. While he was in Eisleben, it would not have been surprising if he had attended the miners' church, St. Anne's, which adjoined a monastery for Augustinian hermits (an order of which we will hear more!).

In Mansfeld, Hans began to climb the socio-economic ladder. He entered the group of copper furnace operators (owning about 6 foundries) and became a Mansfeld counsellor. Yet, despite this his wife would still collect the wood from the forest and the young Martin was still whipped until he bled for stealing a hazelnut. Later he would reflect that despite their strictness, his parents meant well. Hans was ambitious, both for himself and for his son. Martin was sent to the Latin school in Mansfeld at the age of 5. As his parents wanted him to become a lawyer he was sent to the Latin School in Magdeburg for 1 year and then at the age of 15 to the St. George school in Eisenach for 3 years (interestingly, also a school later attended by J.S. Bach). The school had an excellent reputation for Latin, grammar, rhetoric, poetry and music. In Eisenach, he stayed with the well-to-do Cotta family. He earned himself money as a singer in the choir and by singing on a door-to-door basis. It would be unfair to portray this time of his life as happy, it was quite simply hard. In later years, he would reflect that on one morning he was whipped 15 times for no fault of his own and would refer to the school as 'the Mansfeld purgatory'.

Upon the request of his father, Martin left Eisenach in April 1501 to study law. At the age of 17 he travelled to the city of Erfurt. Erfurt is a beautiful city set in the Gera valley and at that time surrounded with vineyards on the hills and extensive fields of woad. Erfurt owed its wealth to woad, a yellow plant that produces a bright blue dye; this plant gave Erfurt the reputation as the 'garden of the Holy Roman Empire'. A city of spires and steeples with over 20,000 citizens and an 800 year history, it was an affluent power base in that huge empire. It had 21 parish churches, 11 monastery chapels and 4 collegiate churches – making it the Rome of Germany. At its heart still stands the breathtaking spires of two cathedrals, one that of the Virgin Mary and the other that of St. Severus.

Erfurt university, founded in 1392, was viewed as one of the premier universities in Germany. Martin took the 'arts' course in the philosophy faculty and was a member of the reputable 'George' college. (Each college had a 'burse' or hostel at which the students stayed.) Non-study time was based on monastic lines with prescribed prayers and Bible readings and regular visits to both services and confession. The everyday language was Latin. However, life at Erfurt was not poor for there were fairly regular examination feasts and the diet contained a moderate consumption of the Erfurt beer. The course concluded with a bachelors degree and Luther became known as the Philosopher among his friends for obtaining this degree in the shortest possible time, on 19 September 1502 at the age of 18. He then proceeded to study for a masters degree which he obtained on 7 January 1505 (aged 24). Trained in Erfurt, Luther developed the ability to think in a scientific or logical fashion and from his readings of Aristotle; he became known as a sharp thinker and a brilliant debator. Following his masters Luther then began to attend the law lectures being given near to the cathedrals. Hans dream that his son would become a lawyer was at the brink of being fulfilled. He wanted him to become the influential counsellor of a ruler, with a wife from some wealthy and distinguished family. Maybe, even a celebrity like Henning Goede 'the King of Law' who was lecturing in Erfurt. If this were the ending of the

story, Martin Luther would have joined him in relative obscurity, unheard of 500 years later.

Despite his material success, it is clear that the young Martin Luther was a very troubled man. He had seen a good friend killed in a brawl and had asked himself the pointed question 'What if I had been killed instead of my friend?' At the same time we have an incident that is cited in many of the books on Luther, however, its accuracy is open to question. The story is that on 2 July 1505, the young traveller was walking a road near Stotternheim and before the village a storm broke. The rain fell and a bolt of lightning lit the sky. The troubled student fell to the floor convinced he was going to be killed. He then cried aloud to the patron saint of miners, St. Anne, and vowed that if he lived he would become a monk.

Whether or not this actually took place, it is clear that the student did take a vow to enter a monastic order. He later referred to this as 'rash and forced' and reflected that it was not the fruit of a religious meditation but an act of terror. Yet, he clearly thought that a vow once made was sacrosanct. So on the 17 July 1505 the bright young lawyer knocked on the door of the Augustinian monastery and asked for admission. In so doing, he broke his father's heart and bade farewell to a group of friends who were busy trying to stop him taking such a drastic step.

The choice of friary is interesting; the Augustinians had a reputation for piety and holiness and were widely respected as the strictest monastery in the area (founded in 1277)¹. Upon his entry, the prior did not admit him directly into the order, as it was custom to give any potential recruit the opportunity to reflect on the step he was taking. During this time of meditation, Luther lived in the guesthouse and spent his time in both soul exercise and communication with his father. He clearly did not feel happy to have thwarted his fathers' plans for his career, and wanted to win the approval of Hans, which was eventually given.

In September 1505, the bell summoned the brothers to the chapter house. Luther knelt by the abbot and the ordination took place. The company then proceeded along the aisle to the high altar, where the young monk lay in his black habit in a cruciform position and prayer was given. Interesting, in this prostrate form he lay on the grave of an early friar, called Professor Zacharie, held in reverence as the 'scourge of John Hus'. This man had been crucial in Hus' condemnation at the Council of Constance in 1414.

Having entered the cloister he was given a cell (the cell that can currently be seen in the monastery at Erfurt is built according to the original specifications and would have been occupied by Luther, but on a rotational basis as the monks were not allowed to keep the same cell). He observed the protocols of being a monk; eating, drinking, services, private prayer, mass, confessional

¹ The monastery at Erfurt contained a large gothic library with many valuable volumes. On February 12th 1945 a British bomb destroyed it and killed 267 people who were using the building as a shelter. Two buildings from the 15th century were destroyed and the monastery and church suffered severe damage.

and reading. In addition he would have been expected to keep the cell clean, work in the kitchen, and beg for alms in the town and countryside (this begging was designed to provoke humility and was not done for the financial welfare of the order). After a year of probation he became a full monk and took the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. After these vows were given, the young Luther was almost immediately promoted to the office of priest, thus demanding he study the liturgical aspects of the Roman Church service. This course last several months at the end of which he was fully versed in the dogma of the Romanists. In Spring of 1507 he was ordained to the priesthood (under Johannes Bonemilch von Laasphe) and several weeks later on May 2nd 1507 he said his first mass in the Augustinian chapel.

The service was attended by his friends and family, however, it is clear that his father, Hans, was not happy and publicly reminded his son of the 5th commandment. Later in his life, Luther would admit that this barbed comment had made him doubt his actions in becoming a monk.

Luther now commenced the academic and theological studies of the priestly order, attending lectures by the distinguished friar, Johannes Nathin in the Erfurt monastery 'studium generale'. Luther submerged himself in studying the writings of the church fathers, such as, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm and William of Ockham. True in his devotion to this world of monastic scholasticism Luther struggled with his inner troubles. These doubts of the mind are difficult to quantify, he was clearly tortured by a sense of his own sins and the wrath of God. He worked hard to merit his salvation, he observed all the church disciplines he was ascetic, penitential, spent time in study and prayer – he even became a little proud of his own humility. Yet, he was still beset by doubts and fears, his monkish endeavours were not being rewarded.

His fellow monks felt powerless, as indeed they were, to help this young man who saw it was impossible to merit the favour of God. At one stage, the monk starved himself of food, water and sleep for a fortnight – spending the time in prayer to departed saints, in a vain attempt to obtain peace.

At this stage, a friend called Johann Staupitz who was the vicar general of the order stepped in. He directed the monk to read the writings of St. Augustine and sought to direct the monk to Christ to obtain pardon for his sins. Luther expressed the view that Christ terrified him, to which Staupitz replied that in the sufferings of Christ we see his purpose towards mankind and that he would not understand God without first grasping Christ. These counsels later brought the monk to reflect that 'If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz, I should have sunk to hell'.

In one of these discussions with the troubled monk beneath the pear tree in the cloister gardens, Staupitz recognising the religious intensity and the intellectual calibre, told Luther that he should take his doctors' degree and assume the Bible chair at the university. A stunned Luther began to stammer out reasons why this should not happen the conclusion to which was that the work would bring his early death – to which Staupitz replied 'God has work for clever men in heaven.' Staupitz was taking a venture that by freeing Luther

from the prescribed Bible readings of the cloister, he would discover within his Bible the secret of Christianity. So in 1508 the monk taught for one semester at Wittenberg. At this stage, Luther began to fight his own battles he grappled with the Pauline Epistles. In the early chapters on Romans he saw Paul's teaching that the believer is made righteous in the sight of God as a result of Christ's righteousness. The light dawned. Luther saw that faith alone, and not his works, were the only way of deliverance. The power of the words 'The just shall live by faith' punctured his conscience and began a change in the mind of the monk that would end with a Reformation in Europe.

Luther was teaching at Wittenberg, living in a monastery and remaining in close contact with his friend Staupitz. Early in 1510, he was sent by his order to Rome – the eternal city – he was miserably disappointed by what he found. He saw first hand the wickedness and politicking in the Curia and how this extended itself to the Pope (Julius II – a very greedy man who was at war with the French). As he moved from church to monastery on his journey, he was shocked to find priests that were utterly ignorant and superstitious. In his four weeks in Rome Luther travelled the city and said a multitude of masses. Towards the end of his stay, Luther visited a staircase (purported to belong Pilate and having been used by Jesus on his way to trial) and he began to climb it on his knees as this was supposed to bring remission of sins, at one point in this worthless climb he was struck by the words from the Bible that 'The just shall live by faith'. By the top of the stairs, Luther doubted the Roman Catholic way of salvation. He went to Rome with the words 'Hail, Holy Rome, thrice holy for the blood of martyrs shed here.' And left it prepared to say 'If there is a hell, Rome is built over it.'

In early April 1511, he returned to Erfurt and then transferred back to Wittenburg. On October 19 1512, he received a Doctor of Theology and began his lecture course. On August 1, 1513 he began his lectures on the Psalms. At the end of this book, in 1515, he began to take the religious services in the Marian Kirche in the city centre and by the Autumn of that year he was into the Epistle to the Romans, while throughout 1516 and 17 he had moved on to Galatians. These studies were conclusive to Luther, his mind was changed, not on a lonely road in a thunderstorm or prostrate by an altar but in the solitude of study in the tower of the monastery.

His lectures were popular and his preaching was excellent. The people began to attend his services as here was a priest, that taught like no other, for he was unfolding Christian truth. In 1517, Luther was drawn to the subject of indulgences. The reason for this was that the Pope (Leo X who had succeeded Julius II) was rebuilding the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Rome, in order to do this he had needed money. At the same time Albert of Brandenburg, an ambitious member of the house of Hohenzollern, wanted to move from his see of Halberstadt and Magdeburg and become the Primate of Germany by obtaining the archbishopric of Mainz. He used the time-honoured tactic and he and the Pope bartered a price of 10 thousand ducats. This huge sum was borrowed by Albert, from the German banking house of Fugger. Albert now need to reimburse himself and obtained from the Pope a deal, which allowed him to sell indulgences. The elector of Saxony, Fredrick the

Wise, banned him from selling them in his lands, as they would encroach on his own ones. Albert conveyed on his indulgences a mass of spiritual benefits and charged the Dominican monk from Leipzig, Tetzl, with their sale. He toured the provinces and varied his payments based on a sliding scale of rank and sin, with the infamous phrase 'The moment the money tinkles in the box, that moment the soul springs out of purgatory'. Dr Luther was appalled to see his parishioners travelling to buy these bits of paper.

On October 31st 1517, Luther took action. He walked the short distance to the Castle (Sloss) Kirche and nailed 95 theses to the door². His timing was deliberate it was the eve of All Saints Day, a day in which the faithful would be in the church and the indulgence sales would be at a peak. His theses were different – they were crisp, bold, sweeping and appealed to the German sense of national pride. They were read, copied, reprinted and within a very short space of time, on the wings of the wind, they had been spread all over Germany, and from there on throughout Europe. The hammer strokes on the door were soon resounding in Papal Rome.

At first, Pope Leo took little cognisance of this upstart German. Then he appointed a new general to the Augustinian order with the express order to quench the monk and smother the fire, the opportunity for this arose in a gathering of this chapter in Heidelberg the following May. At this point, Luther gained a vital friend, the Prince of Saxony (Frederick the Wise) decided to give him his protection. In Heidelberg, he was received as a guest of honour with the Count Palatine inviting him and Staupitz to dinner. Before the gathered order, Luther defended his views as those of Augustine, concluding that even outwardly upright acts can be moral sins. Now the clash between Luther and Tetzl began to divide along familiar lines, the Augustinians against the Dominicans. Tetzl published his response to the 95 theses; unfortunately for Tetzl the Wittenburg students obtain the vast majority of the printed copies and then proceeded to burn them. The Pope then asked Sylvester Prierias, of the Dominicans and Master of the Palace at Rome to draft an official reply to the upstart German. Prierias declared the Church to be the Roman Church and affirmed that it could not err, that the actions of the Pope were infallible and that anyone opposing Pope and Church was a heretic. He then proceeded to refer to Luther as a leper with a brain of brass and a nose of iron. Luther entered, once more, into the fray –You cite no scripture, you give no reasons, like a devil you pervert the scripture, you say the Church is the Pope... and then he proceeded to cite the errors of a series of popes... concluding that the previous incumbent, Julius II, 'came in as a wolf, reigned as a lion, and died as a dog.'... and once more appealing to his German audience he said the German people would not tolerate the Pope as Emperor.

Luther was now in a particularly vulnerable position, he had not only attacked the Indulgences and the Curia but now he had attacked the Pope. Equally, following his reply to Prierias and his attack on indulgences in July of 1518,

² It is important to note that the action of nailing the thesis into the church door is not as reactionary as it appears. It was the common social custom for starting a public debate.

the Emperor of Germany, Maximilian, had written to the Pope on August 5th demanding action against Luther. Luther now stood as a lone monk against the world. On August 7th 1518 the Pope cited Luther to appear before him in Rome.

At this stage, Luther wrote to his protector Frederick the Wise and asked for his support. Frederick kept Luther at arms length and conducted a dialogue, indirectly through his chaplain, Spalatin. Yet, he opened a negotiation with Rome through the Papal legate, Cardinal Cajetan, who agreed to give Luther a personal hearing in private before the imperial diet at Augsburg. For Luther, this had the major advantage that it was on German soil, however, the danger of this audience must not be underestimated – it was much greater than any future event at Worms – here was an obscure Monk travelling to a Cardinal convinced that he was to die at the stake as a disgrace to his parents! Luther needed a guarantee of safety and eventually, this was obtained by Frederick the Wise from the Emperor Maximilian.

The Imperial Diet opened in pomp and splendour with both the Emperor and the Albert of Mainz (the Archbishop of the Indulgences) obtaining gifts from the Pope. From October 12th to the 14th, the Cardinal met Luther and he calmly demanded that he retract his articles as error. Luther responded that they were not error but were to be found in the Word of God. He then stated that he would not stand against the Word of God and his conscience. Cajetan was annoyed and dismissed the monk with the words, 'Recant, or do not come into my presence again!' At this stage, he ordered that Luther be captured. However, Luther was warned of the plot and from October 21st to 22nd of 1518 he escaped by night and fled to Nurnberg. At this stage, his friend Staupitz, who was under pressure from Cajetan, released Luther from his vows to the Augustinian order – maybe it was for his own protection, maybe it was to free him to speak more freely, yet, it was clear he had now gone too far for his former friend. By October 30th Luther was back in Wittenberg.

On January 4th 1519, the Pope decided that this troublesome monk should be tackled in a different way and sent Karl von Miltitz to soften the hearts of both Luther and Frederick the Wise. Luther apologised for his vehemence and even undertook to remain for disputation, provided his opponents were also silent. 8 days later, the Emperor Maximilian died, to be replaced on June 28th by Charles V.

At this stage it is worth mentioning that on August 25th of the previous year, 1518, Philip Melancthon had arrived in Wittenberg. Although, this is a sketch of Luther's life and it would be impossible to deal with Melancthon fairly as a mere side issue, but it must be noted that Melancthon was Luther's right hand man. He was one of the greatest scholars in Germany and was a calming force on the active Luther. Melancthon is rightly identified, as 2nd only to Luther in the work of the Reformation in Germany, yet, to be fair if it had not been for Luther there were times when he would have gone too far down the road of compromise with Rome.

On July 4th to 14th 1519, the pact with Luther and the Roman Catholics broke³ and he entered into a disputation with John Eck in the large and beautiful city of Leipzig⁴. Eck was well versed in the theology of the Church and he pushed Luther hard on the issues of John Hus. To this point, Luther had been careful to distance himself from Hus but, under Eck he found himself drawn more and more into a defence of aspects of Hus theology. By February of 1520, Luther wrote 'We are all Hussites without knowing it.'

Luther was now a major threat to the Papal status quo. On October 10 1520, he received a formal citation, or Bull, from the Pope. He replied to this in an article entitled, 'Against the execrable Bull of Antichrist'. At the time he began to speak a little more clearly against the abuses of the Roman system. Article 18 of his theses said 'indulgences are the pious defrauding of the faithful'... Luther now comments, 'I was wrong; I admit it, when I said that indulgences are the pious defrauding of the faithful. I recant and I say 'indulgences are the most impious frauds and impostors of rascally pontiffs, by which they deceive the souls and destroy the goods of the faithful.' In a similar vein, Article 29 said 'certain articles of John Hus condemned at the Council of Constance are most Christian, true and evangelical, which the universal Church cannot condemn.' Luther writes, 'I was wrong. I retract the statement that certain articles of John Hus are evangelical. I say now, 'not some but all the articles of John Hus were condemned by Antichrist and his apostles in the synagogue of Satan. And to your face, most holy Vicar of God, I say freely that the condemned articles of John Hus are evangelical and Christian, and yours are downright impious and diabolical.' Similarly, the empire abounded with accounts of the Pope's emissaries burning books written by Luther. On 10th December 1520, Melancthon issued an invitation to the University to assemble at 10 am at the Elster gate. Here beneath an oak tree, Luther burnt impious papal constitutions, the canon law, works of scholastic theology and then for good measure he took the papal bull and committed it to the flames.

With the burning of the Bull, Luther was now set in a path that led to either death or victory. The entire power base of medieval Europe, with its emperors, kings, cardinals, princes, abbots, monks and knights, watched spell bounded at a death struggle between the son of a German miner and the Supreme pontiff.

Having burnt the Bull, Luther could not expect anything from Rome expect banishment. His friend, Frederick the Wise, therefore, made representations to the German Emperor. The Romanists, having already tried to get Frederick

³ The disputation had been banned in Leipzig by the local bishop, however, Luther appealed to the local ruler Duke George and it went ahead. Luther's basic argument to the Duke was that the Church had always allowed disputations even on fundamental issues, such as, the Trinity. He said 'What good is a soldier if he is not allowed to fight, a sheep dog if he may not bark, and a theologian if he may not debate? Better spend money on old women who can knit than theologians who cannot discuss.'

⁴ The Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus fought for the survival of Protestantism in the Leipzig area and elsewhere during the post reformation wars. He was finally buried in the Marian Kirche in Wittenberg.

to hand over the monk⁵ also appealed the Charles V in his imperial diet in Worms. On March 6th 1521, Luther was invited to appear before the Emperor. His friends urged him not to go, fearing that he would be killed, yet, he replied 'If there are as many devils in Worms as tiles on the housetops I will still go there.' On April 16th he arrived to crowded streets, all Germany seemed to want to see this single man who had risen in revolt against the forces of Church and State. Interestingly, it is said that on his entry into Worms Luther penned his famous lines 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott..' or,

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood Of mortal ills prevailing,
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

The following day, the 17th of April, the crowds were so thick it was difficult for Luther to reach the assembly hall. At the entrance he found his way blocked by the celebrated George of Freundsberg, a famed and valiant knight who would rout the French. As Luther took the steps, he tapped his shoulder and said 'Poor monk! Poor monk! Thou art now making a nobler stand than I or any other captains have ever made in the bloodiest of our battles! But, if thy cause is just, and thou are sure, go forward in God's name and fear nothing! God will not forsake thee!' It was the tribute of the courage of the sword to the courage of the mind.

Into the Great Hall walked Luther, there the Emperor occupied the principal seat accompanied by his brother, the Archduke Ferdinand, arrayed around sat 6 electors, 24 dukes and 8 margraves representing the civil power of the Holy Roman Empire. In addition, were 30 archbishops, bishops and abbots, 7 ambassadors, papal nuncios and the deputies of the free cities. In total, Luther could observe in the pomp and splendour, 204 persons of rank. Clearly he was a little overawed and one prince approached saying, 'Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul!'

In the silence before the emperor, Johann von Eck stepped forward to open the proceedings and asked Luther whether he was the author of about 20 volumes placed on a table in the middle of the hall. Luther was a little taken aback that they had managed to procure the books, but Eck continued 'Are you prepared to retract these books and their contents'. The book titles were then read, and Luther stood to respond 'Most gracious emperor... His imperial majesty has asked me two questions.. as to the first, I acknowledge as mine the books that have just been named... as to the second.. I entreat your imperial majesty, with all humility to allow me time.'. The request was granted and the proceedings adjourned to the following day.

⁵ When the Romanists appealed to Frederick, he consulted Erasmus, who is said to have replied that Luther had committed two crimes, firstly, to attack the crown of the Pope and secondly, the bellies of the monks. A witty riposte that secured Luther's safety.

Luther spent his night in prayer. As the sun rose on April 18th 1521, we see the start of the greatest day in Luther's life. Again the streets were packed, again the steps were full, again the powers were gathered and again Eck asked his question 'would Luther retract?' He rose from his seat and speaking first in Latin and then in his native German, delivered a speech that shook the world. He concluded 'Unless, I am convinced by the testimony of scripture, or by the clearest reasoning... I cannot and I will not retract.. it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience.' Then looking around the assembly that held his life in its hands, he uttered the immortal words 'Here I stand, I can do no other; May God help me! Amen!'

The assembly was thunderstruck. The princes could not conceal their admiration. The emperor exclaimed 'This monk speaks with an intrepid heart and unshaken courage.'... the Spanish and Italian priests stared at the man whose greatness of soul they could not comprehend. The chancellor rose and said 'The emperor and the states of the empire will consult what course to adopt against this incorrigible heretic.' Frederick trembled, but Luther repeated 'May God be my helper, I retract nothing!'

The following day the Emperor delivered his verdict, 'I am about to dismiss the Augustine Luther... I shall then proceed against him and his adherents, as contumacious heretics, by excommunication, by interdict, and by every means calculated to destroy them. I call on the members of the states to behave like faithful Christians.' It was a death sentence. On April 25th, Luther left for Wittenburg.

As he travelled north, in a thick forest, he was suddenly surrounded by a group of heavily armed horsemen. Luther was seized from his carriage and he and the knights disappeared. Luther vanished from the German nation.

He was taken by these knights in secret to a Castle, set on a forest hill, high above Eisenach. It was a ploy, Frederick the Wise had ordered a select band of crack troops to kidnap his friends and take him to this Wartburg castle to preserve his life. Here he stayed from May 4th 1521 to March 1st 1522 in the guise of a knight, with the pseudonym Junker George. It was in this castle that Luther began the building work for the new world order. He took the Greek version of the Bible and translated the whole of the New Testament in a mere 11 weeks. Due to his lack of proficiency in Hebrew the Old Testament took longer and was published in several sections. But, how could Luther keep from the fray he returned to Wittenberg, during his absence one innovation after another had been culled from the Roman way of service. Nuns and monks married, the garb of the priest was discarded, vespers stopped, idols smashed and the mass reformed.

Finally, on June 13th 1525 Luther married the escaped nun Katherine von Bora. With this marriage, we see the conclusive change in Luther's life. He had thrown off the shackles of monastic belief and all that it entailed and was now an academic in the pay of the civil powers. At this point, Luther turned his attention to his newfound role as an academic in the University and a religious

statesman for the infant Protestant Church. The Augustinian monastery in Wittenburg, in which he had lived, was given to him and his new wife by its benefactor Frederick the Wise. The monastery that became his home is now the largest reformation museum in the world and contains a vast array of interesting material. Luther oversaw the establishment of the Protestant Church (including the first, in Torgau). The term Protestant being coined at the 2nd diet of Speyer on April 19th 1529. In June 1530, Luther and others gathered in Augsburg and produced the Augsburg confession for use by this new Church. This latter period of Luther's life was spent in the role of establishing the Church and clarifying its role with the state. It is interesting to note, that just prior to the Augsburg confession the Swiss had, under the influence of Zwingli distanced themselves from the Lutheran Protestants. Shortly afterwards, in the 2nd Kappel War of 1531, Zwingli died with a sword in his hand on the field of battle. Luther himself considered the death of Zwingli to be God's judgement on a minister who wielded the sword.

On January 28th 1546, Luther though an elderly and ill man arrived in Eisleben. He preached 4 times before February 18th when he retired to his room ill. There in bed, he thrice repeated the words 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit, thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth' and then gave up the ghost. His peaceful and serene death confounded the critics who had confidently predicted a violent end and was one more factor in bringing the German people into the Lutheran fold. On February 22nd 1546, his body was interred with full honours, beneath the pulpit, in the Castle Church at Wittenberg – the place where all those years earlier he had hammered his theses into the door. Today, across the aisle, is interred his close friend and confidant Philip Melancthon.

It would be wrong to view Luther as just a man of action. He was a man of many talents, in both his house in Wittenberg and the house in which he was born are some beautiful leather bound sets of his complete works. A set that runs to over 100 volumes – made all the more remarkable for the fact they were written by hand – it has been estimated that it would take a rapid writer an average lifetime to merely transcribe these books if he worked at a rate of 10 hours a day.

Before we draw the curtain on the heroic life of this amazing man it is interesting to note that in 1547, Emperor Charles V stood before Luther's grave in Wittenberg and asked by a captain, whether he should dig up the body and burn the bones – he replied 'I make war on the living, not upon the dead, Let this man rest until the day of the resurrection and of judgement.'

Today over 450 years later, statues of Luther adorn the towns with which he was associated. The major tourist offices in the beautiful medieval towns of Erfurt, Eisleben, Eisenach and Wittenburg are full of guides to the 'Luther sites' with short history's available in most languages. The Wartburg castle is a Unesco World Heritage site and Luther has been acknowledged as the architect of the Reformation – a movement which transformed the social, aesthetic, religious and cultural world in which we all live.

