LUTHER & HIS WORLD

Graham Tomlin

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Introduction

By any account, Martin Luther must rank as one of the most influential European figures of the last millennium. Marco Polo and Columbus opened up new continents, Shakespeare and Michelangelo produced some of the most sublime pieces of art, and Napoleon and Hitler changed the political face of their centuries. Yet Luther and the Reformation he triggered have made a huge impact not just on Europe, but also on North America, Australia and – by means of the Protestant missionary movement – throughout the rest of the world. Protestantism shaped a whole new way of life for countless people across the Western world and beyond, which coloured their approaches to God, work, politics, leisure, family – in fact, almost every aspect of human life. It played a seminal role in the early development and continuing self-image of the United States, and in the emergence of democracy and economic and religious freedoms in Europe.

> 'To people of all nationalities the first Protestants bequeathed in spite of themselves a heritage of spiritual freedom and equality, the consequences of which are still working themselves out in the world today.'
>
> **Stephen Ozment, *Protestants*, 1992**

Protestantism was one of the key movements ushering in changes from the medieval to the modern world. Luther cannot claim credit nor can he be blamed for the whole of what eventually became Protestantism, but as one who played a critical role in the emergence of a new church and a new way of life for millions of people, the influence of his actions and beliefs on the past 500 years has been incalculable. The modern world can barely be understood without them.

Yet who was Luther? During the 500 years since he lived, Martin Luther has been seen as just about everything: from an infallible teacher of the truth (17th-century Lutheran orthodoxy), to the supreme example of rationalist individualism (the Enlightenment), to the man chiefly responsible for the German churches' near total failure to oppose the rise of the Nazis in 1930s Germany. Alongside this, the Roman Catholic judgment has changed from seeing Luther as the arch-heretic who fatally split a united European Christendom, to a much more sympathetic understanding, almost claiming him as one of their own in recent years.

This book, naturally, paints its own portrait of Luther. It paints a picture of a man struggling with some of the deepest of all human questions – if there is a God, is he good? Can he be trusted? What or who is the power that lies behind the universe? Luther battled with these questions in a profound and sometimes agonizing way from very early in his life. He tried the various contemporary solutions on offer, including the monastic and the academic life, before stumbling upon an answer which stilled his fears and satisfied the deepest yearnings of his soul. In the process, the church in Europe, already going through a period of great upheaval, experienced dramatic change and deep division. Luther was one part of a large and complex story, but he remains a key figure in the development of the modern world. In recent years, the emphasis among historians has been to view the Reformation as an economic or sociological phenomenon, and to concentrate not so much on the 'big names' of the movement, but rather on exploring how it affected ordinary people in Germany, Switzerland and beyond. These approaches have yielded some invaluable results and have helped people to understand the movement far better than ever before. Nonetheless, the Reformation was still, however, a movement sparked off by particular people writing particular ideas, which then had an effect far wider and greater than they could have envisaged. And Luther, as perhaps the chief of these people, deserves study even now.

This book tries to present an accessible and attractive modern introduction to Luther's life, ideas and significance for today, in which recent scholarly research on Luther is implicit but not intrusive. The author's hope is that it will stimulate readers to read Luther for themselves. Many medieval and Renaissance writers are pretty turgid and tedious to read. Luther is neither of these things. A facility with language, a colourful imagination and a blunt Saxon frankness all combine to make his writing hold attention, even when tackling obscure aspects of late-medieval theology. Luther is rarely dull. At the end of this book, a list of suggestions for further reading points the way for those who want to explore his significance a little further.

CHAPTER 1

The Friar

Eisleben was a mining town. Even today the surrounding landscape is punctuated with dark conical slag heaps, the unmistakable scars of excavation. It was never the prettiest of places, but it was at least prosperous, and as the 15th century drew towards its close, it was already attracting many expectant prospectors from further afield in Thuringia and beyond. Among the hopeful new arrivals was Hans Luder. He had come from the village of Möhra but, as his younger brother had inherited the family farmland on his father's death, according to the local custom on inheritance, Hans had to find some other way of making a living. Having worked in the mines of Möhra for a few years, he wanted to move into mine management or ownership. Eisleben seemed a good bet, being a thriving centre of copper extraction. So, in the early summer of 1483, he moved to the town with his pregnant wife, Margarethe, renting lodgings whilst he tried his luck in the business of mining.

Margarethe Luder finally produced her second child on 10 November that year. A day later, the baby boy was taken to St Peter's and St Paul's, the nearest church, just a few yards away from the house, where he was duly baptized. He was given the name of the saint whose day it was: Martin. Eisleben did not prove a successful venture for Hans Luder. Competition was fierce, and he was only one among many trying to forge a living out of copper. Within another year, he had moved on, this time to Mansfeld. Here, he managed to borrow money from some wealthy merchants. He leased a smelting works from the counts of Mansfeld, and gained part ownership in a number of mines. Even though it took him many years to pay off his loans – and

meanwhile the family had to live frugally and carefully – Hans was upwardly mobile, ambitious and determined.

Margarethe Luder had eight or nine children, of whom three or four died young – no one could quite remember how many, because infant mortality was such a common part of life. Martin, the eldest of the surviving children, was clearly bright. He was especially close to his brother, Jacob, and endured what was a strict, but not unusual, upbringing. His father's ambition stretched not just to his business concerns, but also to his son's education, especially as he showed some academic potential during his early years at the school in Mansfeld. Rather than take the usual course of training Martin to inherit the family business, Hans Luder decided to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to ensure a good education for his son.

'I was born in Eisleben, and baptized in St Peter's there. I do not remember this, but I believe my parents and fellow countrymen.'

Martin Luther in a letter to Georg Spalatin, January 1520

In Mansfeld itself, educational possibilities were limited, so when he was 13, Martin was sent 40 miles down the River Elbe to a school in Magdeburg, a much bigger town of 12,000 inhabitants. Here, the young scholar encountered the life of a large city for the first time. For some unknown reason, Hans then moved Martin on to Eisenach. He perhaps hoped, vainly as it turned out, that some of his relations there would take the boy in. He did, however, find lodgings with the affluent Cotta and Schalbe families, who were noted for their simple generosity and genuine piety, which contrasted with the strict regime and strenuous social aspirations of his own home. Martin always spoke with great fondness of Eisenach as *meine liebe Stadt* – 'my dear town'.

School, like Martin's father, was strict. Martin once recalled being soundly beaten for failing to conjugate a verb which he had not yet learned. In Mansfeld, and then in Eisenach, under his teacher Wiegand Güldennapf, he became word perfect in Latin and German grammar. He learned the basics of the church's

liturgy, singing for extra income as a choirboy in St George's, the main parish church in the centre of the town, as well as from house to house. Luder's ambitions for his promising son did not end in Eisenach, however. He clearly wanted him to enter a less precarious and more prestigious trade than his own, so in 1501 he decided that Martin should gain a good university education and prepare for a life as a lawyer.

University days

The city of Erfurt was bigger than anything that Martin had yet seen, and its famous university was already nearly 150 years old. The university itself lay tucked into a bend in the River Gera, which meandered through the crowded city. Erfurt boasted about 36 different churches, their spires straining into the sky. It was home to at least 11 houses of different religious monastic orders. As a result, Erfurt was known in Germany as 'little Rome'. It was, by the standards of the time, a significant place, and the size of its great cathedral, as well as the numerous churches, must have made quite an impression on any young student arriving for the first time. By the time Martin arrived there, the university was, to a certain extent, living on its past reputation. He later commented on how the most popular 'courses' were those offered in the inns and taverns of the city, referring to the university as 'a bawdy house and a beer house'.

Nevertheless, this was an exciting venture for this 17-year-old, as for the first time he entered the university setting in which he was to spend most of his life. In Erfurt, as in all European universities of the time, the Greek philosopher Aristotle was the chief authority. His ideas were used as a basic guide to examining important questions in all subjects. Like all students in the Faculty of Arts, Martin first studied logic, dialectics, rhetoric and grammar – in other words, the methods he would have to use in his future education – all through the lens of Aristotle. In the second year, students would progress to study Aristotle's

texts on ethics, politics, economics and metaphysics, the study of abstract ideas and realities, beyond [meta-] physics. From there, they would move on to music, mathematics, geometry and astronomy. By this stage, having received the status of 'Master', Martin should have received a good general training in all the liberal arts, from which he could move on to specialize in a chosen field, such as Theology, Law or Medicine.

Students at the university lived in special lodgings or *bursa*. For most of his time, Martin Luder (he later changed his name to the more sophisticated-sounding Luther) probably stayed in a hostel called St George's, on the banks of the small, gently flowing river, just to the north of the university area. Here, life was strictly supervised. The day began and ended in chapel, and meals were eaten to the accompaniment of readings from the Bible, or other suitable books. Students slept together, crammed into small dormitories, and the warden kept a close eye on his lodgers – even having a say in their final results.

Martin's early university career was nothing special. He came an undistinguished 30th out of 57 in his baccalaureate examinations at the end of his first year, perhaps as a result of his slow educational start in Mansfeld. Gradually, however, his ability began to emerge. Although 300 had started with him, Luther was one of only 17 students who finally graduated as Master of Arts in February 1505, being placed second in his year.

From that point, the plan was to specialize in law. Hans Luder's natural hope was that Martin would progress towards a respectable career in a legal, civic or even political position as an advisor to the local sovereign, the Elector. Yet within months, that plan was ruined by a dramatic event which changed the course of his life for ever.

Luther and religion

While Martin Luther was in many respects an ordinary, if gifted, student – sociable, musical, popular and religious – in

another respect, he stood apart from his peers. He seemed to possess an unusually scrupulous nature, and suffered from bouts of depression or, as the medievals called it, Despair. Scholars have for years tried to identify the source of these episodes, which seem to have combined physical, spiritual and psychological symptoms.

Whatever personal factors were involved, Luther's anxieties were inevitably tied up with religion. Popular religion at the time was strongly tinged with a fear of death and the following judgment. Earthly life was a brief interlude of preparation for the real thing – eternity to come – which would either be spent with the saints in everlasting blessedness, or tormented by devils in an eternity of conscious pain. Which of these was your fate depended on how this life was spent. As so often in Christian history, the fear of hell was more vivid than the desire for heaven. The Christ of much late-medieval art was the fearsome judge, brooding over the world, the sword of judgment coming out of one ear, the lily of mercy out of the other, watching over the division of humanity into 'saved' and 'damned' with impassive justice. Manuals on preparing for dying, skeletal monuments on tombs in churches and, of course, images of the dying Christ on the cross helped to focus the mind of the medieval Christian on the inevitability of death and the judgment of God.

Meditations on the death and passion of Christ encouraged penitents to feel sympathy with his sufferings, and sorrow for their sins, which made him die. The questions of judgment were foremost in many minds. Would God have mercy on me? Would God be gracious, ushering me into the company of heaven? Or would he be condemning, banishing me to endless anguish, aware of what I have missed out on, an agony which can never know an end? Luther was all too aware of these questions, and felt them more keenly than most. He also knew of the one sure way of forestalling the judgment to come – to enter a monastery.

Preparing for death in the Middle Ages

Medieval people were keenly aware of the nearness of death. Many manuals appeared to help to prepare Christians for the moment of dying. Dietrich Kolde's *Mirror for Christians*, a catechism for uneducated laypeople which was published in 1470, included the following instructions:

When it gets to the point of separation, or when bitter death is coming, then you should say the following repeatedly: 'O holy God! O powerful God! O compassionate God! O strict and righteous judge, have mercy on me, a poor sinner, when I must answer at your terrifyingly strict court, and when I give testimony as a poor human being about all my words and all my deeds. O dear Jesus, then may your holy bitter death, your precious blood and your unspeakable suffering stand between you and all my sins… O Mary, let me never hear the voice of Jesus the strict judge. O gentle, compassionate and sweet Mary, stand by me now, because today I must fight a battle on which my poor soul's eternal bliss or eternal damnation depends.'

A new direction

Luther returned to Erfurt to take up his legal studies in May 1505, after a period of characteristic melancholy. It seems he was not entirely happy with his father's wishes for him. They had argued about the way ahead, but his father had the parental right to dictate what his son should do. However, unexpected events were soon to change Luther's direction in life.

Luther had already had one brush with death. Some years before, he was walking out in the fields with a friend when he slipped and fell. As he did so, the short dagger which he, like most students, carried pierced his thigh and ruptured an artery. He was in serious danger of bleeding to death, and would have done so, had his friend not been able to call for help. During the summer

of 1505, he made a brief trip back home to Mansfeld. One warm day early in July, he was walking back to Erfurt, ready to resume his work the next day. Dark clouds had gathered and a summer storm began. As he passed within half a mile or so of a small village called Stotternheim, a bolt of lightning flashed into the field beside him, knocking him to the ground in terror. In a moment of naked panic, the inner instincts of his heart came suddenly to the surface, as he cried out 'Blessed St Anne! I will become a monk!' (St Anne was the patron saint of miners, his father's profession, and a popular saint of the time.)

> 'Afterwards, I regretted the vow, and others tried to dissuade me. But I stuck to it… I never dreamed of leaving the monastery.'
>
> **Martin Luther, 'Table Talk', January 1538**

Badly shaken, Luther continued the remaining miles of his journey to Erfurt, and told his friends of what had happened. They had no inkling of his spiritual distress, and the new vow came as a complete surprise. Most advised him to ignore it; some said he should keep it. Luther himself was in no doubt that he should abide by what he had promised.

A decision by such a talented student to enter the monastery was by no means unusual – yet it was drastic. This was to exchange the relatively carefree world of a scholar for a life of severe mortification and self-denial. Luther knew exactly the kind of life he was letting himself in for, and why he was entering the monastery. This was no desire for an easy life, enjoying the fruits of the monastery field and cellar. Nor was it running away from his father. He did it to save his soul. It was an attempt, somehow, to please and appease the God of judgment, who was waiting for him at the moment of death. It was out of a simple desire to find a God who would forgive and love him that he embarked on this new, more intense quest in the spiritual rigours of monastic life.

> 'I took the vow not for the sake of my belly, but for the sake of my salvation, and I observed all our statutes very strictly.'
>
> **Martin Luther, 'Table Talk', March 1539**

So, against his father's will and the advice of many friends, just a fortnight later, having cancelled his registration on the

law course, Luther walked the few yards across the bridge from St George's Hostel, up the narrow lane leading to the door of the monastery of the Order of Augustinian Friars, knocked and asked for admittance. He became a 'postulant' for a few weeks, still wearing his old clothes, while the prior of the monastery considered his request for entry. A few weeks later, he was admitted as a 'novice'. During the ceremony, he lay prostrate before the altar in the chapel of the monastery, arms extended in the shape of a cross, to symbolize the sacrifices he was about to make. A list was read out of the hardships of life in the monastery, including the long hours reciting services in chapel, the limited diet, the subduing of the flesh, and the need to beg in the streets. After various prayers, hymns and vows, the new postulant was formally handed over to the novice master, who would supervise his progress in the probationary year, until he could be admitted as a full member of the order. His hair was shaven on top, to create the normal friar's 'tonsure', and, for the first time, Martin Luther dressed in monastic novice's garb.

When his father found out what he had done, he was furious. The years of sacrifice he had made to give his son a good education, his plans to see his gifted eldest son marry and settle down into a good and lucrative career, were all wasted by this impulsive decision – and yet he knew he could do nothing. A call to the monastery was the only kind of calling which had precedence over the rights of a father. He wrote his son an angry letter, which disowned and clearly shook the young Luther. But his father's anger soon cooled, helped by remembering how the plague had killed two of his other sons, and also by a false report of Luther's own death – compared to that, maybe his becoming a monk was not so bad. In any case, Hans Luder agreed – reluctantly – not to oppose the move.

A year later, Martin took his final vows to become a full Augustinian friar. This, it seemed, was the point of no return. Having indicated his wish to proceed, and the novice master having confirmed that he had satisfactorily completed his

novitiate year, the novice allowed the prior to remove his novice's cowl and replace it with the black-and-white habit of the Augustinian order. Placing his hand on an open copy of the order's rule, he then promised obedience to God, to Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the prior, and to a life of poverty and chastity. After more prayers and exhortations, he was ushered to his new seat in the choir, congratulated by his fellow monks, and so began a new life.

The Order of Augustinian Friars

The Order of Augustinian Friars originated in groups of hermits, who lived solitary lives in the mountains and hills of northern Italy in the 13th century. The order was a combination of two monastic traditions. One was the older monastic format of living in monastery buildings. The other was the begging and the theological interests characteristic of the Franciscan and Dominican Friars, who, like the Augustinians, also originated in the 13th century. Augustinian monasteries such as the one in Erfurt combined a strict and ordered lifestyle, with opportunities for intelligent young monks to remain involved in university life. The combination of a serious search for salvation, with the opportunity to continue to study theology in the way with which he had become familiar, made this, out of all the monasteries in Erfurt, exactly what Luther was looking for.

Monastic life

At the time, entry into the monastic life was considered a kind of second baptism. In other words, this was a complete renewal of the Christian life, a new start, and a restoration to an original state of grace, in which purity before God was re-established. This could, of course, be lost through subsequent sin, but it is possible to imagine the elation felt by this new friar as he contemplated a step which seemed to banish his spiritual depression. Despite the lingering sadness of the rupture in the

relationship with his father, Luther felt that at last he had found the road to salvation.

Life in the monastery was even more strictly regulated than in the university *bursa* from which he had come. The day was structured around the services held in the monastery chapel, known as the ‘canonical hours’, in which all 150 Psalms were recited each week. The day began with Matins and Lauds, which entailed being woken in the small hours of the morning. This was followed by the service of Prime at six o’clock in the morning, Terce at nine o’clock, and Sext at noon. After a meal and an hour’s rest, the afternoon contained None and Vespers, and Compline rounded off the day after the evening meal. Alongside these, a Mass was said each morning and, at other times, special Masses might be added for a host of different reasons. This meant spending at least six hours a day in church. Apart from this, monks would read (Luther soon started memorizing the Rule of St Augustine), perform various tasks around the monastery, and wander the narrow streets of Erfurt, dressed in the usual black cloak, begging for sustenance. Meals were taken just twice a day, except during Advent and Lent, when once a day sufficed, with dry bread and wine in the evening. At all times, the food was pretty meagre.

Besides the hours in the chapel, a number of other features pervaded the lives of the monks. One was the cold. Only one room of the monastery was heated, and the monks’ cells, the chapel and the refectory must have been bitterly cold during the long, icy winters of northern Germany. In winter, the monks were allowed a pair of special slippers, and they could wear animal furs inside their monk’s cowl. Yet, in an atmosphere where it was felt that it was especially pleasing to God to endure painful conditions while praying, one can imagine why Luther later recalled how he would often nearly freeze in his cowl during the services. Another factor was the silence, which was imposed for most of the day and night. Meals were held in quiet, apart from the accompaniment of edifying readings from the works of such

masters of monastic theology as Bernard of Clairvaux, a 12th-century Cistercian monk, whose writings influenced Luther a great deal in these early years. During these periods of silence, ordinary communications, such as asking for milk or asking the time, had to be done using an agreed sign language.

Neglecting to say the hours (services), or omitting part of the prescribed prayers, was considered a sin by the Augustinian order. So was permitting the eyes to wander during the service, lateness, laughing, grumbling or spilling food. These, however, were considered minor sins. More serious offences were lying, stealing and speaking with a woman. At least once a week, in the daily chapter meeting of the monastery, the monks were encouraged to confess their sins of commission or neglect, and monks could even report on each other's sins. The prior would then impose a suitable punishment, which might often include the saying of further prayers, or recitations of psalms.

> 'I almost fasted myself to death, for again and again I went for three days without taking a drop of water or a morsel of food. I was very serious about it.'
>
> **Martin Luther, 'Table Talk', March 1539**

Luther took these austerities very seriously. During his first months as a monk, he experienced peace at heart and a sense of at last being pleasing to God. In the monastery library, he held for the first time a full copy of the Bible, which he read eagerly, with fascination and thoroughness. It was not long before he was recognized as a sincere and dedicated monk, if perhaps a little over-scrupulous. He would often fast more than was strictly necessary. Several times he recalled forgetting part of a psalm, or being unsure about whether he had in fact included all the prayers he should, and so he would go back to the chapel to say them all over again, to make sure that he had completed them properly. Confession became an increasingly important part of his life. Monastic spirituality encouraged hunting out the smallest of sins, to ensure that they were fully confessed and that absolution was received. Only thus could the monks be sure they were in a state of grace before God. As one of the more

dedicated of the monks, Luther would engage in long bouts of self-examination, once confessing for six hours at a stretch. One of his confessors rebuked him gently for an over-precise nature, suggesting that the sins he kept bringing up were barely sins at all. Luther, however, could not see the point. Were not all sins, small or large, displeasing to God, and potentially fatal to his prospects of salvation?

On his own admission, and from the evidence of his contemporaries, Luther's struggles in the monastery were not the standard temptations. He does not appear to have been abnormally plagued by sexual fantasies, nor was he anxious about money, given his relatively frugal background. Boredom, or *accidie*, was not an especial difficulty, either. Instead, if there was a lingering fear, it was the anxiety over what God really thought of him. We will explore this more in due course.

> 'I was very pious in the monastery, yet I was sad because I thought God would not be gracious to me. I said Mass and prayed and hardly saw or heard a woman as long as I was in the order.'
>
> **Martin Luther, 'Table Talk', spring 1533**

Luther's colleagues

Among the 50 or so Augustinian friars in Erfurt, Luther encountered a number of figures who played crucial roles in the drama which would unfold. Johann von Paltz had been Head of Theological Studies in the monastery for the past two decades. Although an argument with colleagues in the order led to his departure soon after Luther's arrival, he was a well-known figure in the theological landscape, and a Professor of Theology in the university. His sermons and theological lectures would urge the right use of the Mass, penance and indulgences (of which more later), through which a true penitence could be achieved with which God would be satisfied. Johann Nathin became Luther's theological tutor after von Paltz left, and even boasted further afield of the new brother's dramatic conversion to the cloister. Johann Lang, who became a close friend and supporter of Luther, and Bartholomäus Arnoldi, who had taught

Luther theology in the university, soon followed him into the monastery as well.

The main influence upon the new young friar was Johann von Staupitz, the Vicar General of the Augustinian Observant Congregation. In this wider role, the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt fell under his jurisdiction, and he was a regular visitor. It was he who, on hearing of Luther's interest in the Bible and his desire to study it, asked for him to be removed from sweeping and cleaning duties, and instead to be set the task of memorizing the whole Bible by heart. This small step accounts for Luther's extraordinary grasp and memory of scripture in the years to come, and had consequences far beyond what Staupitz could ever have imagined.

The priesthood

It was not unusual for a dedicated monk such as Luther to be recommended to prepare for the priesthood. Training consisted primarily in working through the standard late-medieval textbook, the *Sacri Canonis Missae Expositio* (*Exposition of the Sacred Canon of the Mass*) written in 1499 by Gabriel Biel, the famous Tübingen theologian. This was a lengthy and detailed commentary on the liturgy of the Mass, which discussed the key theological questions raised by the different parts of the service. It also advised on the various pastoral problems a priest might encounter arising out of the Mass, such as how to advise people to approach the Mass, or how to cope with feelings of unworthiness.

> 'The sacrament of the eucharist, as a sacrifice offered to the Most High Father, takes away not only venial but also mortal sin, I do not say only of those who receive it, but, of all those for whom it is offered, so far as concerns guilt and penalty… And therefore this service is offered for the living and the dead.'
>
> **Gabriel Biel, *Sacri Canonis Missae Expositio,* 1499**

Here, Luther learned how the Mass did not exactly repeat the sacrifice of Christ fully, but in a lesser way. The priest offered Christ's broken body and blood before God, on behalf of the church, just as Christ had done on Calvary, pleading the

merits of his death for their sake. The Mass, wrote Biel, 'kindles love, keeps up the memory of Christ's passion, sustains for the performance of good… cleanses venial sin and sometimes mortal sin… gives the life of grace… fortifies against the falls which are the result of human weakness, and lessens the fire of fleshly lust in the face of the assaults of the devil'. Receiving these benefits, however, depended upon the attitude which a Christian brought to the Mass. To come with only a vague sorrow for sin, or without a sense of love for God in the heart, would lessen the effects of the Mass on the heart. In effect, the Mass was seen as an offering made by the priest to God, to ask for God's help. It was a form of prayer – especially effective prayer at that – which pleased God and merited more of his grace.

'I was so terrified by the words, "to thee, the eternal, living and true God", that I thought of running away from the altar and said to my prior, "Reverend Father, I'm afraid I must leave the altar." He shouted to me, "Go ahead, faster, faster."'

Martin Luther, on his first Mass as a priest, 2 May 1507

Having worked his way through, and taken careful attention of, Biel's work, Luther was finally ordained as a priest in the imposing cathedral in Erfurt on 3 April 1507. The new priest was to celebrate Mass for the first time on 2 May that year. Friends were invited, as was his father, who came with a large retinue from Mansfeld. As the day drew nearer, Luther found himself filled with foreboding at what he was about to do. To handle the very body and blood of Christ, into which the bread and wine was to be transformed, was such a breathtaking thing to do that Luther trembled in his spirit at the prospect.

During the service, facing the altar in the by now familiar chapel, as he found himself uttering the words, '… we offer unto thee, the living and the true God', Luther suddenly faltered. As he put it later, 'Who am I, that I should lift up my eyes or raise up my hands to the divine Majesty? For I am dust and ashes, and

full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God!' He whispered his misgivings to the prior of the monastery who was assisting him, but as these were not unusual emotions for a new priest, especially one as scrupulous as brother Martin, the prior advised him to continue nonetheless. These, however, were not routine utterances of a feigned humility, nor were they the paranoid fears of a psychologically disturbed neurotic. They were the natural and inevitable consequence of the medieval view of the Mass, taken seriously. It may be hard for modern sensibilities to understand, yet given what Luther and his world believed about God, the awful judge of humankind, and given what Biel had taught Luther about the Mass, it is perhaps not surprising that a thoughtful and attentive student such as Luther would tremble at performing such an act.

'I chose 21 saints and prayed to three every day when I celebrated Mass… I prayed especially to the Blessed Virgin, who with her womanly heart would compassionately appease her Son.'

Martin Luther, 'Table Talk', 1539

The day still held one more dramatic turn. The service over, the new priest and the congregation retired to a separate room, where they were to celebrate with wine and rich food. Perhaps still shaken by his terrifying experience at the altar, and needing reassurance, he asked his father whether he was now reconciled to his son's entry into the monastery and ready to give his approval. Hans Luder, no longer able to hide his smouldering resentment, accused Martin in front of the guests of disobedience to his parents, leaving them to fend for themselves in their old age. Taken aback, Luther countered that as God had directly called him out of the thunderclap at Stotternheim, surely Hans should see this was God's will. 'God grant that it was not an apparition of the devil!' came the gruff reply.

Fifteen years later, the son admitted that his father's words 'penetrated to the depths of my soul and stayed there'. This God whom he feared, the God who had apparently called him into the monastery, the God before whom he had stood trembling at

his first Mass – was he really the good God which Luther longed for him to be, the God of grace and kindness and mercy? Or was he in fact the devil? Was he an angry, remorseless figure, dragging him through doubt, despair and self-torment, before picking up on the slightest excuse to damn him for all eternity? It was a question that demanded a reply.