

Hymns: 160 Powerful in making us wise to salvation
154 Come Divine Interpreter
153 Break thou the bread of life
159 Not far beyond the sea nor high
676 Christ, from whom all blessings flow

Readings: Psalm 34 vv 1-8
Mark 10: 46-52
2 Timothy 3:12 – 4:5

HEAR, READ, MARK, LEARN AND INWARDLY DIGEST

A year ago, Christians around the world commemorated the 500th Anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, and specifically the influence of Martin Luther. The Reformation led to the fracture of the Christian Church into different branches, Catholic and Protestant (initially including Lutheranism, Calvinism, and the Church of England).

So it was in October last year that I began an exciting literary journey when I bought a book called *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* by Lyndal Roper. It was fascinating, so I then read *Protestants: the Radicals who made the modern world* (by Alex Ryrie). I was now enthralled by the 16th and 17th centuries, so I read other historical, biographical and theological books, adding the medieval mystics and poetry for good measure. For light relief, I even branched into murder stories (not my usual fare!) set in the 16^c and 17^c, but written by a modern-day historian.

One of the issues at the heart of the 16^c theological differences was disagreement about the Bible. Who should read the Bible? What language should it be in?

Traditionalist Christians were very clear. The Bible should be read only by the clergy, who should read it in Latin to their congregations (though they might themselves read the OT in Hebrew and the NT in Greek if they were able) and the Bible should be read only in Church. Some churches had beautiful wall-paintings of stories from the Bible to captivate and inspire worshippers, and were particularly helpful if people couldn't understand the readings.

Some people disagreed, thinking that not only the clergy, but wealthy, educated men might want to own and read the Bible themselves. The Reformers however wanted much wider circulation, thinking that maybe even the ploughboy should be able to read a Bible (though he would need first to be taught to read at all!). Translations into a number of European languages caused much argument, and many deaths on both sides: traditionalists and reformers.

In Britain people were tortured, and then burnt at the stake, after they were accused of translating the Bible, or of conspiring to circulate such Bibles. King Henry VIII himself wrestled with the questions of belief, and right practice. He broke away from

the Catholic Church, and the Pope, and eventually established the Church of England, with himself as its 'Supreme Head'. (Later monarchs, including our current Queen, have the title 'Supreme Governor'.) Gradually things changed in Britain and the reformers made progress. Henry VIII authorised the Great Bible which appeared in 1540.

The King James Version, came out in 1611, at the instigation of King James I of England, and VI of Scotland, with the note that it was 'appointed to be read in churches' (and so is also known as The Authorised Version).

It occurs to me that the books I mentioned earlier, the different types of literature I had read this past year: theology, history, biography, law, wisdom and poetry, stories of disaster and stories of grace and salvation, are some of the themes of the Bible, which itself is a library of 66 books, 39 in the OT, and 27 in the NT. Just to add a contemporary fact: the Bible is said to be currently available in 670 languages, and the New Testament alone in 1,521 languages.

The Bible Sunday Collect we prayed earlier, was written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (who himself died by burning in 1556). This Collect was later included in The Book of Common Prayer of 1662, and reflects the concern of the English Reformers that the Scriptures assume their proper authority and place, not only for doctrine and in worship, but also in daily living. As the Collect says, we believe that the Bible was inspired by God, and written for our learning. This wonderful book was made accessible for us by the faith and skill and discipleship of martyrs and saints.

How do we respond? Let us consider briefly what the Collect asks of us:

To HEAR.

When the Collect was written, most people couldn't read, though there was a Bible in every church, supposedly 'in a language understood by the people'. The congregation would need to listen as it was read aloud. Later, when the King James Version, (KJV) was being translated, every sentence was read aloud and had to be approved or altered by the translators before it was agreed.

READ

It has been claimed that the translation of the Bible into English, and its availability, was the single spur to the growth of the English-speaking world. How should we read the Bible?

Firstly, we need to look at the Scriptures with an investigative and curious mind, and to use our intelligence and imagination to discover what type of literature we are reading.

Secondly, we need to make the distinction between what is to be understood literally – like Jesus' telling us to forgive our enemies – and what is to be understood as a metaphor, as when Jesus tells stories, and uses images, such as 'I am the vine and you are the branches'. Such images help us to employ our imagination when we read them.

Thirdly we sometimes read the Bible, as a discipline, a spiritual practice, to take us further on the road of our Christian discipleship. There are lots of aids for this: meeting with a group to study the Bible, reading Bible commentaries, or daily Bible

notes. I also commend to you the (free) Methodist Church app for mobile phones, which has a daily Bible reading a brief commentary, and something to think about. It follows the lectionary which we Methodists use, along with many of our sister denominations. This way it is easy to have your Bible study material always at hand.

MARK

This implies a serious engagement with the Bible text, and meditating on what it means to us. It also encourages us to make space for God to speak to us in the silence.

LEARN

Learning by heart. This was common when I was at school for Times Tables, poetry, and for some passages of the Bible (KJV of course in those days!) I do want to encourage you to refresh your memory of passages you may have once known and may like to revisit.

In one Methodist circuit, we preachers used to take services in retirement homes, or sheltered-housing complexes. It was inspiring sometimes when people with often quite serious health problems would join in with well-known and loved Bible passages and hymns. It helps at any age if you can keep your memory stocked with treasures you can visit any time.

INWARDLY DIGEST

Just as the food we eat is digested and used for our bodily good, so we are invited to feed our souls. One way of doing this is to ponder on a word, a phrase, or a sentence and see how God might speak to us, bringing as the collect says 'patience and comfort'.

AND FINALLY let me ask you a question.

What is the most valuable thing in your home? How would you judge? The most expensive, most sentimental, the oldest, the newest? Think of your possessions. I wonder how many of us would immediately say 'my Bible?' The Bible for which so many saints and martyrs died, so that we their successors could read it for ourselves, in our own language, whenever we choose to do so.

Thomas Cranmer, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, was asked by King Henry VIII to write a preface for the Great Bible. He included these words:

'I would advise you all, who come to the reading or hearing of this book, which is the word of God, the most precious jewel, and the most holy relic that remains on the earth, that you bring with you the fear of God, with all due reverence...'

In the Coronation Service of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, she was given a Bible, with these words: *'Receive this Book, the most valuable thing this world affords. This is the Royal Law. These are the lively oracles of God.'*

May the Bible, the lively oracles of God, be for us too 'the most valuable thing this world affords'. Amen