

Meditation | Scottish Heritage Sunday

Chris Currie

II Corinthians 5:16-21

October 30, 2022 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

Imagine, if you will, that you are a common man or woman in medieval Europe living 500 or 600 years ago. Perhaps you are a peasant on a feudal fiefdom, or you live in a village like Wittenberg or walled city like Edinburgh or a city-state like Geneva and you are a shopkeeper or cobbler or tradesperson. At the center of your village or town or city center is a local parish church or cathedral where you, your neighbors, and most of the townspeople come to worship. The floors of the cathedral are bare flag stone and are cold and hard to kneel on for mass. Some people bring wooden stools but most stand or kneel. There are no pews or places to sit in the nave of the church but on the other side of the screen there is the choir where brothers and monks and choristers sit and chant. At the opposite end of the church is the altar where the priest leads the Latin mass facing away from you. Above the den of your neighbors and townspeople it is near impossible to hear what is being said by the priest in the service. When the words are spoken and the bread is broken or rather when the priest utters the words in the liturgy, 'hoc est corpus meum,' 'this is my body,' a bell rings and the priest lifts the elements high for all to see, and the crowd quiets down in a moment of holy reverence.

The entire service is conducted in Latin, the language of the Roman Empire, the language adopted by the church in Rome the fourth century, the language that Jerome used to translate the scriptures into what was called the Vulgate Bible because it translated the scriptures into what was then the vulgar tongue, the common language of the people. Your average medieval commoner 500-600 years ago might have known a few Latin phrases and perhaps some prayers and saints, but the words and language of the mass would have been unintelligible for the most part. Latin was the language of law and education and diplomacy, but not the language of the marketplace or the home or the neighbor and friend in the street. And nearly all medieval persons were illiterate. One of the striking features of the cathedral or local parish church was the stained-glass windows, which reached their height in sophistication and beauty in the high Middle Ages, between 1150 and 1500. While an illiterate society might not be able to read or understand the language of liturgy and religion, they could engage with the gospel stories and the heroes and heroines of scripture, along with the saints of the church, through stained glass. Medieval cathedrals from Notre Dame to Chartres to Salisbury, York, and Canterbury offered beautiful images of gospel stories to an illiterate medieval population through majestic and physical beauty that sought to impart the majestic nature of God's vastness and beauty and our own smallness in comparison. Stories or figures not depicted in stained glass were rarely known. A story in the Bible not found in stained In the medieval world, unless you were pursuing a university education, further

investigation and reading was rare if not possible. There was no hearing a sermon and wanting to read more. Books were rare commodities and libraries were only kept by the wealthy and well connected. The introduction of the printing press in the middle of the 15th century allowed for printed materials to be produced in mass quantity, cheaply, and also demanded that material be printed in a language familiar to the local populace.

Just like reading, scripture translation, and engagement with written text, congregational singing was a rarity in the local medieval parish or even the cathedral church. Yes, there might be Gregorian chants led by monks or brothers from a local priory; cathedral churches might have choristers or a boys choir, but the idea that every common person who entered the church had a vocation that could serve God, a mind to seek God's wisdom, and a voice to sing God's praises in the act of communal worship, would have been revolutionary and rare prior to the Reformation. One would not think of singing hymns like 'Now Thank We All our God' around the family hearth or singing Psalm 100 'All People That on Earth Do Dwell,' as subversive activity, but author Marilynne Robinson reminds us that William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament into the English language (80% of which remained exactly as it was translated about 90 years later in the King James Bible), Robinson reminds us that 'the Bible may be fairly said to have entered English as a subversive document.' And not only that, but the Reformation was a movement for social justice, not only protesting indulgences that exploited the poor and the devout, but also in the idea that life of faith was meant for everyone whatever their station and therefore everyone should be able to know and confess and read the scripture of the faith they believed. In William Tyndale's own words: 'I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of Scripture' than a learned scholar or priest.¹ This same impulse led John Knox to seek to establish a school in every parish in Scotland so that boys and girls (no matter their social class, standing, or gender), could learn to read Holy Scripture. By the end of the eighteenth century, Scotland's literacy rate 'would be higher than any other country,' by 1750 as high as 75% and nearly twice as high as much more prosperous and cultured England to the south. During such time a shocked and maybe appalled English observer visiting Scotland noted that 'in the low country of Scotland...the poorest are, in general, taught to read.'² The Reformation was not an elitist movement at all, but an egalitarian one that sought to reach and include and engage the ploughman and the common girl and the poor and the impoverished with the gospel of Jesus Christ expressed in the language they spoke in the market and in the field and in the cobblestone streets. Just as Jesus became fully human, so should the words of scripture, incarnating, reaching, and transforming the lives of the people Jesus himself loved and served.

¹ Marilynne Robinson, 'Reformation,' in *The Givenness of Things*, 22.

² Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, 23.

The Reformation ignited a theological revolution or at least a theological recalibration that placed the emphasis not on what we can do to merit God's favor, but on the work of Christ 'through whom we have obtained access to the grace in which we stand.' The Reformation ignited a cultural revolution resetting many European communities and nations' relationship with Rome but also their relationship with their rulers. One of the reasons King James authorized a version of the Bible under his name is because he did not like some of the translations whose marginal notes questioned the divine right of kings. The Reformation also ignited a literary revolution and the real flowering of languages like German, French, and English as they got out from under Latin as the language of cultural elite. And the Reformation ignited a social revolution putting scripture in the language and hands of the people, reforming worship in a way that sought to offer people across life's social strata the opportunity to pray, sing praises, and hear the Word of God in a language they could comprehend and themselves respond as servants of the living God. But not everything about the Protestant Reformation was good. It was a church painful schism which has ignited painful church schisms ever since including very recently in our own Presbyterian family. As I understand it, there are more than 30,000 denominations or forms of Christianity being practiced and by 2050 they tell us there will be 50,000 branches, yet Ephesians declares that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us All. People like John Knox, the author of the Scots Confession also destroyed a lot of church property and led to a suppression of artistic expressions of the Christian faith. And perhaps our Reformation roots have tended to veer us into communities of the like-minded at times rather than communities seeking the mind of Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, Scot or Anglo.

So may this tartan and pipe not be an identity that we embrace that sets us apart or privileges one particular culture over another; instead, may it help us better find our way as servants to Jesus Christ our Lord.