

Wells Cathedral England before the Reformation

In 1951 Winston Churchill promised the German Chancellor, Adenauer, that Britain would always stand by Europe's side. Adenauer was not impressed, 'Prime Minister... England is part of Europe. That is a conversation about history and we are still having it. A conversation about where England has always belonged. We are always talking about history, revising history. Let me give you another example. Most of you will know about St Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Do you remember, the sermon Stephen preached? It was a history lesson, it described the way the Jews had opposed the will of God

you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do Acts 7:51

He was using history to demonstrate that they were the sort of people who might well kill the Messiah. It was Stephen's version of history and it got him killed. We all do versions of history. Christian faith is a version of history in which God intervenes.

When we come to telling the story of how faith develops, well then the versions abound. And that is a problem when we have to talk about the Reformation and what went before it. Now the versions come loaded with titles and capital letters. They force a judgement. You rather assume that before the Enlightenment people must have been somehow unenlightened. If you have a Reformation, it does rather assume things must have needed reforming.

Reformation is the lens we use to look at religion in England in the Fifteenth Century. We go looking for trouble. We assume things needed reforming. We always have. By the end of the Sixteenth Century nearly every parish church and cathedral had a copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, you still have one in your library here. This was the history we were taught. Foxe taught us that cruel catholics tortured and killed the saints because they always had. He took great pains to demonstrate that 666, the mark of the beast, properly understood meant MAN OF ROME. He thought the Reformation was progress and *a good thing*.

By the time I started learning Reformation history we were a little more subtle, but only a little. I was brought upon the terrible crimes of a corrupt catholic church. The great text book was by AG Dickens and he just could not wait to tell you the terrible stories of catholic crime. He described a Norwich monk pulling up his 'frock' (his word) to show off the red bows on his boots to younger monks. He told us about Cardinal Wolsey's son, Thomas Wynter

While still a schoolboy [he] was Dean of Wells, provost of Beverley, archdeacon of York, archdeacon of Richmond, chancellor of Salisbury, prebendary of Wells, York, Salisbury, Lincoln...

And that is not even the whole list. I have never told my mother about Thomas Wynter, she thinks I have done well to be Dean of Bristol. We have all been brought up on the idea that the late medieval church was corrupt and credulous.

It was, of course, more complicated than that. Let me take you to the Norfolk Broads, to the church of St Helen Ranworth. Push open the door on a tiny village church. The stained

glass has gone, it is light inside, and at first glance unremarkable, save for a solid wooden screen that divides the nave from the chancel. Step closer and you see the screen is painted. Painted with saints and each panel is good enough to hang in a gallery. This was costly, someone paid for this. That is an important point. We know that something like three quarters of our parish churches had significant sums of money spent on them in the years just before the Reformation. You don't do that, you don't spend money on the church if you are at odds with it, ask the archdeacon. There was commitment in Ranworth. The panels in the centre of the screen are the figures you would expect, the apostles. The screen though stretches across the church and to the right and left there is an altar to the west of the screen. It is for weekday use and here, the paintings are just above the table top. They are startling assembly of female figures and they are surrounded by their children and with toys: a little ark, a windmill, a cup and ball. This is a working altar, this is where the women of the parish came to pray to the female kin of Jesus when they were worried for their children, when they were pregnant, when they wanted to be pregnant. This is popular devotion.

Let me take you to Cawston, not that far away, there is another screen. The apostles are there again but there is a strange figure holding a boot at one end. It is Master John Schorne, a Buckinghamshire priest, patron saint to sufferers with gout. These saints came closer than we let them now, the pious knelt beside them when they prayed at the screen, prayed with them, thought of them as kith and kin and shared their troubles with them. This faith worked.

Faith filled the everyday, it was not just that you prayed about your gout, went to St Apollinaria with your toothache, or St Roche if you feared the plague. You walked in the company of the saints, you knew the story of grace told in that human life was at work in your all too human life. The mass might have been awe-inspiring and approached with trembling, but there was a weekly traffic in holy things that could be touched, handled. Salt, bread and water was blessed at mass each Sunday set about with power to ward off evil. Holy water went into each home. Candles from Candlemas went home too. The peace was not an English handshake, eyes firmly on the floor, it was an image, and you kissed it. When you were dying a cross was held before your face, that is what triggered the visions of Julian of Norwich. There were prayers you had learnt, rituals you could trust.

It is perhaps that preoccupation with dying that seems most alien to us now, John Fisher saying mass with a skull sitting on the altar. There was indeed a dwelling on death, our shared legacy from Adam

Forto be borne yn sycknes, forto to liven in travayle, and forto dye in drede.

But we miss the point if we think that these were people who simply lived in fear or who took a macabre delight in horror. What this church had and we have lost forever is the sense that the living and the dead were one community. You prayed for the dead and with the dead. You knew the continuity of life and death, you remembered the dead in the company of the saints. That is a community that we have swept away. Get back in your car, drive down to Blythburgh,. It is a great hull of a church beached near the Suffolk coast and washed in light. The roof is full of angels and their wings are peppered with shot from Cromwell's soldier who could not be doing with such nonsense. But, I want you to look down, the floor of the nave is curiously pitted as though something might be missing. The gaps are where metal plates once sat, on them the names of the dead, the mothers, uncles,

and aunts, of Blythburgh. They have been ripped up by reformers because they contained the words *ora pro nobis, pray for us*. There is no community of the living and the dead any more.

That is what the 'unreformed' church knew. It knew community. In its festivals and in its liturgical year, in procession, bonfires, and pilgrimage it marked the passage of time in company. Guilds were not just city corporations in restraint of trade, they were parish sodalities knitting communities into common life. On Ash Wednesday I preached in my own cathedral, on Joel, blow the trumpet, summon an assembly. Joel thought penitence should be shared and public. So did the Fifteenth Century. We have Lent turned it into a solitary struggle with a packet of chocolate hob nobs, or the bottle of sherry. We are poorer for that.

So, there is another history to set alongside the story of *Reformation*. The story of a faith embedded in the routines of rural life, a faith that brought the sacred home, a faith that grasped the hem of glory. By now, if my protestant friends could hear me, they would be peering over their glasses and reaching for small, sharp and precise instruments of correction. They would be accusing me of nostalgia and offering just another partial version of events. They would have a point. That Norwich monk *really did* have red bows on his shoes, your Dean, once, *was* a schoolboy. Alongside the religion I have described here there was superstition, confusion and in places, a breath-taking ignorance of the faith.

Reformers did not just bring us scripture, they let loose the glories of an English language steeped in faith. Thanks to Tyndale we have

under the sun, signs of the times, the land of the living, the apple of his eye, go the extra mile, and the parting of the ways

Reformation brought new learning, and put scripture and faith into the hands of the laity. It gave us Cranmer, of course, and choral evensong. Thank God for Reformation.

Even so, let's not delude ourselves. Good as this, in Wells on a Sunday afternoon with *Stanford???* And the Dean in his stall this is not the sum and purpose of God's providence. We are too close to the ruins of Muchelney and Glastonbury, to forget that we got here on a tide of destruction. There were losses as well as gains. There are other histories than the one we usually tell. And in one of them, we had learnt to be public, not private, Christians.