

The Word of God – Epiphany 1 2011

Psalm 29, Isaiah 42 vv 1-9, Acts 10 vv 34-43 Matthew 3 vv 13-17

What can you tell me about Thomas Hitton? I was afraid of that. I'm ashamed to say I hadn't heard of him either until just after Christmas. He was burned at the stake at Maidstone on 23rd February 1530. Some people call him the first English martyr of the Reformation.

In 1529 he had been apprehended at Rochester on his way to the continent. He was arraigned before the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Warham (the one before Thomas Cranmer, who gave us the English Prayer Book), and John Fisher (the last Bishop of Rochester to live at Halling). Hitton confessed to being a Bible smuggler and to holding certain Reformation doctrines. When they could neither argue nor terrify him out of his convictions, the church authorities handed him over to the state for execution and he suffered death by burning.

This is an extract from the account in Foxe's Book of Martyrs, first published in 1563.

(Some time later) the said archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of Rochester, and divers other assistants, called the said poor man before them again, and caused all the former articles, interrogatories, and demands to be read unto him in English, to the end he should either have revoked the same, or else recanted them altogether, using both threats and fair promises, to the performance thereof, but all in vain: for his faith was built upon the rock Christ Jesus, and therefore unable to be removed with any storms of persecution whatsoever. In fine, the archbishop, (with mature judgment you must believe,) consulting with the bishop of Rochester, and others, proceeded to his condemnation, reading the bloody sentence of death against him; and so was he, being condemned, delivered to the secular power, who carried him to the prison; and soon after he was burnt for the testimony of Jesus Christ, as you may see more at large in his story, for whose constancy in the truth, the everlasting God be praised, Amen.

This was relatively early in the Reformation. Henry VIII was still loyal to the pope, but in Germany Martin Luther had nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg, denied the pope's supremacy over the whole church and begun to translate the Bible into German. Luther had come to the conviction that the Mediaeval Catholic Church had corrupted the Gospel and come between God and His people. Institutional religion had become an obstacle on the path to salvation rather than a guide. The Church had complicated the simple truths of the Gospel and had exploited ordinary men's conscientiousness in order to arrogate to itself wealth and power. What was needed was a simple recognition of where a man or woman stands in relation to God. What was needed was summed up in three Latin phrases: *sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*. We stand in God's presence solely by His grace. All we need to receive God's grace is faith. All we need to apprehend God's grace and to live the life of faith is the Bible. Already some people in England had come to share these

beliefs. The people of England and Germany and indeed of the whole world deserved to know the truth – that anyone, absolutely anyone, may come into the presence of God solely through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is all you need. Jesus has done everything for you on the Cross and nobody stands between you and God. All you have to do is to believe and faith is itself the gift of God.

As a child of God, as a disciple of Jesus, every Christian man, woman or child is entitled to approach the throne of God in prayer and worship and to know the Word of God for him or herself. No pope, no bishop, no priest stands between the believer and God. Every faithful person has access to the Father in Jesus. For this reason, church services ought to be conducted in a manner in which it is possible for all the worshippers to join in *in spirit and in truth*. This normally means that they are conducted in a language the worshippers can understand. Even more importantly, the Bible, the Word of God, ought to be available in English and it ought to be read by all Christians. Indeed, in the words of the prayer, the Scriptures ought to be read, marked, learned and inwardly digested by all people, and this is a prayer, not merely a claim, because we receive God's Word in the Bible both by His grace and by our faith, which is in itself the gift of grace!

So Hitton suffered for smuggling Bible texts into England. The work of translation was going on on the continent, chiefly under the guidance of William Tyndale, who would himself suffer martyrdom six years later. Eventually King Henry would allow and then require bibles to be placed in English parish churches. Archbishop Warham's successor Thomas Cranmer would provide us with a prayer book in English. The Reformation principles of grace alone, faith alone and Scripture alone would be accepted in the Church of England, but between Hitton's martyrdom and King James' promulgation of the Authorised Version in 1611 there were decades of martyrdoms and persecutions as first one side and then the other achieved power in the turbulence of Reformation.

This year we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Authorised Version of the English Bible. More copies of it have been published than of any other book in the English language. For three hundred years or more every home in England had one. Not only did people hear the Bible read in churches of every denomination except Roman Catholic, it was also read daily in many homes both for family prayers and for individual study and devotion. The English Bible has not only played a key part in forming our English spirituality. It has also shaped our language and culture.

In the last few decades, we have seen many other English translations of the Bible come on to the scene – some more “popular” in style or more modern than the AV, some introducing the fruits of modern scholarship, knowledge of texts and the biblical languages that were unavailable to King James' translators 400 years ago. There is a lot of controversy about which English translations we ought to read and which are most suitable on which occasions. What really bothers me, however, is that English people today don't read the Bible anything like often enough in any translation!

Did you notice in Psalm 29, how often the psalmist referred to the *Voice of God*? This is the קול יהוה. *The voice of the Lord is mighty in operation. The voice of the Lord is a glorious voice. The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedar trees. The voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness. The voice of the Lord maketh the hinds to bring forth young.*

The voice of God, the Word of God, is the way God acts. The Bible starts with the Creation. God *said* *Let there be light and there was light.* So the psalm says, *By the word of the Lord were the heavens made.* God's Law begins with the Ten Commandments, *And God spake all these words saying, I am the LORD thy God.* The prophets are the messengers of God's Word. In the New Testament Hebrews says, *For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened to the eyes of him with whom we have to deal.*

In Isaiah 42 the word of God through the prophet speaks of the Servant of God, who will bring salvation not only to the Jews, but also to the gentiles. The servant is called by the One Whose Word created heaven and earth. He will be gentle and meek, but He will bring illumination to all nations. Light means an end to all the powers of darkness and death. The servant brings healing and freedom. He is the word of Truth and will stand over against all the lies, the vanities, the false gods of silver and gold, the works of human hands. He will bring God's life-giving Word to the whole of creation. The servant of the Lord is Jesus and Jesus is the Word of God.

In our Acts reading, Peter has been summoned to Cornelius' house to tell Cornelius what he ought to do. Now Cornelius was a Roman soldier, a gentile, and God had had to send Peter a special vision to teach him that he ought to go to Cornelius and share the Good News with these non-Jews. When he got there, however, Peter was inspired by the Holy Spirit to recognise what Isaiah had already foretold – that the blessings of the Word of God were not just for the chosen people, but for all nations. Jesus had proclaimed the Word from His Baptism onwards and Jesus was the Word, Good News for all people everywhere – doing good, healing all those who were oppressed by the devil, remitting sins, because, after he was hanged on the tree, God raised Him from the dead and shewed him openly. The Risen Christ created His Church by the preaching of the Word and commissioned His Church to preach the same Word to the whole world. When the Word of God commenced the mission the Father had given Him, He was baptised in solidarity with the human race and God acknowledged Him as the Son in Whom He is well pleased and the Spirit of God descended upon Him in the form of a dove. Those human beings who *receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls*, are baptised in solidarity with Him. We are coheirs with Christ and we therefore share the commission of the Son of God to proclaim the Word of salvation to the whole of creation. We are the children of God upon whom the Spirit lights and our inheritance is the Redemption of the whole creation in Christ.

We hear a lot about the media. Mostly by media people mean newspapers, TV and radio, films and the internet. Media carry the message. Media are the means whereby the word is conveyed. The media are very powerful and extremely important and sometimes they can seem more important than the message. The news has to be made to fit the time allocated for news broadcasts or to the space allocated in the paper. The message has to be expressed in the “house style” of the particular journal. In some places the word is censored. Everywhere what gets published in the media inevitably must reflect the preferences, prejudices and business interests of the publishers. Sometimes content is generated by the needs of the media. Protestors may make their protest more dramatic because they know that the cameras are on them. It has even been alleged that reporters have encouraged riots so that they have something to report.

There is a tension between the message and the media. How honestly does any medium convey the message? How honestly can any medium convey a message?

With Jesus, this problem does not arise. Jesus is both the medium and the message. Jesus is the Word of God and He is the means by Whom God proclaims His Word. What Jesus says is God’s Word. What Jesus does is God’s Word. What Jesus is is God’s Word.

He is baptised in solidarity with us and we are baptised in solidarity with Him. We are coheirs with Christ and we share the commission of the Son of God. This commission is to preach the Gospel, to proclaim the Word to all nations, teaching them to do what Christ has commanded us to do, and baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the Word and the medium. It follows that His Body, the Christian Church, the Spirit-filled community, is also called to be both medium and message. We are called to proclaim the Word of God and we are called to be the Word of God. We are transformed by our relationship with Christ into His likeness through our membership of His Church, by our fellowship in the Holy Spirit, in our prayerful meditation on Holy Scripture, the Word of God, and through our filial relationship with God the Father.

The awful thing is that as medium the Church so often seems to belie the message. How can people who proclaim the Word of God burn other Christians at the stake as Thomas Warham and John Fisher burned Thomas Hitton? How can a supposedly Christian monarch behead one of his bishops because he refuses to accept the king’s right to divorce his wife as Henry VIII beheaded the same Bishop John Fisher? Jesus is the message and the medium. We, God’s Church, the Body of Christ, are commissioned to proclaim the Word. We are the medium and we ought to be the message as well. *See how these Christians love one another*, was what the pagans said about Christians in the time of the Roman Empire. The medium was the message then. The medium is the message today. You and I proclaim the Word of God by what we say, by what we do and by what we are. Like Hitton and Fisher we are far from perfect, but, by the grace of God we are what we are and by His grace we fulfil our vocation to declare His Word to the World.