CHAPTER 1

In the Beginning There Was No Word

Christianity has existed in England for over sixteen hundred years and for well over twelve hundred of those years there was no officially approved Bible that the English people could read in their own language. It was not considered necessary that they should do so. The Fourth Lateran Council of the western church decreed in 1215:

> *The secret mysteries of the faith ought not to be explained to all men in all places… For such is the depth of divine Scripture that, not only the simple and illiterate, but even the prudent and learned are not fully sufficient to try to understand it.*

Two centuries later the leaders of the English church went even further by making it a criminal offence to translate any passage

of Scripture into the vernacular. Anyone found guilty of doing so faced the prospect of being burned to death as a heretic. England became the only major European country in which translation of the Bible was actually banned.

If we went into a church today, we would probably expect to see a large Bible somewhere or, at least, a lectern from which the Bible is read, so we need to adjust our thinking if we are to comprehend the spiritual, intellectual, and social issues involved in creating what became the most influential book in world history, the King James Version of the Holy Bible. It changed the way people understood their faith and gave expression to their faith. It changed the way they lived their lives and the way they faced death. The story of "how we got our Bible" is the story of a revolution, arguably the most cataclysmic revolution in English history. That is why we need to go back to the beginning, a couple of hundred years before 1604, the year in which the decision was taken to create a royally approved new translation of holy writ.

Just like the people of any other age, the men and women of late medieval England had spiritual needs. The church tried to meet them in various ways. Sermons were preached, although not every Sunday. Few parish clergy had the necessary education to provide regular teaching of any depth. Thus, when a travelling friar from one of the preaching orders – Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians – appeared in the village it was an exciting event. English communities were self-contained and people rarely travelled far from home, so the arrival of a stranger always aroused interest. News would spread quickly that a brown-robed Franciscan or black-robed Dominican had arrived and was to preach in the church or at the market cross, and people would flock to hear him. And what did they hear? Since very few sermons ever got written down and passed on we cannot know. However, what we do have are a few anthologies of sermon illustrations which were provided to help clergy and itinerant preachers to get their message across. For the most part they consist of dramatic or lurid moral tales such as this:

> *It befell at Dijon, about the year 1240, that a certain usurer would have celebrated his wedding with much rejoicing; and, having been led with instruments of music to the parish church of the Blessed Virgin, and standing now under the church portal that his bride might give her consent and the marriage be ratified according to custom by the promise "I do", and so the wedding might be solemnized in the church by the singing of mass and other ceremonies – while this was there being done, I say, and the bride and bridegroom should have been led with joy into the church, a certain usurer, carved in stone upon the portal above, whom a carven devil was bearing to hell, fell with his money-bag upon the head of this living usurer who should have been married, and crushed and slew him; so that the wedding was turned to mourning, and their joy to lamentation, and the living man was shut out by the stone image from that entrance into church, and those sacraments, from which the priests not only did not exclude him but would have led him in.*[1]

Teaching by Images

There was very little else in the way of verbal religious communication in English available to people. The vast majority were illiterate. What handwritten books there were were expensive and in Latin. Church services were also in Latin. So, if the preacher was a reasonably good orator, the impact of his cautionary tales must have been considerable. They help us by giving us some idea of what our medieval ancestors believed and what they understood of the Christian faith.

Thirteenth-century folk lived in a hard world. They were constantly prey to natural calamities, untreatable diseases, and sudden death. Life expectancy was little more than forty-five and at least half of the children who were successfully born died in infancy. People did not doubt that God was active in his world nor

that good or ill fortune were signs of his blessing or disapproval. To be sure of divine favour in this world and, more importantly, in the next, they had to avail themselves of whatever aids the church had to offer. After the friar had filled his collecting bag and moved on, his hearers were left with whatever was on offer in the parish church. Here, their eyes were assailed with a profusion of visual images. And it was images, rather than words, which, on a regular basis, fired their imagination and provided them with conduits between earth and heaven.

Every holy building was profusely decorated with the symbols of the faith and stuffed with crucifixes and painted saints. Wherever there was a large surface area of wall or window which could be used, biblical and hagiographical stories were colourfully told. Sculpted and painted images have often been called "sermons in stone" and "the people's Bible". But we have to ask ourselves whether the medieval mind was really capable of grasping the spiritual significance of a carved image and correctly piecing together the story told in a stained glass strip cartoon? The modern visitor needs to study the magnificent west front of Wells Cathedral with the aid of a guide book and can only with difficulty identify the figures in the beautiful windows of King's College Chapel, Cambridge. Were his or her ancestors of 500 years ago better equipped to piece together the main events of the God narrative?

Biblical scenes were comparatively rare in church decoration. Events in the lives of Jesus and the Virgin Mary (many of the latter apocryphal) were featured in some churches, as were some of the more striking Old Testament stories – the creation, Noah's ark, Jonah and the great fish, Abraham offering Isaac, etc. But they had little prominence, being featured, more often than not, in small areas of wood carving. Carver and sculptor rarely applied their chisels with any sense of didactic purpose. They repeated well-known subjects in no particular order and happily mixed sacred and secular motifs. A sequence of roof spandrels in the north aisle of St Mary's Church in Mildenhall, Suffolk, for example, portrays the sacrifice of Isaac, the baptism of Jesus, St George slaying the dragon, and a hunting scene.

Emphasis was more likely to be placed on motifs which supported the ritual life of the church. One popular theme was the seven sacraments. They were usually to be found carved on fonts and on the elaborate font covers, which were among the most remarkable achievements of Gothic craftsmen. The scenes depicted were baptism, confirmation, mass, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and matrimony. Other common features were parades of the Seven Deadly Sins, symbolical and mythological beasts, such as unicorns, griffins, pelicans in their piety, etc. – the list becomes tediously long and we have only considered decoration of a specifically religious character. Mixed up with all these motifs were heraldic devices, and carved scenes inspired by everyday events, as well as flowers, birds, and stylized ornaments of a purely decorative nature. If we are to think of the medieval parish church as a book in which the devout might seek instruction, we should envisage a volume made up of pages torn recklessly from a variety of other books and sewn together in no particular order.

Not only did the conglomeration of vivid images which confronted the worshipper every time he or she went to mass provide scant guidance towards an understanding of the essential elements of the faith, it often distorted truth and created new myths. A typical example is the translation of St Nicholas into the patron saint of children. The most striking feature of Nicholas's life was the large number of converts he made in Asia Minor. Early paintings therefore portrayed him standing beside a font in which stood three naked pagans. In accordance with current artistic convention Nicholas, as the most important figure in the group, was painted as the largest. In later centuries it was assumed that the three diminutive figures were children, and the round barrel-like font was mistaken for a pickling-tub. It remained only for popular piety to weave a legend around the symbols, as follows: One day St Nicholas stayed at an inn not knowing that his host and hostess were murderers. It was their custom to kill and dismember small children, pickle the "joints", and serve them to their guests. The saint was, however, apprised of the situation in a vision. Instead of eating the dainty morsels set before him, he restored them to life.

Thus, the medieval laymen – and most medieval clergy – could make no distinction between biblical and non-biblical events, truth and myth, miracle, and superstition, matters essential to salvation and snares for the credulous.

Holy Materialism

Popular devotion was stirred by stories and images. And material objects. People believed that *things* and *places* could be invested with holiness. Particularly efficacious were the shrines and relics of departed saints. No one doubted that miraculous powers were vested in the bodies, clothes, possessions, and tombs of men and women who had lived holy lives. Christian pilgrimage was the Middle Ages' equivalent of the modern package-tour industry. Churches, abbeys, and cathedrals vied with each other for possession of the most highly celebrated relics, knowing that the penitent, the mendicant, the suffering, and the bereaved would flock to their doors bringing financial proof of their devotion, clamouring to buy candles and souvenirs, and boosting business for the local tradespeople. At Reading Abbey they had a choice of 241 relics to venerate, including twenty-nine pertaining to Jesus, six to the Virgin Mary, nineteen to the patriarchs and prophets, fourteen to apostles, seventy-three to martyrs, fifty-one to confessors, and forty-nine to virgins.[2] Westminster could boast a vase containing some of Jesus' blood. Lincoln Cathedral, as well as housing the popular shrine of St Hugh, possessed a large number of other valuable relics including two fingers of Mary Magdalene. Bury St Edmunds, besides possessing the shrine of Edmund, the king martyr, could display the coals on which St Lawrence was roasted and Thomas of Canterbury's penknife and boots. Bath Abbey owned combs said to have belonged to Mary Magdalene, St Dorothy, and St Margaret.

Belief in the efficacy of physical contact with holy things impelled the devout to the most extraordinary excesses. They scooped up and even ate dust which had gathered on the tombs of the saints. They took away phials of water which had been used

to wash the tombs. Twelfth-century visitors to Bury St Edmunds Abbey had to be restrained from biting off pieces of gilt from the shrine of the martyr. To the medieval mind, spiritual benefits could not only be conveyed *through* material objects, but could also assume material attributes. Gregory of Tours was, admittedly, writing in the sixth century, but there is no doubt that his attitude towards divine grace was one which was to become a permanent feature of popular piety until the Reformation. Gregory describes a pilgrim visiting the tomb of St Peter in Rome:

> *Should he wish to bring back a relic from the tomb, he carefully weighs a piece of cloth which he then hangs inside the tomb. Then he prays ardently and, if his faith is sufficient, the cloth, once removed from the tomb, will be found to be so full of divine grace that it will be much heavier than before. Thus will he know that his prayers have been granted.*[3]

Some church leaders warned against the crasser examples of materialism. As early as 813 the Second Council of Talons inveighed against the "simple-minded notion that sinners need only catch sight of the shrines of the saints and their sins will be absolved". Orthodox preachers and heretics in later years took up the cry. But they made little impact; the religion of the people took more comfort in the tangible, traditional objects of devotion than in the abstract subtleties of the theologians. What Johan Huizinga pointed out in the early twentieth century remains valid:

> *The spirit of the Middle Ages, still plastic and naïve, longs to give concrete shape to every conception. Every thought seeks expression in an image, but in this image it solidifies and becomes rigid. By this tendency to embodiment in visible forms all holy concepts are constantly exposed to the danger of hardening into mere externalism. For in assuming a definite figurative shape thought loses its ethereal and vague qualities, and pious*

feeling is apt to resolve itself in the image.[4]

It is not surprising to learn that popular Christian belief was liberally mixed with pagan survivals, folk religion, and magic. Those in poor health or other distress were as likely to resort to witches, wizards, healers, fortune-tellers, astrologers, and other practitioners of the occult as they were to their parish clergy. Spells cast by such agents of forbidden arts frequently aped church rituals, incorporated Christian prayers, and used holy water or consecrated wafers. In fact, most people found it difficult to differentiate between church magic and occult magic. If the priest at mass could "make God" by muttering a few Latin words over the Host, as the church taught, who was to say that a knife or a wand could not be similarly invested with spiritual power?

Clergy considered themselves, and were considered by their flocks, to be primarily performers of rituals rather than teachers of Christian truth. As late as 1551, Hooper, the bishop of Gloucester in the process of a visitation of his 311 clergy discovered that 168 could not remember all the Ten Commandments, thirty-three could not locate them in the Bible, ten were unable to recite the Lord's Prayer, and thirty-four did not know who its author was. For a hundred years or more, zealous bishops had complained about the educational inadequacy of priests, many of whom knew just about enough Latin to mutter their way through the mass. This state of affairs was perhaps understandable during the centuries when books were extremely expensive, hand-made objects, but the printing press had been invented a full century before Bishop Hooper made his disturbing discovery. His statistics can be backed up by others.

Between 1500 and 1550, 869 East Anglian clergy left wills which were proved in the consistory court at Norwich, the second city in the kingdom. Only 158 died possessed of any books at all. Of that residue fifty-eight clergy merely had service books (missals, manuals, processionaries, etc.) to bequeath. That leaves a round hundred who might have owned devotional, instructional, or apologetic works. No detailed information is given about twenty-

one of the remaining clerical libraries. We are thus left with seventy-nine parish clergy about whose literary and religious tastes we can discern something. Most of them owned collections of sermons and anthologies of legends and stories of the "miraculous" type already mentioned. Twelve testators owned Latin Bibles. Thus, only a dozen pastors throughout a large, populous, and thriving part of England owned the sourcebook of the Christian faith. Fewer than a hundred possessed preaching aids and the vast majority were concerned only with the mechanical performance of their pastoral, ritual, and sacramental duties.

The Medieval Bible

What place, then, did the Christian Scriptures occupy in the life of the medieval English church? The only approved edition of the Bible was the Latin Vulgate, completed by St Jerome around 404. When it was first devised it had been a good piece of work, being based on the best Greek and Hebrew sources then available. But it had never succeeded, as was intended, in ousting the many versions of Scripture popular in different regions. So there had never been an undisputed common text. As centuries of painstaking manuscript-copying passed, variant readings had become incorporated in the Vulgate. Inevitably, errors crept in as the book was copied laboriously by hand.

The Vulgate was the standard text in the theology courses of Europe's great universities. There the schoolmen, the masters of exegesis and disputation, gathered their students around them and lectured on the chosen books of the sacred corpus. By the fourteenth century the full course lasted eight years and involved attending lectures, taking part in disputations, reading commentaries, delivering lectures, and becoming fully acquainted with the exegetical writings of the early church fathers and other great theologians. It would be reasonable to suppose that any scholar who survived this academic assault course would possess, not merely a doctorate, but a thorough knowledge of the Bible.

This was not always the case: the medieval universities turned out many excellent theologians with a firm grasp of God's redemptive plan as expounded in holy writ; they also turned out a multitude of mediocre minds stuffed to overflowing with Bible scraps.

Standards of teaching varied with the passing of the years and the arrival and departure of brilliant teachers, but that in itself does not explain the poor overall standard of biblical scholarship. One reason for this was over-reliance on the *glossae*. Many great doctors had produced notes or "glosses" on the biblical text and these had been collected and made into books. It was possible for students to accomplish a considerable part of their course with a knowledge only of the second-hand wisdom of the schoolmen. Similar to the *glossae* were the *Sentences*. These were collections of theological and doctrinal statements made by revered masters, the most popular being the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. The opinions of this twelfth-century doctor were soon accepted as orthodox and as required reading for all theological students. Throughout the medieval period the *Sentences* enjoyed a place second only to the Bible as a repository of divine revelation. In practice students were often more familiar with Peter Lombard's work than with Scripture. It is always easier to trot out a fashionable scholar's ideas than to go back to the original.

Not only was an orthodox interpretation of Scripture forced on students by means of the *glossae* and the *Sentences*, but standard techniques of exposition tended to obscure the meaning. Any passage of the Bible which did not have an obvious reference to its medieval readers was gilded with symbolism or allegorized to give it spiritual significance. For example, this is how readers of the *Glossa Ordinaria,* the standard medieval commentary, were bidden to interpret the building of Noah's ark:

> *Now the fact that the ark is six times as long as it is broad and ten times as long as it is deep presents an exact likeness with the human body in which Christ was made manifest. For the length of a body from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot is six times the*

> *breadth, that is to say from one side to the other, and it is ten times its height, that is the measurement from the back to the belly. Then, the broad expanse of fifty cubits symbolizes the manner in which the heart expands under the influence of that love which the Holy Ghost inspires, as the apostle said: "the love of God hath been shed forth in our hearts". For it was on the fiftieth day after the Resurrection that Christ sent forth the Holy Spirit which expanded the hearts of the faithful. Now a length of three hundred cubits amounts to six times fifty, and in the same way the whole extent of time falls into six ages, in which Christ was proclaimed without ceasing: in the fifth he is the subject of prophecy, while in the sixth he is openly proclaimed in the Gospel.*[5]

Sections of the Vulgate were incorporated into the mass. There were readings from the Gospels and epistles; the psalms were chanted; and many other parts of the service were direct quotations from or adaptations of Scripture. But all this was of little value to people who understood no Latin. Parishioners came and went during the celebration and, after leaving church, devoted the rest of the Sunday or feast day to pursuits which, if some grumblers are to be believed, were less than edifying. In 1362 no less a person than Archbishop Simon Islip of Canterbury (d. 1366) said that holy days,

> … *are now turned to blasphemy, seeing that assemblages, trading and other unlawful pursuits are specially followed upon these days; that which was prepared as a summary of devotion is made into a heap of dissipation, since upon these holy-days the tavern is rather worshipped than the Church, gluttony and drunkenness are more abundant than tears and prayers, men are busied rather with wantonness and contumely than with the leisure of contemplation.*[6]

However, whatever state of ignorance simple English men and women found themselves in, their literate neighbours of an enquiring turn of mind were not totally devoid of all knowledge of the Bible in their native tongue. Translations and interpretations existed of some passages of Scripture. There were three types of vehicle which conveyed parts of the sacred text into the common stream of consciousness: poetry, *glossae*, and straight translation. Caedmon, a seventh-century monk of Whitby Abbey, was, according to Bede, a simple cowherd before he took the cowl, but the gift of poetry was miraculously bestowed upon him and he used it to sing the praises of God and to retell in popular form the great Bible stories. The medium of verse paraphrase was used by later poets such as Cynewulf and the author of one of the masterpieces of Old English literature, *The Dream of the Rood*.

Such orthodox translations as existed grew out of the *glossae*. In many biblical texts, such as the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, the interlinear commentaries were in the vernacular. Some of them were scholarly comments on the original but others were word-for-word translations. They were used within the monasteries for instructing novices and schoolchildren. Like other *glossae*, some of these interpolations were collected and bound separately. This was particularly true of the psalter (the book of Psalms), which was the most important part of the Bible for liturgical and devotional use. Many versions of the psalms, in prose and verse form, were in circulation by the end of the medieval period. There were also extant translations of Genesis and the Gospels available to the literate devout.

All these vernacular fragments came into existence despite, rather than because of, official ecclesiastical policy. Notwithstanding its acknowledged shortcomings and the fact that there was no single version accepted throughout western Christendom, church leaders adopted a fundamentalist attitude towards the canon of the Vulgate. It was inspired by God and could not be altered. It was in Latin, the immaculate language of the classical world, of Augustine, Jerome, and the early doctors of the western church, a language spoken by some of the apostles themselves. The very

idea of debasing it by rendering it into "marketplace English" was, to many, abhorrent. And what could possibly be the purpose of making the Bible available in the common tongue? Reformers claimed that it would be easier for priests and people to understand the things of God, but how could this be? Did it not take eight years of hard study for a scholar to become acquainted with the deep mysteries of redemption? If the uneducated laity could read the Bible, they would not be able to understand it. What would be worse, they might think that they did understand it. That would be dangerous; that path led to heresy. No, it was not necessary for common people to have the Bible; God had decreed that they should achieve salvation by good works and by such acts of piety as they were directed towards by their spiritual superiors. It was for the church to mediate to the people the grace of God in word and sacrament, which would empower them and inspire them to holiness of living. More perceptive ecclesiastics had another reason for opposing translation into the vernacular: they realized that translation implied interpretation. In choosing modern words approximating to the Latin originals, any translator would be inadvertently imposing his own prejudices and opinions on the church.

Yet there were always some people who wanted to know more. In every generation there appeared devout men and women, clergy and lay, who could not be satisfied with conventional religion. Some availed themselves of the pathway laid down by the church for those who sought a rigid pattern of devotion. They entered the cloistered world of the monastery or nunnery. Others joined guilds or brotherhoods which maintained altars or chantry chapels and administered local charities. Some banded together to perform religious music or to enact biblical stories on portable public stages. There were those who sought the mystic or ascetic path, living in seclusion to devote themselves to prayer and who gained a reputation as holy men and women.

One proof of widespread lay devotion is the large number of primers that have survived. These illustrated books of psalms and prayers designed for personal use began to circulate as soon

as printing began in the mid-fifteenth century. They encouraged people to learn to read, although doubtless illiterate buyers acquired them so that their better educated friends and relatives could read them aloud for their edification. It was only a matter of time before pious souls clamoured to possess their own Bibles.

Church authorities were uncertain about the spread of lay devotion. As long as it was directed into conventional channels, all was well. But pious men and women could get above themselves. When they manifestly lived purer lives or understood the faith better than their priests, members of the establishment felt challenged. They smelled HERESY.