**St Andrew’s on the Terrace Sunday 22 October 2017 How? Printing and the Reformation. Nehemiah 8: 1-12, Luke 4: 14-22 and poems from *Homeless* by John Howell**

**Hebrew Bible Nehemiah 8: 1-12**

*This incident took place after the people of Israel had returned from exile and under the direction of Nehemiah were re building the city of Jerusalem.*

Ezra Reads the Law

**8**And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they  asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which God had given to Israel. **2**Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. **3**He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from [[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Nehemiah+8&version=NASB#fen-NASB-12497c)]early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. **4**Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose…. **5**Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. **6**Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped God with their faces to the ground. **7 …**The Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. **8**They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

“This Day Is Holy”

**9**Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. **10**Then he said to them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” **11**So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” **12**All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

**Gospel Luke 4: 14-22**

*The author of the book of Luke places this story after Jesus returns from being tempted in the desert*

Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

**14**Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. **15**He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

**16**He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, **17**and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

**18**“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, / because he has anointed me/ to proclaim good news to the poor./ He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners/ and recovery of sight for the blind,/ to set the oppressed free,/ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

**20**Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.**21**He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” **22**All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

We don’t know how lucky we are. We can buy or borrow a book. We can open a newspaper. We can hit on a website, or receive and read a text. We can take written literature wherever we like and read it to ourselves in hard coy of in an e book.

People before us have not been so fortunate. They have been hindered by their own inability to read, or by the information for which they yearned being written in an official language they did not know. Or, they are hindered by the cost of literature (we know something of that too!). Or, perhaps more importantly, they were and are denied by censorship access to works they should have been be free to read.

In the readings today we heard described two ancient moments when written words were read to the people. In both cases the words were read from scrolls; labour intensive, hand-made parchment, laboriously hand written. The first scroll is purported to have been found in the ruins of the temple in Jerusalem, in the aftermath of the Babylonian victory. Ezra reads the book of Moses to the people. It has a powerful effect when they find they can understand the word, when it is interpreted.

Centuries later, the moment is equally stunning for the discerning listener in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus takes his normal place as a male congregant, taking his turn to read from the scriptures. Here is Joe the carpenter’s boy grown now, reading in the service. But then, Jesus claims to be the very embodiment of Isaiah’s prophecy. If you had begun to doze off, this would jerk you wide awake!

Even when scrolls gave way to books, the Bible was hand-written for many centuries. The beautiful illustrated medieval manuscripts we’ve seen in museums were the elaborate versions of hand written scriptures – there would have been more simple versions. Monks patiently transcribed the scriptures, considering it a holy task. How much would such volumes would have cost were monks paid reasonable wages?

Printing began first using woodcuts – not only pictures were printed from blocks of wood. Words could be cut into wood blocks, then the blocks printed from. They wore out quickly and there was little chance to cut and paste the message. It was slow and unwieldy a process.

The moveable type printing press was invented by [Johannes Gutenberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Gutenberg) around 1440. He used the existing screw press, where the plate is screwed down on to the block and paper, but his particular contribution was to develop a hand mould which produced large quantities of metal type.

Movable type was new to Europe. It had been invented in East Asia, but was less useful there due to the complexity of the writing system. It was Gutenberg’s hand mould which speeded up production of type. The two inventions used together, hand mould and printing press, reduced the cost of books and documents. The press spread to over 200 European cities in Western Europe. By the year 1500 there had already been produced presses more than 20 million volumes.

These cheaper printings of small runs of documents, books and pamphlets was a technological tool which was therefore available to disseminate the Reformation ideas of those before Luther, for Luther himself and his successors.

Pamphlets were booklets which could be or several pages. Some are shown on the front page of the pamphlet which you have been given. Printed works of this size enabled ideas to spread very fast, through networks of printing presses. They spread widely through Germany and overseas. This format enabled ideas to be spread undercover – easier to hide a book than an heretical preacher – they could be tucked in a courier’s backpack and secretly conveyed from village to village. Printing also allowed the ideas within the pamphlets to read over and over again, as compared with a sermon heard only once. Where public readings were necessary because of lack of copies or illiteracy, pamphlets were also quicker to read, meaning a group of people gathered in one place for a shorter time – much safer. Printers were entrepreneurs; they had commercial reasons for making sure popular pamphlets were printed in large quantities. Perhaps partly for that reason they used the images in your pamphlet – caricatures, intended to poke fun at the opposition and to catch the eye. I have tried to be even handed in my choices of title woodcuts – one of Luther shown with 7 heads, probably a Catholic author, the next of Pope Leo pictured receiving money for indulgences would be a protestant tract. Another with Luther and Hans Jus shown distributing communion in ‘both kinds’ - bread *and* wine - could be on either side’s literature – this was not the common practice in the mother church at the time. It is not known whether the choice of title woodcut was the writers’ or of those entrepreneurial printers, out for as many sales as possible.

Then a colourful picture of Martin Luther being depicted as the devil’s bagpipe followed by one which depicts the Pope as a donkey. Neither side spared the other. On the second last page, is a plainer title page – it was because of this pamphlet that John Knox had to flee to the continent. The ‘monstrous regiment of women’ whom he lambasts was a clutch of queens or almost-queens – Jane Grey, Mary 1, Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots and her regent mother Mary of Guise. We still draw caricatures and a this-century caricature of Martin Luther is on the back cover.

Studying for the ministry I completed a paper called ‘People, Pamphlets and Polemic’. The writers’ words printed in these documents pulled no punches. Polemical attack freely flowed from both sides of the argument, not unlike parliamentarians during Question Time. Many pamphlets were written in the form of dialogues, key in bringing the ordinary people on board. Reformation ideas might be sponsored by thinkers and rulers, but they would only survive if accepted by the majority. Written dialogues allowed arguments for and against to be rehearsed and defeated or highlighted, depending on the author’s view. The dialogues brought alive issues already being discussed in the wider society. Different characters played their part – peasants, students, noblemen, monks, Roman courtiers were brought into the printed conversations. Peter Matheson writes: “These dialogues which would often have been read aloud are in fact with their characterizations, humour and dramatic tension quite close to being small dramatic pieces … this is literature at its most engaged.”[[1]](#footnote-1) While called ‘dialogues’ these t4ended to be more like monologues, the opposing character got none of the best lines! But. the robust nature of the conversation promoted ideas in a lively engaging manner with undoubted emotional overtones. Getting the main ideas across was paramount; “a robust new role for the laity, a fierce anti clericalism and the primacy of a vernacular Scripture.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Printing also opened a door to women. They previously had been excluded from public debate. Printing however provided “packaged learning in the privacy of their own homes”[[3]](#footnote-3) A few women such as Argula von Grumbach, whom we heard of last week, contributed to the growing pile of Reformation pamphlets – Argula herself, nearly 30,000 pamphlets over two years. Peter Matheson calls the printed pamphlet the “silent heretic”. He argues they enabled a writer like von Grumbach to “leapfrog over the traditional gate keepers of conventional wisdom and engage with people in the privacy of their homes.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This format of the printed Pamphlet enabled Argula to send out ideas which were sensational enough, but “that she said it as a lay woman shook the foundations of society”[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is this ability of the printed pamphlet to bypass traditional gatekeepers which links with our contemporary digital forms of communication.

Political analysts argue that the iron curtain and Berlin Wall fell because of cable TV. When those behind the iron curtain could see what the capitalist world was enjoying, it fed the sense of revolution within the eastern bloc. I also remember a student flash mob happening in Lower Hutt years ago through cell phone use - not for the first time, but in a more efficient and secret way, students could organise themselves out of sight of parents and teachers. In each case, the communication was able to, as Argula’s pamphlets did, leapfrog the usual gatekeepers.

Now we are used to anyone being able to access anything online and to place their opinions where they want to place them. I can blog almost what I want. We know that bullies are using their own polemic to harass others through various forms of social media. We also know that tremendous good can be achieved through the same medium – look at the student army after the Christchurch earthquake and community giving which happens through give-a-little pages and other means.

We have on *our* hands a technological revolution which is as great as the printing press was in its time. We have the technology. I believe we have a compelling message to put out on that technology. Are we doing so?

Will people cry with joy when they read our words about God and Spirituality on the net? Will people know that the promised rule of God is embodied in us today as it was in Jesus all those years ago in another place and another time? Or, are we still waiting inside a building for them to come to us at 10am on a Sunday morning? In light of the digital revolution perhaps the best investment this church has made is its new website for the Centre and the website alterations on the church site. We can grow in the way we use it and who we interest in it. Who would like to join in that task? \_ email me or text me!

Recently a pair of grandparents spoke to me of their concern for their grand-daughter who lives in another country. I suggested they email her directly and say how much they loved her. They did, and that has sparked an ongoing conversation and connection which I am sure is part of her good health today. I do not see that the digital revolution is only for the young.

A friend of mine watches a lot of television late at night. I frequently have to field calls from her when she becomes angry and anxious about hard hitting black and white homophobic messages she finds there. How can she find something better on the web, particularly late at night when sleep is elusive?

And, when we put our hands to the keyboard or tweet from our phone, what will we tell the world which is hurting and anxious, poor and needy?

There is a message significant enough and poignant enough to make people cry – they are loved, they are accepted, people care, lgbtqi people are not excluded in scripture, what is needed is better interpretation of that bible of ours. There is a leader companion called Jesus who shows a better Way to live and offers a transforming grace. I think we have a message and we have a still novel new medium in which to put it forth. I think our reforming forebears, women like Argula and men like Martin would expect us to stand tall in the digital space and spread the word.

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1. Peter Matheson reformation Dialogues Unpublished manuscript, p 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peter Matheson, ‘Breaking the Silence: Women, Censorship and the Reformation’ *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXVII/I (1996), p.99 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)