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Reformationstag, 31. Oktober 2017, 10.00 Uhr

Gracious God, please take these frail human words and open to us your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Dear friends, I bring warm greetings to you from the people who work, minister and worship at St Paul's Cathedral, in London. It is such an honour to be with you, particularly as we mark this 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

In preparing for this service, of course I wanted to spend time reflecting on the gospel passage we have just heard read, from Matthew's gospel chapter 5.

I read it first in my own copy of the Bible, as you would expect. Then I did something else. I made my way up into a part of St Paul's which is not freely open to the public, to our library. There the librarian kindly arranged for me to view the Cathedral's most precious treasure.

I wanted to read the words of Matthew Chapter 5 in our Tyndale Bible.

The Bible itself is very small, plain, easily overlooked, yet it is an extraordinarily rare survivor from the turbulent times of the Reformation and one that cost its translator, William Tyndale, his life.

I feel ill-equipped to speak of the Reformation, as it began with the letter sent almost 500 years ago by the dutiful priest and friar Martin Luther to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. In truth, I am here to listen and to learn from you. But I wonder if I might speak to you about our William Tyndale and his unshakeable Reformation conviction that God wanted the English people to hear and to receive God's word in their own language.

I hope to hint at how the story of Tyndale and his part in the English Reformation is woven into the story of Martin Luther and the wider Reformation and then, here under your beautiful mosaics depicting the Beatitudes, to link both back to the words of Jesus himself as we heard them in the gospel of Matthew. William Tyndale is known as the 'Father of the English Bible'. Unlike me he was that rare thing, an English person who is an excellent linguist -he was fluent in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, Spanish and German. At that time the Bible in England was available only in Latin, the language of the few and the privileged. Only they, not the many, could mediate directly with God.

Tyndale was an admirer of what Luther was achieving in Wittenburg in the 1520's and would visit him there towards the end of that decade.

At the beginning of the decade, in 1521, Bishops and Ambassadors gathered close to old Medieval Cathedral of St Pauls, on a site known as St Paul's cross to watch Cardinal Wolsey, chief servant of the King, Henry VIII, overseeing the burning of Luther's books. His writings were seen in England, as elsewhere, as a threat to the stability of the intertwined church and state.

These Reformation books, these ideas and thoughts were seen as dangerous! And indeed they were. It's been said that the flame of Luther's arguments had lit a fire. Whilst a core of influential men in London sought to fight fire with fire, eventually nothing would stop it.

Little wonder then, that when Tyndale came to London in 1523 to speak with the Bishop of London, he was refused permission to translate and print a New Testament in English.

So what did Tyndale do? Convinced that his calling was to push ahead with the forbidden translations and to get the Bible into the hands of the people, Tyndale left London, left England and came here, to

Germany, the centre of the Reformation. He embarked on the waters of the Thames, and would never see England again.

Tyndale began work in Cologne but was forced to flee to Worms. There in 1526 3,000 copies of his translation of the New Testament were published by Peter Schoeffer and smuggled to England and Scotland. They were small in size and modest, deliberately so. Thus they could be hidden in clothing, even in imported bales of wool. Any copies discovered by the authorities were burned in public, many of them by the Bishop of London and Cardinal Wolsey in the grounds of St Paul's.

What delicious irony then that I, a Canon of St Paul's am speaking with you about all this and sharing with you our profound gratitude for the survival of the tiny copy of Tyndale's Bible printed at Worms in 1526, and from which I read the words of our gospel reading earlier this week.

That passage from Matthew contains the words of Jesus which, in English we call the Beatitudes, I believe that in German they are *die Seligpreisungen*.

They are some of the most well-loved words of all scripture – and are actually where the St Paul's copy of the Tyndale Bible naturally falls open. This passage is a grand proclamation of the heart of God's kingdom and of God's heart for the people, for the crowd.

'You are blessed' cried out Jesus, to the disdain of the religious authorities and rulers of his day. Blessed, not because you are rich and influential, but blessed if you are poor in spirit. The kingdom is yours.

Blessed not through the power you exercise through church or state, but if you are meek. The merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers – 'blessed' for you are God's children, you will see God and to you God extends mercy and grace.

Luther and Tyndale shared the concern of their Saviour for the crowd, for the people who were yet to know that they could draw near to God.

Martin Luther, William Tyndale and others set in motion a spiritual revolution that would shape the next 500 years of Germany, England, the rest of Europe and the world, which would feed politics, literature, art and music, but most of all the human heart and belief.

Tyndale himself was, in 1535, betrayed by someone he had come to trust, and seized by the imperial authorities in Antwerp. After being imprisoned for 16 months, he was charged with heresy and strangled to death while tied to the stake and his body burned. His last words were 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes!'

Many years earlier, whilst still in England, Tyndale had been in the company of some learned clergy and was incensed when one of them said 'We were better without God's Law than the Pope's'.

Tyndale replied

'If God spare my life ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.'

Thanks to the work of Tyndale – whose New Testament inspired and provided the foundation for the work of others – king and ploughboy could know for themselves the grace of God and read of it in their own language.

The question remains then for us at St Paul's, and I assume for you here at the Berliner Dom. How is the word, the message of Christ to be shared with ruler and ploughboy in our day?

And are we ready to bear the cost?