

Deuteronomy 34:1 - 12
Psalm 90:1 - 6
Romans 13:1 - 7
John 15:1 – 5

Four Faces in a Window: John Knox and the (monstrous) regiment of women

It has been said that the Reformation was a revival of Pauline Christianity in the church, and so it was. But in the Scottish church where John Knox was the leader, the richness of John's gospel had a fundamental part in the new foundation. We have read from *Romans* today, and although Knox's theology was basically Calvin's, in at least one sense John Knox did not follow Paul. We have read from John Chapter 17 because this was the scripture that gave Knox his first grasp of the Gospel, and as he lay dying in 1572 it was this he asked his wife to read to him.

John Knox was born in Scotland in 1514, the point at which Martin Luther was about to emerge as a Reformer. A trained priest, Knox did not join the reformed cause until 1546 and his real work did not begin until 1559, thirteen years after Luther died. Knox was not a systematic theologian. He was a man of action whose revolutionary, nationalist leadership left its imprint on Scotland, and Europe.

Knox lived when contempt for the church was commonplace and a new humanist emphasis in philosophy was providing an intellectual basis for reform of church and society, ideas easily propagated thanks to the invention of the printing press. For two centuries the Papacy had asserted its political and spiritual supremacy over Europe's rulers who used alliances created through marriage and the manipulation of ecclesiastical and government appointments to undermine the Vatican and compete for its income. In Knox's time Scotland was drawn into European conflicts through its royal links with Catholic France.

Knox was a forthright preacher who served in England and Europe and became a recognized leader among the Puritan wing of English Protestantism. Some of the Scottish nobility espoused Reformed ideas and during a return visit to Scotland in 1555 Knox urged them to unite in this cause.

After Elizabeth I became queen of England (1558) Mary Queen of Scots married the dauphin Francis, who succeeded to the French throne (1559) and then suddenly died (1560). The French regarded Catholic Mary as the rightful Queen of England. Her mother, Mary of Guise was Regent of Scotland, and the French wanted to use Scotland as a basis for pressure on England to dethrone the heretic Elizabeth and secure England for Mary Queen of Scots and the Catholic faith.

In the fourteen months of conflict that followed between May 1559 and July 1560, pent up forces built up over two centuries were released. Supported by Knox, Scottish Protestants rallied and gained control. In 1560 the Parliament, known as the Reformation Parliament, abolished papal jurisdiction, denied the Old Church the right to raise revenues, outlawed the mass and approved the *Scots Confession* as a

statement of faith for Scotland. Knox was not the only preacher active at this time but his voice led the way.

In 1561 Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, returned from France to the uncongenial environment of a Reformed Scotland. There she had to confront the crude but fearless and politically astute John Knox whose principles were inherently democratic. Knox was a volatile person who in his anger developed revolutionary ideas. He went beyond the belief that the socially privileged nobility had a duty to use its powers to deliver the people from violence, oppression, and the corruption of religion. He took the idea of a Just War, which in those days was used to justify wars *between states*, and applied it *within* the state. He espoused the revolutionary and egalitarian view that the power to rule does not properly belong to kings but to the people living in honour of God. And on this basis of Godly law Knox said Christians had the right to revolt against their rulers if they impeded what the people believed to be the will of God. Knox obviously did not read what Paul said about being subject to the governing authorities (*Romans 13*) with an unquestioning eye.

At a time when the first women ever to rule in their own right were reigning in England and Scotland Knox achieved a reputation as a misogynist for publishing the tract: *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. Knox had warm relationships with women. But by 'the monstrous regiment' he meant it is 'unnatural' for a woman to rule. Most of the tract, originally published anonymously, was critical of Mary Tudor for her persecution of Protestants in England. Knox's main point was that since a woman could not be a barrister or a judge, it was absurd for a woman to be the source of authority for the whole legal system. The claim of misogyny is difficult to quench.

The picture on the Order of Service is of Knox engaged in one of many long conversations with Mary Queen of Scots who hoped to gain his support in her desire to marry Don Carlos of Spain, which would have kept Scotland Catholic. In frustration she shouted: "What have ye to do with my marriage? Or what are ye within this Commonwealth?" He replied: "A subject born within the same, Madam. And albeit I neither be Earl, Lord nor Baron within, yet has God made me (however abject I be in your eyes) a profitable member within the same." Knox's democratic leanings scared the Anglicans half to death. One Archbishop said: "Keep us from such visitations as Knox hath attempted in Scotland; the people to be the orderers of things." Knox took the remark as a compliment.

The difference between the English and Scottish Reformations is that England vested the monarch with all the rights and prerogatives removed from the Pope. Scotland annulled these altogether. England prescribed the use of a Prayer Book for public worship whereas Scotland proscribed the mass and only laid down directions for worship. England accepted the machinery of the Catholic Church, Scotland left open the question of how the church would be governed, though the General Assembly of the Church came to function rather like a House of Commons.

John Knox's plan for Church government was set out in his *First Book of Discipline*. He proposed to direct the funds formerly derived from the Old Church towards the support of the Reformed Church. His plan was for schemes of poor relief, the repair of derelict churches, and the provision of universal compulsory education, which was to be free to the poor from parish school to university. The problem was the majority

of those in Parliament were already deeply involved in the traffic of funds from Church lands, and had no desire to fund Knox's "pious imaginings". The Scottish revolution envisaged by Knox was diverted into a cul-de-sac and he was discredited. Parliament rejected the *Book of Discipline*, withdrew spiritual functions from those Catholic clergy on Church lands but gave them life-rent, which meant that if they were willing to live peaceably under the new regime and pay their rent, the Crown received the income. The Reformed church only received what was left over after expenses. Knox and the Reformers had been gazumped! They could expect little support from the government for the new church. Knox was driven into a position of chronic opposition to the government, the consequences of which were eruptions of religious strife in the next 150 years. One writer says: "Unhappy is the reformer who lives beyond the hour of triumph, to see the inevitable tarnishing of his visions, and grow bitter in disillusionment"(Mc Ewen, p. 4). In 1560 the bells of Edinburgh were ringing for Knox and the Protestant victory. His voice had rallied the people to reform, but he was less successful when the time came for a different style of leadership and diplomacy. Knox had coveted a new and more equitable world for the people of Scotland, but he died 12 years late saddened by strife and shattered hopes.

If you thought you were going to get away without a reference to Moses and the Exodus today you were mistaken! Moses stood on the mountain above the plains of Moab and God showed him the whole land. But he did not go there. The scene, spelt out in careful detail is not a geography lesson. Moses' being able to "see the whole land" is a vision from beyond time that reaches into the present – a vision of the promises of God. Before he died Moses was able to see the complete picture of what God wills for the world. He is the first amongst the many celebrated in the letter to the Hebrews: "All these died in faith without having received the promises; but from a distance they saw and greeted them from afar... therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, indeed he has prepared a city for them". (Heb 11:13a – 16).

Knox saw with dreaming gaze a promised future for the people of Scotland, but he did not find the means to lead them there. And yet were it not for his voice, his exaggerated principles and his willingness to challenge people at the highest level, the renewal of spiritual life may not have come as it did to the church and people of Scotland. And it may not have remained.

A Prayer of John Knox

Convert us O Lord and we shall be converted... Though the great multitude remain rebellious, and although there remain in us perpetual imperfections, yet for the glory of Thine own name, and for the glory of Thine only beloved Son Jesus Christ, whose truth and evangel Thou of thy mercy has manifested amongst us: may it please Thee to take us under Thy protection and in Thy defence, that all the world may know that, as Thou has begun this work of salvation among us, so of this same mercy Thou wilt continue it.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(*Book of Common Order: Works*, VI, p. 297)

Reference

McEwen, James, *The Faith of John Knox*. London: Lutterworth, 1961.