

Whatever it is that floats your boat, whatever it is that tickles your fancy, chances are that somewhere, quietly waiting for you to walk in and peruse its pages is a periodical tailor made, just for you. You might have thought that the niche market magazine was a product of the revolution in publishing that is digital offset and computer driven DTP. True, the ability to turn on a cheap computer and with a little time and patience produce a reasonable looking magazine has certainly eased and expanded the, how shall we say, custom publishing market, but truth be told this is no new phenomenon. As long as there has been a printing press there has been an obsessive somewhere wanting to make use of it to share his (mostly) preoccupations with likeminded los.. individuals.

As long as there have been model railways there has been someone writing a magazine about them. Go back in time beyond the first rattling Hornby loco and you will find *Ringing World* peeling its first tintintabulary texts in 1911 and of course, the periodical for the ultimate no-hoper *Church Times* has been depressing committed Anglicans every week since 1863.

Raking my recollections I'm sure I can remember people reading *Whippets Weekly* when I was a child, but as Google has failed to confirm the existence of said periodical, it have to admit now that's probably a false memory of the 'shoebox in middle of t'road you 'ad it lucky' variety. However there was a *Fur and Feather* magazine and it's still in print: the monthly newspaper for Rabbit breeders and Pigeon Fanciers pursuits more innocent and less illegal than they sound.

There are also less innocuous niche publications. *The Spectator* is now into its third century peddling right-wing rhetoric and then there is my Aunt Sally for this evening, the quarterly magazine *This England*. *This England* is a periodical that specialises in simpering, smug nationalism; as its title suggests, it takes it's inspiration from Shakespeare's John of Gaunt, though sadly now with his 'green and pleasant land' speech rewritten by a hack from the Sun. I have only once I had the misfortune to leaf through a copy *This England*: I suspect the dentist who left it in her waiting room was trying to make her butchery seem less unpleasant by comparison. Had she had added piped Cliff Richard muzak and a series of Andy Warhol style silk screen prints of George Osborne she might have succeeded, but alas, all my pre-anaesthetic was to be was *This England*. Apart from low grade nausea, the main thing I remember of that issue of the magazine was that it dedicated a lot of its column inches to an article crowing about the English Reformation and even the Church of England as if they were some indomitable expression of the plucky Brit spirit, a great national liberation from the nasty foreign inventions of Roman Catholicism and mediaeval superstition.

Now it's an axiom of political spin that if you say anything often enough - 'Northern Powerhouse', say or 'austerity is working', or 'the NHS is safe in our hands'- no matter how outrageous or patently untrue, say it often enough and eventually people will start to believe it.

In England, we've had a good five hundred years of spinning the Reformation that it has become a great founding myth of our nation: an heroic victory of English reason over continental credulity, the greatness of the Reformation a self-evident truth sunk so deep into our national self understanding that it can become, unnoticed, a patriotic anaesthetic for the dentist's waiting room.

Now there is, I admit, not quite enough time to properly evaluate the Reformation in a Sunday evening sermon, but even if we're not ready for the full autopsy tonight, I can't see why we shouldn't give the notion a bit of a poke and a prod, and ask the question: with Cranmer's hot-handed martyrdom, the King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, evensong and ante-communion; with all the good and admirable stuff the English Reformation might have given us, is there anything we have lost? You might have guessed by now that I'm going to say I think there is. And I think that what we have lost, apart from the ability to buy your way out of purgatory, the Spanish Inquisition and incomprehensible services in Latin (replaced of course by incomprehensible services in English), what we have lost is the notion of a holy place. Gone from our spirituality are shrines and pilgrimages, holy wells and sacred spaces; no longer do we follow where the saints have trod, their footsteps burning with the heavenly fire: under our Protestant feet is cold damp earth.

As we listened to the scripture tonight we met the great hero of the Jewish nation Moses, in that famous tale of the burning bush. The bush is burning but not consumed, and out of the bush comes the voice of divinity. It's a story of epiphany and commissioning; a man realising his destiny, coming face to face with miracle and meeting his God. And the very first instruction God gives the great lawgiver is:

*'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'*

You've heard it so many times you probably don't hear anything shocking in that, not even mildly challenging. What poor Protestants we Anglicans have become. Had Moses been a Reformation Protestant, he would almost certainly have responded to God saying 'Holy ground? Ground's ground lad. Nothing holy about that.' (Though why he would have said it in a northern accent I'm not sure. Perhaps he picked it up from *Whippet Weekly*.)

At its heart, Protestantism cannot accept the idea of holy ground, because if ground can be holy, then holiness has an independent, external existence: it doesn't depend upon what you believe, or what you confess, or whether you have publicly accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and saviour, or whether it's something you've read written in the Bible. Ground holiness is holiness that inheres, it is not a property we can generate ourselves; it is the natural extension of the incarnation, the God-with-us ecstatically filling his world with his presence. Not mediated by a priesthood; not mediated by a book: remove your sandals and you are in direct contact with what is holy.

And that, at least as far as the formularies of the Church of England are concerned, is what you have lost. Ground is nothing more than ground: there are no more shrines or pilgrimages; no holy wells and sacred spaces. Unlike Moses we do not meet God in the field as we are tending our fathers sheep; unlike Abraham, we do not meet God as we are sat in our tent by the oaks of Mamre; unlike Jacob, we do not meet God as we cross the waters at Peniel. We meet God, if we meet him at all, in the pages of a book, we meet God now, in a product of the printing press.

I think you know that this is not true. I'm sure you have not fallen for the feeble nationalist replacement lie peddled by the likes of *This England* that somehow Redhill and Scunthorpe, the M25 and Salford are destinations superior to anywhere in the world. You're not that silly: you know *that* is not true. But I think you know that there are places in the world where the veil separating human from God is stretched so thin we can almost begin to see through it. You know there are places in this world where the clash and clatter and clanging of our daily desire dims and we can more clearly hear the still, small voice. You know that sometimes it is much easier to hear God's word if you close the book and gaze at a coloured window or an old carving. You know that, against all Reformation logic, that there are times when you will turn away to marvel at the fire that fails to consume the bush, that there is such a thing as holy ground.

Keep your shoes on please: but tonight, I think you're on it.