



## **Chapter 2 - Christianity in Middle Ages**

### **What Would It Have Been Like Attending the Chapel in 15th Century?**

Before the Reformation, churches were colourful and full of sounds, smells and activity. Religious services were opportunities to come together with your neighbours to worship and the Guild Chapel would have been no exception.

It could be a Sunday, although Mass was not only said on Sundays. It could be the feast day of a saint. There is no end of celebrations to draw people to the church. The guild members greet each other, exchange small talk, wander on, and listen for the sound of the church bell. They are going to church to hear, to taste, to smell, and to see.

### **A Feast for the Senses**

Upon arrival, the faithful find much in the church to delight their senses. Going to church before the Reformation was a sensuous experience, even in small churches and chapels. The worshippers:



#### **heard...**

- the sound of the bell
- the intoning of the ritual prayers—mesmerizing in their unintelligible, monotonous latin.



#### **saw...**

- colourful paintings covering the walls
- stained glass pictures in the windows
- intricate carved rood screen and loft separating them from the chancel
- beautiful decorative ceiling with carved angels looking down on them
- altar with its cloths, cross and candlesticks
- the corpse-laden crucifix
- the bread plate and chalice
- the glint of candlelight
- the ceremonial vestments worked in flowers or scenes of the savior's life in beautiful threads and colours

- the transfixing motion of the priest's hands as he raised up the Host and by God's permission effected a miracle.



### **smelled...**

- the sweat of their neighbours and at the same time
- the heavenly fragrances of beeswax, incense and burning candles.



### **felt/touched/tasted...**

- holy water on their fingertips
- the very flesh of Christ sacrificed as the priest placed the wafer into their mouths at the rood screen or the altar steps
- the plume inhaled as the acolyte swung the censer

Walking into the Chapel, dipping fingertips in the holy water font, the worshippers look up to see stained glass windows depicting scenes from the bible and from the lives of the saints. On the walls and ceilings are paintings and sculptures as well as other sacred objects. Although they are made of plain wood or marble, they are painted with vivid colours.

*Image shows a reconstruction of how the Guild Chapel would have looked to medieval worshippers.*

Quite likely, those entering the Chapel have made some contribution to these decorations. Guilds gave money to endow statues and artwork; local craftsmen and women sculpted and painted, sewed and embroidered vestments, altar cloths, tapestries, and drapings and veils for statues.



Firmly attached to the back wall of the Chancel, is the high altar. The Chapel's wealth is indicated by knowledge that it had a rood screen between the Nave (people's space) and the Chancel (choir and altar space). This was an elaborately carved wooden barrier, solid from the waist down and full of windows from the waist up, likely with images of saints and biblical figures carved on it, and a giant crucifix in the middle at the top (roof loft). While this screened the activity at the high altar from the everyday worshippers, sometimes the activity spilled out from the Chancel as the gospel book, holy water, or (on Easter) the eucharistic elements themselves were carried out into the Nave by the priests and deacons. At other occasions, the people processed with candles through the door of the rood screen and into the altar space.

There were no, or at least very few, pews (only available/provided for very wealthy or important people); they would not become widespread for several more centuries. Still, certain standing places became customary for certain people, with the poor standing closer to the back.

There is a processional, a greeting, the confession of sin, the gloria, prayers, and readings for the day from the epistle and gospel. If the priest is literate, he preaches, not in latin but in the language of the congregation. Then the action shifts from Word to table, with the creed, the offering, the priest's washing of his hands in preparation for the Holy Meal, and the long eucharistic prayer, with its prayers for the living and the dead. the acolytes swing a thurible, and incense fills the space around the altar. The priest faces the altar, not the people, and the prayers for the most part are silent.

A bell is rung when the words of consecration are said so that, wherever they are in the church, the people will know that the holy moment has arrived. Now the priest, facing the altar and beyond it the east of morning and resurrection, takes the sacred Host into his hands and raises it high so that all may see the body of the Lord. Most people receive the bread (rarely the wine) into their mouths only yearly, at Easter, after confessing their sins to a priest during Holy Week. This annual ritual was often referred to as "taking one's rights." However, each week, even every day, they can see the eucharistic meal take place. The people hold up their hands and recite their prayers. For a moment, they are of one mind and one spirit. everything else falls away.

Those who have been to confession during the week before are allowed to come forward to receive the elements. Once the select few have been served, the communion vessels are cleaned, the lord's prayer said, and the kiss of peace shared. In the Middle ages, the passing of this kiss didn't involve actual kissing. Instead, a pax board was held between the attendees, and each person kissed one side of the board.



*Image shows a recreation of the Guild Chapel's Doom painting – which can still be seen in fine detail today*

The Mass closes with prayers and a dismissal. the priest, deacons, and acolytes process out of the church, and the Mass comes to an end. Slowly, the faithful file out again into the sunlight and travel back to their homes.

But this devoted pilgrimage won't last. Within 150 years, after these are nailed to a door in Wittenberg, the crucifixes will be torn down, the candles extinguished, the

vessels stolen, and the faces of the saints and angels and the Virgin Mary will be scratched out of paintings and scraped off statues. But the faithful who labor here for their lord do not know that now.

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## **The English Reformation**

The medieval Catholic church accepted a wide range of religious tastes and expressions, which in the modern world might find places in different denominations.

The Reformation started a splintering of christianity in the United Kingdom which over the following centuries saw the creation of Protestant, Puritan, Jesuit, Baptist and Quaker branches of Christianity.

Many medieval churches were owned privately by wealthy laymen, monasteries, or bishops. The owner sold or passed on the property as he wished, and kept its revenues. He appointed the priest, had him ordained, and paid him. Many owners gave the parish to a priest as a "living," who as "rector," received all or most of the revenues. The parish rector collected offerings at mass, on the anniversary of a parishioner's death, at weddings and funerals, and from penitents at confession. Offerings weren't always money: bread for Communion, wax and candles, eggs at Easter, fowls at Christmas.

Though priests took a vow of celibacy, many had concubines. The practice was often open and accepted, as long as the priest was faithful to one woman.

During this period, prior to the Reformation, there was growth in the Catholic church of money being "offset" against sins and wealthy people offering payments of various kinds in exchange for salvation. The rules weren't very clear and some priests took advantage of this, making themselves, the church and the church owners very wealthy in the process. Some of the population were angry at the way the Roman Catholic Church used them as a source of money. To get married you had to pay; to get a child baptised (which you needed to be if you were to go to Heaven) you had to pay; you even had to pay the Church to bury someone (which you had to do as your soul could only go to Heaven if you were buried on Holy Ground). Therefore, the Catholic Church was very wealthy while many poor remained just that....poor. Their money was going to the Catholic Church. This perceived corruption angered people and it was one of the practices which was targeted by reformers, who wanted to simplify worship and make God more accessible to worshippers.

The reformers also complained that the Bible was only written in Latin, so very people could read and understand it; it meant that a priest could explain the text in any way they wanted and the everyday people had to trust their interpretation. They wanted it to be available in English so that everyone could read it

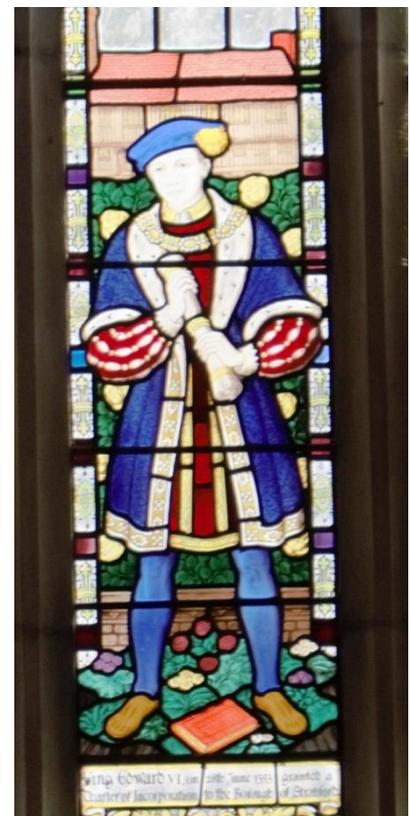
themselves. The Catholic church didn't want this as they thought it would diminish the influence and power of their priests.

As the Reformation movement gained popularity, it also timed with Henry VIII's desire to divorce his wife (which the pope had forbidden) and raise money, at a time when much of the wealth of the kingdom went to the church, not the crown. Henry chose to declare himself Supreme Head of the Church of England in 1534 with the Act of Supremacy, thus ending Catholic rule of the church in England. Henry dissolved England's monasteries to confiscate their wealth and worked to place the Bible in the hands of the people. An English Bible (the 'Great Bible') was placed in churches and by 1540 every parish in England had a copy.

After Edward VI succeeded his father in 1547, a second and more radical Reformation replaced the Catholic Latin Mass and other rituals with an English *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549. These services, written for the first time in English rather than Latin, transformed the Mass, eliminated the cult of the saints, and removed prayers on behalf of the dead, which had been central to the whole practice of religion for hundreds of years.

However, when Edward died in 1553, his sister Mary I reversed the revolution in religion. The Mass was revived and laws forbidding religious dissent or heresy were restored, leading to a counter-Reformation. Yet in 1558 Mary also died suddenly and Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1559. Her government revived the *Book of Common Prayer* and passed a Royal Injunction demanding the removal of 'all signs of superstition and idolatry' from places of worship, 'so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glasses, windows or elsewhere within their churches and houses'.

It was this injunction that led to the first limewashing of the Chapel's wall paintings and gradual move to remove images of saints and other more catholic decorative elements from the church.



*Image shows Edward VI, depicted in the Guild Chapel's stained-glass windows alongside prominent Guild figures.*

30 years of religious strife continued as policy once again turned everything upside down. Catholics were increasingly persecuted, along with more radical Protestants known as Puritans.

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