

10th June

Memory verse

I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.
John 11:25

A story from history¹The Peasants' Revolt²

In the middle of the fourteenth century, the black death swept through the country. Unlike Covid 19, the black death was almost always fatal. It killed between 30 to 60 percent of the whole population. To get some idea of what that means think of it in modern terms: if there are ten houses in your street, three to six of them would now be empty if we had recently suffered an epidemic of the black death rather than Covid 19.



The black death was followed by set-backs for the English armies in the Hundred Years War. There were so few peasants left on the land as a result of the black death that the lords of the manor found it difficult to run their estates. Food prices rose. Those peasants who survived demanded higher wages for their work. This may seem natural to us, but in those days things were regarded as having a fixed value and it was considered wrong to ask more for something (even your labour) just because it was in short supply.

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Once the worst of the black death was over, Parliament met and passed the Statute of Labourers (1351) making it illegal for anyone to either ask for or pay more than the old wages. It was not possible to enforce this law. Landlords did not want to lose their crops altogether and were therefore forced to pay what the surviving peasants demanded.

Because the king, Richard II (1377-1399), was young, the nobles became powerful. Headed by the king's Uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, the country was ruled by a group of nobles called the Lords Appellant. These nobles acted largely in their own interests and became very unpopular.



The Master of Balliol Hall, Oxford in the 1370s, was John Wycliffe. He began to write and preach against the things that were happening in the church. Wycliffe saw how rich the church was and how it swindled poor people. He began to teach that the clergy ought to live as the apostles of old had done and give up all their property.³ He began to compare the rest of the church's teaching with Scripture too.

Wycliffe did not stop his work. As he continued to read and study God's word he became convinced that more was wrong with the church than the greed of its clergy. The very fundamentals of its teaching on sin and salvation were contrary to Scripture. He began to attack pilgrimages, penances, worship of relics, masses for the dead, and the office of the papacy itself. He saw clearly that everything necessary for salvation is

- 1 If you did the lessons for 1st February about Edward III and 22nd May about Wycliffe's Bible you will remember some of this lesson.
- 2 Adapted from Owen, Evan, *What Happened Today* Volume 2 Available on the *Mothers' Companion* Flashdrive. <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com> and *The Story of God's Dealings with our Nation* Volume 1 which is available here: <https://www.creationresearchstore.com/s/search?q=The%20Story%20of%20Gods%20Dealings%20with%20our%20Nation>.
- 3 Do you remember the lesson on William of Ockham on May 25th? He had had similar concerns.

contained in the Bible. In spite of being forbidden to do so by the bishop, he preached these ideas freely. These ideas were accepted eagerly in Oxford. Many people were converted.

Wycliffe formed bands of "Poor Preachers" whom he sent out to preach the gospel to people throughout the country. More people were converted as the gospel began to spread. Those who had been converted became known as Lollards. Because there was no Bible in English Wycliffe set about supervising a translation so that people could know the truth for themselves. The clergy became alarmed. Great numbers of people were turning to the truth. A law was passed commanding the local officers to imprison the preachers and their followers. The people however defended their preachers when attempts were made to arrest them. The work of the Lollards continued. Wycliffe himself continued to study God's word. Now he discovered that the mass itself and the doctrine of transubstantiation were not supported by the Bible and were therefore wrong. When he began to teach these things, many of his former supporters left him.

The Black Death had led to sweeping changes in the countryside. Among the peasants there was discontent and poverty on all sides. In the towns things were just as unsettled. The rise of the guild system brought discontent among members of the lower classes unable to follow their trade. In some towns there was discontent among the Merchant Guilds themselves because they could not buy the freedom of the town from their lord. There were many people without work especially in London. Some were soldiers returned from the wars in France. These men often became robbers. Some were runaway villeins and some were cloth workers thrown out of business by the Flemish cloth workers who had settled just outside London's city walls.

Amidst all this discontent a priest named John Ball was drawing great crowds by his preaching. He was not one of the Lollards. He taught that all men were born equal and were therefore entitled to an equal share of this world's goods. "My good friends," he would say, "matters cannot go on well in England until all things shall be in common; when there shall be neither serf nor lords; when the Lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. How ill they behave to us! For what reason do they hold us in bondage? Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? When Adam delved [dug] and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?"

The wars began again in France. They were very unsuccessful and also very expensive. It was difficult to raise enough money to pay for them. In the previous reign there had been profits from the war in the form of spoils and ransom money. This time there were no profits. The council who ruled on behalf of the boy king Richard II decided to try a poll-tax. This was a new tax in which everyone over the age of fifteen had to pay a shilling. This was about the equivalent of what a labourer would earn in a week. In 1381 the tax was imposed twice. This proved to be the spark which set the country afire with revolt.

At Brentwood in Essex and at Gravesend in Kent tax-collectors were beaten and driven away. The villagers stirred up others in villages around to join them and soon from all the counties around London the peasants came flocking up to Blackheath. Here they listened to John Ball. The peasant's leader was a man named Watt Tyler. By **June 10th** the whole country was up in arms.

The peasants demanded that no one should be forced to do service as a villein or serf but all should be free to work for wages. They also demanded that land should be leased to those who had been villeins for a fixed rent of fourpence per acre. Many blamed the teaching of Wycliffe for the revolt although he had never supported it. The council, frightened by what was going on, met the rebels at Mile End and agreed to their demands. Meanwhile another mob in London forced its way into the Tower of London and killed the Chancellor and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Another meeting was arranged between the King and his courtiers and Watt Tyler and the rebels, this time at Smithfield. The rebels gathered on one side of the open space with the Royal party on horseback some 50 metres away. Watt Tyler rode forward to speak to the Royal party. There was an argument, then a scuffle and Tyler was struck from his horse and killed by the Lord Mayor of London. Seeing what had happened to their leader the mob surged forward threateningly. The young king managed to save the courtiers from destruction by riding forward towards the mob crying “Sirs, will you kill your king? I will be your chief and captain and you shall have from me all that you seek.”

The peasants cheered, trusting the king and believing his words. They were soon on their way home to their villages confident that the king would put all to rights. Alas for the poor peasants! As soon as they had dispersed and were no longer a threat, men at arms were sent after them to hunt them down. Those who escaped were captured, tried and hung. Richard had no intention of keeping his word. When some poor peasants came and begged him to remember what he had promised he laughed. “Serfs you are and serfs you will remain!” he said.

Some things to think about for older children

John Ball taught that because all men are equal in God’s sight all should have an equal share of this world’s goods. Wycliffe did not support John Ball’s ideas. Can you think why? What does the Bible say about poverty and riches? Do you think the demands of the peasants were just? How ought a good king to have responded to them?

Map Work

The revolt seems to have begun at **Dartford**. Then **Rochester** Castle was taken two days later. On **10th June** the rebels had arrived in **Canterbury**. By **12th June** they had reached **Blackheath** on their way to **London**. Chart their course on a map. Did they go straight to London?

Something to make

The peasants broke into manor-houses where they destroyed the records that gave details of the names of the serfs, their rents and duties in line with Ball's idea that there should be “neither serf nor lords”. These records were the legal evidence which would be used in a court of law if a peasant ran away from his manor, for example. “The rebels returned to the New Temple which belonged to the prior of **Clerkenwell**... and tore up with their axes all the church books, charters and records discovered in the chests and burnt them...” wrote Henry Knighton (d.c. 1396) in his *Chronicon*. The peasants would have been almost all illiterate and they took no chances; any book or roll of parchment could be a record of serfdom. Although we have many archives of surviving documents of various types from the middle ages this is a little snapshot of what can so easily happen to historical records.⁴

You can make your own “Medieval” documents using cold tea and a candle to make them look like old parchment. First make your “old” paper:

⁴You can see some slightly later manor court rolls here:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/researchguidance/medievaldocuments/format.aspx> (scroll down to the second picture) and I expect some of the documents that were destroyed were rather like this.

You can apply an “aged” surface to plain white paper by dabbing it with a freshly used teabag or by soaking the paper in strong tea or coffee for a few minutes. Crumpling the paper up first gives an interesting effect if you use the soaking method. You may have to iron it afterwards to get it flat enough to write on. Some types of paper work better than others. You may find a blank page from a sketch book is more absorbent than printer paper and so works better. You can dry your paper with a hair-dryer and also experiment with blowing some dabs of tea/coffee about on the paper with the hairdryer to give a streaky or spotty effect.

Now for the writing. If you write on the paper before “ageing” it, you may find your writing runs when it gets wet so it is best to age the paper first. If you have dip pens to write with so much the better but felt-tip pens will do. Decide what you are going to write. You could imagine you are serfs on a medieval manor and put down your own names and your job – are you a ploughman, a thatcher, a shepherd...? Then you could add some comments; have you been fined for losing your lord's sheep, or ploughing a crooked furrow? Use your imagination! Another idea would be to imagine you are a noble or churchman and write a few words of a report warning of the approach of the army of peasants and telling what they have done in your area.

Alternatively you could write your memory verse. Here it is in the translation made by John Wycliffe:

I am again-rising and life; he that believeth in me, yea, though he be dead, he shall live.

And in Latin:

ego sum resurrectio et vita qui credit in me et si mortuus fuerit vivet

Practice on a piece of scrap paper first.

Now comes the best bit – but be careful! To give a singed edge to the paper, light a candle and hold the edges of your paper in the flame until they are nicely scorched. Over the sink can be a good place to do this and adult help is required!