

0:20

This man is a pilgrim – a common sight in the Middle Ages.

0:27

Pilgrims were living reminders that earthly life is no more than an interim stage on the way to eternity. According to the church, everyone should go on a pilgrimage at least once in their lives. For many citizens it was the only long journey they ever undertook, and it was a hazardous business.

0:49

The destinations were holy sites where the pilgrims prayed for the forgiveness of their sins. They prepared for life in the next world by doing penance and good works.

1:04

In the Middle Ages, people believed that this was their only hope of being admitted to the kingdom of God after they died.

Title: Hellfire and Salvation

1:26

For late-medieval citizens, the future was very much an unknown quantity.

1:36

Life was tough. People were confronted with illness and death every day, and many of them died young.

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Rats were everywhere - a sure sign of poor hygiene standards. There were no sewers. Waste was simply thrown onto the street, making it easier for disease to spread.

2:05

When crops failed, people had to resort to inferior corn for milling. As a result, a disease called "St. Anthony's fire" killed many people. It was caused by ergot, a fungus in the grain that contaminated the bread that was made from it.

2:20

Those who survived the illness were marked for life. Gangrene, caused by blood-vessel constriction, made their limbs wither and drop off; begging was the only course left to them.

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To arouse compassion for their plight, they would often display the parts of their body they had lost on the ground in front of them.

2:46

Lepers were another common sight. These "untouchables" were doomed as there was no known cure for the disease.

3:02

From 1348 to 1351, a bubonic plague epidemic ravaged the western world. The Black Death killed a total of 25 million people, one third of the entire population of Europe.

3:26

Natural disasters were another scourge, causing illness and hunger and making life more expensive. There was nothing the population could do to escape them.

3:40

People interpreted these catastrophes as divine punishment and organised church services and processions in which they begged the Almighty for mercy.

3:58

Protected as it was by the hand of God, the church became the cornerstone of urban life. Church spires loomed high above all the other buildings, symbolising both the piety of the citizens and the power of religion.

4:18

The size and magnificence of the churches represented the glory of God. One example is Strasbourg Cathedral.

4:28

The church spent a third of its money on building work. All the citizens were involved, providing either free manual labour or generous donations.

4:40

These buildings stood for the strength of the Christian faith and the civic pride and love of ostentation displayed by many urban communities.

4:54

No other building in Strasbourg rivalled the cathedral for sheer size. Life in the late Middle Ages was dominated by the church.

5:06

The façade of Strasbourg Cathedral features stories from the Bible carved in stone. Above the main entrance, we see episodes from the life of Christ:

5:17

...the Last Supper,

5:21

...Jesus bearing His cross,

5:25

...and doubting Thomas.

Most people could not read, so these sculptures were the equivalent of stone picture-books or medieval Bible comics.

5:39

But however large and magnificent the church they had built, the citizens were in for trouble if they disregarded God's commandments.

5:52

Though people truly believed that earthly existence was only a stopover on the way to a better world, they also feared that they would have to pay for their sins in purgatory.

6:06

They dreaded the thought of being excluded from Heaven and sentenced to eternal torment in Hell. To evade such horrors, the people of the Middle Ages either had to lead virtuous lives or repent and make up for their sins. 6:23

6:31

The best way of ensuring a place in Heaven was to enter a convent or monastery. Nuns and monks gave up all earthly goods. They sacrificed their possessions to serve God alone.

6:50

In the cloisters the monks spent their time praying or studying religious writings.

6:57

They earned their keep with manual work.

7:07

Alongside their labours, they attended church services several times a day. Many monks were educated because they came from aristocratic families. Some even wrote books. But not all of them were cut out for the monotony of spiritual life. Education, worship and prayer did not make them immune to sin. Celibacy – first introduced in the 11th century – was hard to impose on the monks.

7:45

People in need were given food and shelter for the night.

7:55

Care for the poor and hungry was one of the central tasks assigned to these religious orders, so food was regularly distributed outside the walls.

8:11

The sick were looked after in hospitals on the premises.

8:16

Here we see nuns tending their patients free of charge.

8:24

In the Middle Ages, wealth was thought to be a gift from God. But the Church expected the rich to be charitable to those less fortunate than themselves.

8:36

They gave alms to the needy.

8:43

Beggars did not regard poverty as a disgrace. When wealthy citizens gave them money, clothing or food, they saw this as a token of God's mercy.

8:58

The Church assured the rich that alms-giving would lighten the burden of their sins and save their souls from damnation.

9:12

This prospect of rewards in the next life led them to believe that they could pay their way to Heaven.

9:25

One uniquely impressive donation of this kind that has survived to the present day was made in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor to the Duke of Burgundy.

9:38

The chancellor and his wife decided to ensure the salvation of their souls by establishing a hospital for the poor. They gave it a substantial sum of money every year and provided it with vineyards and saltworks as a further source of income.

9:56

Renowned artists were hired to decorate the building.

10:04

The heart of this “palace for the poor” was the great central ward, which has retained its medieval character to this day.

Usually there were two patients to a bed, so 120 persons could be looked after at any one time.

10:29

Precautions were also taken for the salvation of their souls. An altar was set up to bring the patients closer to God.

10:38

This magnificent Gothic painting hung over the altar.

It shows the donor, Nicolas Rolin, and his wife Guigone worshipping the two patron saints of the hospital. This way they could be sure that after their death the patients in the great ward would follow their example and pray for the souls of their two benefactors.

11:04

On weekends, the altar picture was opened to its full size. It is a depiction of the Last Judgment, the day on which the dead rise from their graves and God, the great judge, decides on their ultimate fate.

11:20

The sick were instructed to be mindful of their sins and to contemplate death. “Be vigilant,” they were told, “for you know neither the day nor the hour of your death.”

11:38

The only sure way of admission to the kingdom of God was via the Church.

It was the constant link between rich and poor, between this life and the next, the terms of reference that defined medieval thinking and medieval people’s view of the world.

12:00

The Church was the one safe path from the vale of tears in this life to heavenly bliss in the next because it was the only source of absolution from sin.

12:22

But this monopoly led to abuses. The church began to capitalise on the sins of the faithful.

12:32

It did so by selling letters of indulgence. They guaranteed their owners forgiveness for their sins. This one promises absolution for a period of three years.

12:45

Trade in indulgences flourished in the late Middle Ages and brought the church substantial revenues. The church officials used the money not only to buy land but also for their own personal benefit.

13:00

This connection between religion and money was one of the motives for the Reformation in 1517.

13:13

Today, we rarely witness illness and death. And the piety so conspicuous in the Middle Ages has little influence on our everyday lives.

Only on the occasion of high church festivals like Corpus Christi day are the symbols of religious faith displayed in public processions celebrating and honouring the presence of Jesus Christ.

13:39

Many take part – dignitaries, societies and associations, young people. But many others stay away. Today, religious faith and piety, once such important part of urban life in the Middle Ages, have become a private affair.