

There's a wonderful moment in Patrick Leigh Fermor's account of his passage through Europe in 1934 when he comes across a party of loggers deep in a forest in the Carpathian uplands. He's been without human contact, high in the mountains, for a couple of days and is rather resentful of the noises of human activity from below but he approaches the group and is led by the friendly but suspicious Jewish foreman to a nearby cabin where he finds to his surprise an orthodox rabbi, the foreman's brother, with his two sons, studying scripture – all dressed in black and somewhat forbidding. The Jews at this time, had every reason to be suspicious of a stranger:

Everything took a different turn when scripture cropped up. The book in front of the Rabbi was the Torah, or part of it, printed in dense Hebrew black letter that was irresistible to someone with a passion for alphabets...laboriously I could phonetically decipher the sounds of the simpler words, without a glimmer of their meaning, of course, and this sign of interest gives pleasure.

He shows them his diary containing earlier encounters with Hebrew in Bratislava and elsewhere and his clumsy attempts to render them in German. The Rabbi and his sons are excited, not only that an English goy should show interest in their scriptures, but that, as the Rabbi repeats the Torah script, Patrick begins to understand that they are words from David's elegy over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. The Jews are astonished and *touched, too.. that their tribal poetry enjoyed such glory and affection in the outside world; utterly cut off, I think they had no inkling of this.* They decide they could accept him as a *shabbas goy* – *the Sabbath gentile employed by well-off Jews* – *'not like us'* – *to perform the many tasks the Law forbids on the seventh Day.* He departs as a friend amidst laughter. This is a very poignant scene knowing that in a few years' time those Jews will, more than likely, be exterminated and their culture largely lost from Central Europe, but the memory of it strikes me as a taste of the hidden treasure found by those who seek God, not for earthly riches and power, but for the wisdom and joy which knowing something of God brings – the sort of wisdom Solomon seeks and which Jesus lays before us. It's a delight accessible only to those willing to be justified by God – that is, according to one definition – to those who know themselves to be both loved by God and limited in themselves. It's a recognition of who we really are in relation to God, and vice -versa. We are only earthenware vessels, as we heard yesterday, but able, nevertheless, to hold something of the glory of God when we realise our limitation.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour