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BIBLE ANNIVERSARY: 'What looks dead and dusty can give you a shock'



THE SYNOD, endorsing next year's celebrations of the quatercentenary of the Authorised or King James Version of the Bible, is hoping that churches will seize opportunities to make the Bible better known.

Introducing the motion from Chelmsford diocesan synod, the Revd John Dunnett (Chelmsford) said that it was not a plea for special recognition for the Authorised Version (AV); nor did it focus on the AV's literary contribution over 400 years, immense though that was.

Rather, it asked the Synod to affirm that the gift of scripture, handed down through Christian history, spoke with clarity and authority in the 21st century to both Church and nation. It was also to acknowledge the widespread reality of biblical illiteracy, and the urgency with which the Church needed to address that poverty. The 400th anniversary of the AV offered a particular opportunity. The motion expressed a confidence in the Bible, but it was a confidence that needed to look forward, not back. Churches and congregations up and down the country needed the reassurance that scripture really was sufficient as a basis for faith.

The Very Revd Archimandrite Ephrem Lash (Orthodox Churches) said that the Council of Nicaea

promulgated a concern that anyone who aspired to be a bishop must know the Psalter by heart. The great thing about the Bible was that one should know it well, but there was a problem when there were a dozen different translations to use.

He said he was always very impressed by Muslims who learned the Qur'an by heart, and it was an advantage in the Orthodox Churches that they always used the original scripture, as indeed one version had been used in the Western Christian Church until the 16th century. Among the Orthodox, the Bible was integrated into all the hymns of liturgy.

Years ago, he had welcomed a visitor to a service and had provided him with a translation of the liturgy with footnote references to all the biblical quotations. The visitor said that he had never been to such a scriptural service in his life.

The Archimandrite said that the Orthodox regarded the Apocrypha on exactly the same basis as the rest of the Bible.

The Bishop of Bradwell (Chelmsford), the Rt Revd Laurie Green, said that he was firmly in favour of the motion, but was concerned at its retrospective aspect rather than concentrating on the future. The Bible as a printed text originated in a particular era, and he had always thought it regressive that people were asked to follow a Bible reading in the pew rather than reading it together. It used to be used for communal reading. He hoped the motion would encourage more Bible study in churches. But if the Synod wanted to promote the Bible it should not get hung up in a retrospective debate. Print technology gave a particular slant in the way that all media affected the message. The new technology promised new insights, no longer privatised, but more interactive and dynamic.

Brigadier Ian Dobbie (Rochester) praised the commendation of the King James Bible in the amendments, and expressed the wish that today's generation should have access to its dignified translation. He hoped that it would promote a recovery of daily Bible reading. The message was urgently needed, because it was the authentic account of the person and work of Christ, about which statistics exposed contemporary illiteracy.

The Revd Dr Tim Stratford (Liverpool) said that the Liturgical Commission had long been keen to emphasise the importance of scripture in worship. He was very supportive of the motion. He recognised that there were quarters of the Church of England in which the place of scripture was sometimes played down — sometimes the most missional worship was where this happened most.

Parts of the Bible that resonated most with the human spirit were often used least. He urged the Church to set free the imagination in allowing the Bible to speak.

The Revd Professor Richard Burridge (Universities) spoke to his amendment, which replaced the Chelmsford amendment with four points (a) to (d).

In South Africa, reading the Bible and interpreting the scriptures was "a matter of life and death across all our traditions". It had been a matter of life and death in South Africa at the time of the struggle against apartheid and the Dutch Reformed Church's understanding of scripture. Archbishop Desmond Tutu had sent a message to this Synod in which he said: "The Bible drives us out to confront the world's crises."

The AV had been composed by scholars working "100 yards away in the Jerusalem Chamber" in Westminster Abbey, "trying to communicate scriptures in a language people would understand at that time". That manuscript was now lodged in the British Library.

There was now "a crisis of biblical poverty". To confront that, there would be national and local celebrations next year. "Working on the Bible is like rewiring an old house without turning off the electricity: what looks dead and dusty can suddenly give you a real shock."

The Archbishop of Canterbury said that he was very enthusiastic about the Burridge amendment, especially its fourth clause, which called for celebrating and teaching the Bible both in the Church and throughout society. The original motion had not said enough about teaching the Bible in the Church. When he had been a bishop in Wales, he had had to ask of some mission services: "Where's the scriptural reading?" "We have allowed ourselves to think that missional worship is somehow absolved from scriptural readings." It was of concern to the Church of England Youth Council, which would be asking diocesan synods to act on the concern.

The Anglican Communion was initiating a study of the Bible in the Church. He hoped that this would "tease out the hermeneutic we share in common". The Bible was not just "a quarry for individual bright ideas" on how to understand it, but there was also "canonical reading" of the Bible, where the Church

had expressed how the Bible was to be understood. The debates in the Early Church had been “the Church saying: ‘This is how we corporately read the Bible in a way that honours the full diversity of Christ, and not otherwise.’” The Bible was a book which Christians discerned corporately, and to the corporate understanding of which they submitted themselves in charity to one another.

Mary Judkins (Wakefield) did not care which version of the Bible children read, so long as they had access to it. Experience of six great faiths in the educational sphere in which she worked had shown her that Christian children, even in church schools, had no idea of the Bible. That was partly the Church’s fault. Churchgoers did not even know where to find the books in the Bible. “If we’re not teaching the Bible, we don’t have confidence in it.” Local initiatives taking the Bible into schools were imperative.

The Bishop of Wakefield, the Rt Revd Stephen Platten, moved his amendment, which addressed a “vital omission” of the affirmation of the theological and liturgical significance of the Bible. His amendment drew attention to the foundational nature of the scriptures, and the rich scriptural text of the liturgy. Belief and worship went hand in hand: the reference to public worship would show that the place of scripture was paramount.

The Bishop of Durham, Dr Tom Wright, believed that it was very important not to distract from the 2011 opportunity. The very people who might be freshly engaged with it might view it as taking the Church into the world it had left behind. There could be unintended consequences when it appeared that the reason why Anglicans read the scriptures was that the formularies told them to. There was also an ecumenical head of steam for this initiative. Not including this emphasis on the Anglican Church would emphasise that this was something that should be done ecumenically together.

The Wakefield amendment was lost.

Timothy Cox (Blackburn) moved his amendment (to the Burridge amendment), asking the Synod to remember that two years ago it had passed a motion that encouraged all churches and cathedrals to have Bibles readily available, and to undertake local initiatives to celebrate the teaching of the Bible. Professor Burridge resisted this amendment because, he said, it destroyed the balance of his amendment, and he did not know how churches and cathedrals would be able to obtain the Bibles needed. The Cox amendment was lost.

The Burridge amendment was carried, and Linda Ali (York) spoke to the amended motion, saying that she had been very moved by the service chaplains earlier in the week, who had told how servicemen and -women valued reading the Bible when in the stress of the battlefield. She suggested that all parishes and deaneries with service establishments in their boundaries should provide Bibles for the men and women serving in them.

The Bishop of Lincoln, Dr John Saxbee, speaking on behalf of the House of Bishops, said that the Bishops had given a “fair wind” to the motion, and were exploring the possibility that three Bible-study Sundays a year should be established. It would be a good way to celebrate the anniversary of the Authorised Version. The matter was now in the hands of the Liturgical Commission.

The amended motion was put to the Synod and carried nem. con.
It said:

That this Synod

(a) believe that the 400th anniversary in 2011 of the King James Version of the Bible is an obvious opportunity to celebrate the exceptional contribution which that translation has made to shaping the life, language and culture of this and other nations;

(b) commend the King James Version and other translations of the Bible as relevant and authoritative for personal and public instruction, reiterating the importance of continuing biblical translation, scholarship and teaching;

(c) note with enthusiasm the events throughout the year being organised by the 2011 Trust and other bodies, details of which are to be warmly commended to Church and local communities; and

(d) request that dioceses, deaneries and parishes undertake local initiatives to celebrate and teach the Bible both within the Church and throughout wider society.