

23rd October 2011
Southwark Cathedral

Nehemiah 8.1-4a [5-6] 8-12
Colossians 3.12-17
Matthew 24.30-35

Bible Sunday – Apples and Gospel Sculptures

Introduction

I want to begin with several words of thanks. It is very good to be here in Southwark Cathedral and preaching at this Eucharist. What a fabulous banquet of riches is before us on a day like today: Bible Sunday, Apple Day, and the display of Sophie Dickens' sculptures in the nave. The relationship between King's College London and Southwark Cathedral is a long and very close one and is symbolised most obviously, of course, by the fact that we share The Revd Anna Macham who is deaconing for us this morning. Anna is a member of my team at King's whilst also being Succentor here at the cathedral. With so many of our campuses and students around you, it is such a very good partnership to have and good to be able to work together in this way. So many events from King's College London happen here in the cathedral (including the graduation ceremonies for the School of Medicine and Dental Institute).

As well as being Dean of King's, I am also the Professor of Biblical Interpretation in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. So I was intrigued to hear, in that first reading from the Prophet Nehemiah, the importance of how, when they were reading the word of God, they had to provide interpretation. Probably all that really meant was that the Scriptures were being read in Hebrew and were being translated into Aramaic, but the whole point was so that people could understand. I think that somewhere among all the information I have received about this wonderful day, I have been asked to say, on this Bible Sunday, something about the 400th Anniversary of the King James translation of the Bible, something about why we should be doing what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing in that first reading and something about what we are told in that second reading, so beautifully read in Zulu, about letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly.

The 400th Anniversary of the KJV

As I am sure you are aware, this is the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James translation of the Bible in 1611. I am sure you will be aware because there has been so much going on. In fact, I was the person who wrote and drafted and put through the motion at the General Synod of the Church of England that we should keep this 400th year as a year of celebration of the Bible. I have to say that there have been many times when I have almost regretted that in the course of this year as I have travelled up and down the country from diocese to diocese doing clergy training. There have been wall-to-wall Bible events, but I do not think you can get too much of the Bible. We have encouraged people to celebrate, not just the KJV, but also all the different translations and the work of biblical scholarship and

interpretation, the arts, literature and culture, and all of those things. We called upon dioceses and deaneries to do something to mark this year.

The 400th Anniversary of the KJV has been observed on the BBC with Melvyn Bragg's documentary, *The King James Bible: The Book that Changed the World*, and all sorts of other programmes on the radio and the television. There have been exhibitions in Oxford and Cambridge, at Lambeth Palace and at King's College London. We have had important and significant lectures, beginning with the Bishop of London's Eric Abbott Memorial Lecture in Westminster Abbey on May 26th.¹ In that lecture, the Bishop of London gave us a very interesting challenge, asking whether there was any future for the KJV as a sacred text or whether it is now just either a museum piece or a literary and cultural icon? I found myself asking the question, with these readings before us and with the prospect of having fun with apples and the magnificent sculptures by Sophie Dickens, why do we want to read the Bible today?

If you have followed all the material about the King James Bible on the BBC and elsewhere – not just Lord Bragg but that important and well-known 'theologian' who has been championing the KJV all year, Richard Dawkins – you would think that the whole point of the KJV is Desert Island Discs. The KJV is one of the things you will be given on your desert island accompanied by the complete works of Shakespeare because without it you would not understand anything of British life or history or culture.

The Translators' Principles

However, if you read the Preface to the KJV, the translators describe it as an 'inestimable treasure', the 'sacred word' of God. What the translators are trying to say is that it is an extraordinary thing when God speaks to us for us to hear and say, 'Here am I, speak to me'. I am going to let you into a little secret. The translators of the KJV didn't really think in English. They were nearly fifty of the top scholars in the country and one of them had a library of fourteen hundred volumes which we still have today. There was one book in English in his library: the other thirteen hundred and ninety nine were in Latin and Greek, French and German, all those important and cultural academic languages. The book in English was a poem, 'The Spider and the Fly'.

These incredibly learned men, the Regius Professors of Oxford and Cambridge, the Deans of our cathedrals, were charged to translate the word of God as Scripture. They describe in their preface to the KJV the principles upon which they were working and they were first to make it clear that it was not their job to do something new, but 'to make a good one better.' They were building upon 150 years of biblical scholarship. The Professors of Greek and Hebrew in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were about, at this stage 100, years old – I mean, not the Professors themselves (although they may well have been) but the posts. Their job was to build

¹ For the full text, see the Westminster Abbey website: <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/whats-on/lectures-and-seminars/eric-symes-abbott-memorial-lectures/past-lectures-seminars/2011/may/26th-eric-symes-abbott-memorial-lecture>

upon the work of Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthew, the Geneva Bible, the Great Bible, the Bishops' Bible, and the way they worked was like a poetry reading. They began by reading out literally verse by verse from the Bishops' Bible while all the others sat and listened to it being read aloud and made notes about how it sounded. What is interesting is that the notes they made were all in Latin and Greek, as we have preserved in the diaries of John Bois, one of the translators.

The translators' aim was to make 'a good one better'. They were to take the wonderful phrasing of Tyndale and others – many of the phrases we know so well from the KJV are of course from Tyndale himself – and to make it better, to improve it. This was for two reasons. First, they said they wanted to do it for translation from the original languages, from the Hebrew and the Greek where so much before them had been translated from the Latin, from the Vulgate. They didn't get things always right: for example, on today of all days you might be interested to know that, despite the wonderful story of Adam and Eve, apples were not known in the Ancient Near East. Whatever else the fruit that Eve ate was, it was not an apple. It was probably nearer to what we would know as an apricot. The translators considered what the fruit people would understand in their own context would be. So the fruit was translated as an apple because the other priority in their Preface was to translate it into understandable English.

Even in its own day, the KJV was criticised and opposed. It was not an instant best seller. For fifty years, people carried on wanting to read the old translations. It was illegal to continue to have those translations and there was a roaring trade in the production of the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible with the KJV frontispiece on it so that it looked like it was okay really. The KJV was accused of being too archaic and of being too masculine in its language because it did not like this new found use of the word 'its' ('So if the salt has lost his savour', for instance, in Matthew 5.13). The translators were very clear, therefore, that they were improving upon those who had gone before, with a concern for understandable English. They, of all people, would have been appalled by this year's celebrations. I think they would have expected us long ago to have produced the RV, the RSV, the NRSV, all of which stand in that tradition and preserve the best of the KJV, preserve those wonderful phrases. But these newer translations also back to the much older manuscripts that we have discovered since 1611 and translate them afresh into understandable English.

Culture Shift

The KJV was the culmination of a technological revolution that had begun one hundred and fifty years or so before, called the Printing Press. Prior to that, most people's way of getting to know the Scriptures would have been hearing them, hearing someone else read aloud from hand written copies of the Bible. The revolution of technology, of the production of printing, which would have put the Bible into the hands of everyone – as Tyndale put it, to be translated so that even the boy with the plough might understand it – was absolutely phenomenal. The revolution in culture and technology was probably one of the most important things in the past two thousand years, until today when we are living in an equally similar

technological revolution. The KJV's period took us to a shift to a print culture. We work, now, on another form of 'apples' – although apparently these Apples are iPods and iPads and laptops. There is increasingly a shift from a print culture to a visual culture: everything presented on a screen, lots of pictures and images. In one sense, this 400th anniversary marks the end of the dominance of the printed word as we move into a completely new culture: the instant culture of information technology.

But it was so also in the ancient world, a visual culture. For those who could not read it was the beautiful pictures that illuminated ancient manuscripts that told them what the book was. If they saw a manuscript which had an eagle on it they would know that it was the Gospel of St John, or a lion and it was the Gospel of St Mark. Of course, I am referring to these amazing sculptures beautifully displayed here in this sacred space.

Images of Jesus

In the prophet Ezekiel's vision of God in Chapter One, those who are gathered around the throne of God have four faces: a lion, an ox, an eagle and a human face. In St John the Divine's vision of Revelation in Chapter Four, there are four living creatures around the throne and by the middle of the second century it was already common to associate those four creatures with the four evangelists. St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, in the middle of the second century talks about why there have to be four gospels because there are four corners of the earth, four winds, for covenants and four everything.² (Some of his arguments are a little bit desperate, one might think, but never mind.) The important thing is that it was clear even by the middle of the second century that these four books were absolutely vital and that they were being interpreted with these four images. If you look at the Book of Kells, or the other illuminated manuscripts of the time, you will see that. Often we associate those images with the evangelists themselves, but what Irenaeus says is that they are 'dispositions of the Son of God'. They are portraits of the way in which each gospel portrays Jesus of Nazareth: the Word of God, incarnate not in print but in a human being.

If you look at the first statue it depicts Mark and his lion. Mark's gospel is like a symphony: it's dark and it's riddling, and in the first movement, the fast movement, Jesus is rushing around roaring, fighting, confusing – the lion jumps on the stage and roars and runs about. And then in the middle of his gospel, we have a slow movement, where people ask the question, 'What manner of beast is this?', 'Who do people say that I am?' (Mark 8.27) And there is a confusing set of answers. Jesus is the Messiah who is going to die; Jesus is the miracle worker and healer that tells people to be quiet; Jesus is the Son of Man, but he is also Son of God. In the final movement, a stately march, the lion comes to Jerusalem, returns to his lair and finds that it has been made a robbers den. The roaring stops and he offers himself to his enemies, like Aslan the Great Lion in C. S. Lewis' Narnia stories, shaven and

² Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, III.11.8-9

sacrificed, apparently to no avail: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15.34)

Matthew's gospel has a human face. That wonderful sculpture there of the winged human being answers Mark's dark and riddling portrayal of the word of God with the human face of God. The teacher of Israel who, like Moses before him, stands on mountains, who delivers himself of the five great sermons: the Sermon on the Mount, the mission of the church, the parables of the kingdom, the life of the church and the foretelling of the end times. Jesus explains the story of Israel and the story of Israel's Messiah and how God comes to his people like looking for fruit on a fig tree or the owner coming to a vineyard and getting no fruit whether it is apples or figs or any other produce.

Across on the other side of the Nave, we have Luke and this extraordinary image of the ox: the universal beast of burden. Before the industrial revolution, if you wanted to draw water, if you wanted to plough your field, if you wanted to thresh your corn, you did it with an ox. 'Where there is no ox there is no wealth,' said the prophet (Proverbs 14.4). The ox is the beast of burden who carries everyone else's weight. Luke depicts Jesus as one who carries the weight of the world, always caring for women, for Samaritans, for non-Jews, for those who had no human rights at all. And yet, when the ox comes to Jerusalem, the authorities know what to do with an ox who won't keep in his place: you sacrifice him in the Temple.

Lastly, we have John's high flying, all seeing, all knowing eagle, coming from the heights of the divine and yet landing amongst the human race: in conflict with those who oppose him and yet nurturing his children, calling his disciples under his wings to care for them and to lay down his life for them.³

Conclusion

The ancients used these four images as images of the Word of God incarnate that was reflected in the written words of Scripture and what Sophie Dickens has done for us is the same today, to interpret that Word. Read the Bible in this four hundredth year if in no other. Read the Bible with interpretation as Ezra and Nehemiah did. You need, as the letter to the Colossians says, to let it dwell in you richly. So read the gospels. Imagine Jesus with these incredible visual aids of the four creatures, get a guide book. Read the Bible, read the written words and look for the Word made flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, whose coming we prepare for as Advent and Christmas draw near. God has spoken his word, God has enfolded his word in a human life. As Miles Smith, Bishop of Gloucester, the writer of the KJV translators' *Preface to the Reader* says, 'A blessed thing it is ... when God speaketh unto us, to hearken; when he setteth his word before us, to read it; when he stretcheth out his hand and calleth, to answer, "Here am I, here we are to do thy will, O God."' Amen.

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³ For a full explanation of the four images applied to the gospels, see Richard A. BurrIDGE, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (SPCK 2005).