

DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTIONS: CONFIDENCE IN THE BIBLE

“On Wednesday morning, when I was preparing this speech for this debate, my day began, as is the normal custom for me and is, I’m sure, for most of us here, with reading the Bible. What was important about Wednesday morning was the context in which I was reading it and with whom, which was the early morning Eucharist with Archbishop Desmond Tutu here in his London hotel.

I was first able to celebrate the Eucharist and read the Bible with Archbishop Desmond 20 years ago, when I was hosting him in the aftermath of Nelson Mandela’s release. I’ve been impressed for over 20 years with his commitment to reading the Bible in worship, a commitment he learned from the Community of the Resurrection and of course his training later at King’s College London, to the importance of the Bible. But what is particularly important is that his ministry took place in a country with a Christian government and the biblical doctrine of apartheid, put forward by the Dutch Reformed Church, a biblical, protestant, bible-reading church, passed by their synod and which oppressed him. So for Archbishop Desmond, reading the Bible was quite literally a matter of life and death and not just something to be done casually. I asked him for his message for the Synod debate and he said, ‘That the Bible drives us out into the world to confront the real issues’.

As for me, I grew up to learn Bible stories as a child in an Anglo-catholic parish on the edge of Bristol, I received a good liberal education about the Bible in the Cathedral School, I learned to love bible studies in an evangelical tradition in the Christian Union in Oxford and at St. Aldates, through my ordination training at St John’s Nottingham and through my doctoral research. Throughout that I have realised the truth that reading and interpreting scripture is a matter of life and death across all of our traditions. That’s why my own work has been in this field for such a long time and why I was then given a personal chair as Professor of Biblical Interpretation.

Therefore I immediately welcomed the Chelmsford motion back in the summer not least because I have a PTO [Permission to Officiate] for Chelmsford Diocese and for Southwark because our students are across the whole of London (and it lets me play in their diocesan golf team!). However, I was concerned that the debate on the original motion might lapse into sterile argument between so called ‘conservatives’ and so called ‘liberals’ about being biblical and needing to ‘defend the Bible’. We’ve already had CS Lewis mentioned, who reminded us he would “rather defend a lion”. On the other hand, there are also those who wish to reassert the importance of speaking in Jacobean language and who ignore what happened before 1610 and after 1612.

In 1610, four hundred years ago, a group of scholars were a couple of hundred yards away in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey working on manuscripts from the 12th, 13th and 14th Centuries, building upon the insights of Wycliffe and Tyndale, desperately trying to communicate the scriptures in a language that people could understand at that time. The King James’ Bible, published in 1611, became greatly loved and honoured across the entire world and acquired the name the ‘Authorised Version’. Although of course as GS misc 698, the note from the House of Bishops for this debate reminds us, the Church of England does not authorise any one version but actually has a whole range of translations. This is why I have wanted to stress in paragraph a) the

importance of the KJV and in b) that importance alongside continuing scholarship, teaching and so on.

Those manuscripts are now about half a mile to the north in the British Library alongside older 2nd, 3rd and 4th Century manuscripts, which are studied at King's College London, half a mile to the East, as well as by lots of other biblical scholars. This is why it's important to have this continuing stress on translation, scholarship and teaching to deal with this crisis of biblical poverty that we have already heard about.

The 2011 Trust is an initiative of the Bible Society: it has the Prince of Wales as its Patron, The Bishop of London as its Vice Patron. It is planning a service in Westminster Abbey with the Archbishop of Canterbury and I know the Archbishop of York is keen to be doing things throughout the year. There will be dramas, passion plays and a gathering at King's College London of the International Society of Biblical Literature.

That's why we want to celebrate it and roll these amendments together. We want there to be local initiatives, not just a national celebration, to celebrate and teach down on the ground, not just what the church has said in the past about the Bible (which is what Amendment 61 is about), but what we will say to the nation in the future. As J. B. Phillips put it, and as a biblical scholar I continue to believe,

“Working on the Bible is like rewiring an old house when you can't turn the power off. What looks dead and dusty will occasionally give you a terrible shock when you discover it is alive”.

I've dedicated my life, members of Synod, to interpreting, teaching and studying the Bible. All I'm asking you to do is to dedicate a year, 2011, the Year of the Bible”.

Friday, 12th February 2010