

Reading and Translating the Bible

Introduction

It is very good to be here preaching in Westminster Abbey again and I want to begin with a word of thanks. The relationship between King's College London, where I am Dean, and Westminster Abbey is a long and treasured one. I enjoy very much working with the Dean of Westminster, John Hall, over events like the Eric Abbott Memorial Lecture, commemorating both our predecessor Eric Abbott, who was Dean of Westminster and Dean of King's College London. It was a delight when Vernon White was chosen as the Canon Theologian here, someone I have known for nearly thirty years since he, as a relatively recently ordained priest, interviewed me about the crazy idea that I might be ordained as well. With many of our students living close by the Abbey, and our different campuses near by, 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 have taken place here in the Abbey, including the service for our 175th anniversary.

As well as being Dean of King's, I am also the Professor of Biblical Interpretation in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. I was struck, in that first reading, that Daniel approaches someone and asks how to interpret the extraordinary visions he had experienced in the night. This year above all has been a year of interpretation of the visions contained within the Bible.

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 and we heard our readings tonight read from that translation. The Dean of Westminster is one of the trustees of the 2011 Trust to celebrate the 400th anniversary. We have taken many events together already this year and I have been glad to share in the celebrations with the Abbey of the 400th anniversary. 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 will confess to you 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 preaching and speaking and doing training from diocese to diocese. 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. It was fantastic to have *Sixty Six Books*, part of these KJV celebrations by the Bush Theatre, here in the Abbey recently.

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, indeed, at King's College London. We have had important and significant lectures, beginning here in Westminster Abbey on May 26th with the Bishop of London's Eric Abbott Memorial Lecture.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? Bishops are very good at asking questions: they do not always give us the answers. We have struggled to find the answer over the rest of this year. 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. After all, the KJV is one of the things you will be given on your desert island accompanied by the complete works of Shakespeare because without either of these 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, in a couple of pages addressed to 'The Most High and Mightie Prince, James' describe the Bible as an 'inestimable treasure', the 'sacred word' of God. And then, in the longer Preface written by Miles Smith (Bishop of Gloucester and one of the translators), entitled 'From the Translators to the Reader', he says 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 (an extraordinary number in those days). 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, scholarly 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 one hundred and fifty years of biblical scholarship. The Regius Professors of Greek and Hebrew in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were about, at this stage, one hundred years old – the Chairs, I mean, not the Professors themselves (although they may well have been). Their job was to build upon the work of Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthew, the Geneva Bible, the Great Bible, the Bishops' Bible, and the way they

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>

worked was like a poetry reading. In this very Abbey, in the Jerusalem Chamber, 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 whether it was an accurate translation of the Greek and Hebrew that they had in front of them. 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’ and to translate it into understandable English. 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. They wanted to take it from the original languages, from the Greek and the Hebrew, and 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: they resisted firmly the new found use of the word ‘its’ (‘So if the salt has lost his savour’, for instance, in Matthew 5.13). With their concern to translate into understandable English the great phrases, I wonder what the translators would have made of this year’s celebrations and whether they would have expected the translation to last for four hundred years. I think that they, of all people, would have been appalled. The translators would have been serving on the boards of the RV, the RSV, the NRSV, all of the translations of the Bible which stand in that tradition and preserve the best of the KJV, preserve those wonderful phrases, but make use of the much older manuscripts that we have discovered and translate afresh into understandable English.

The Word Enfleshed in Human Form

The reason for this is that the written words reveal the real Word of God. In that first reading, from the Book of Daniel, we have Daniel’s vision of the various different beasts: the empires of human history. There have been all sorts of interpretations down through the ages of which empires each beast stands for, but the important thing is that they are all brought before the throne of the Ancient of Days, the extraordinary vision of God (one might think of William Blake’s paintings). The arrogant empires of the world are as nothing before Him. And then one comes to Him like a Son of Man, a Hebrew and Aramaic phrase which means someone like a human being. Daniel turns to his neighbour and asks for the interpretation of what he sees, and he is told how these beasts symbolise the various kings who are arrogant and stand against God. The interpretation of the Son of Man in Daniel Chapter 7 has become over the years one of the key understandings of Jesus of Nazareth.

In our New Testament reading, after we heard that wonderful response from the choir in the Magnificat, to the word of God in human history, so, as it says in the Nunc Dimittis, we see the light to lighten the gentiles, the glory of God's people Israel. The Word made flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, giving us the words of life in the Beatitudes, spoken here in Luke's gospel on the plain. Jesus reveals the living word of God in action first, as people are healed, cleansed and made whole. And then in spoken words, he gives the blessings of God for the poor and the hungry, for those who weep and woes for the rich, the full and the complacent. We are told to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to turn the other cheek when we are struck, leading up to the sum of so much of Jesus' teaching and the basis of so much ethics in our world today: do to others as you would have them do to you.

Conclusion

The whole point of having these ancient books is so that we might read and hear and understand from the spoken and written words God's communication, God's Word made flesh in the human life. Any celebration of the KJV or anything else for that matter which remains purely at the level of the written words misses the entire point. I hope that through all these many and different celebrations and activities this year if in no other you have been inspired to go home, pick up and read the Bible. Read the Bible looking as Daniel did for its interpretation. Hear the Bible as the multitude did in our second reading, to hear Jesus speaking to you. Of course, as the year of the Bible draws to a close shortly with a major service here in the Abbey with Prince Charles and the Archbishop of Canterbury on the 16th November, we then prepare for Advent and Christmas: we look for the coming of the Word made flesh, as God has enfleshed his Word in a human life and we prepare for his coming to draw all things to a consummation. God has spoken his word, God has enfleshed his Word in a human life. As Miles Smith wrote in the 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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