

Sermon Preached at John the Baptist Devizes 15 October 2017--Trinity XVIII

By a curious coincidence I was preaching the last time the Lectionary chose today's Gospel reading for Matthew, three years ago. In this parable Christ is warning, indeed threatening, his listeners to choose the right response to the coming of God's kingdom of which the wedding banquet is a celebration. I will not waste my time and yours on this stuff. I do not recognise the Christ Matthew here portrays. In particular the stranger who has been hoicked in off the streets and is sent to eternal punishment because he had no wedding garment is hardly an example of Christ's generosity of spirit.

On Friday 6th October the Church of England remembered one of its heroes, William Tyndale, "translator, martyr". I want to say something about him, and something about the Bible. Paul tells us that we were bought at a price, and this is true of the English Bible. Our Bible was bought at a price. The first translators were playing, literally, with fire. To translate the Bible from Latin into a language ordinary people could understand was profoundly sinful. It was not that the Church hierarchy believed that Almighty God was fluent in Latin but not interested in other languages. It was that an English Bible might lead worshippers to question the authority of the Church, and this was intolerable. This was heresy, and such heretics must be burnt. The Church ignored Christ's words in Mark 10: "You know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great one's exercise authority upon them. But shall it not be so among you: but whosoever will be great amongst you shall be your servant: and whosoever will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all."

One of the first translators to be burnt was Wycliffe. It was done with due ceremony. The High Sheriff was in attendance, as was the Bishop of Lincoln. It didn't worry Wycliffe one iota. When this macabre proceeding took place, Wycliffe had been dead 44 years. His remains were exhumed, chained to the stake and burnt. After the burning the executioner pulverised what remained of the skeleton, so that no potential relics were left to be venerated by Wycliffe's followers.

It shows the extent to which the Church would go in its dealing with those who questioned its authority.

The most important victim of the Church's persecution of translators was William Tyndale. Tyndale was a literary genius, a master of Greek and Hebrew, and of course of Latin. His translations of the New Testament, and of the first five books of the Old Testament, became the foundations of those works in the KJV.

Tyndale, like his great contemporary Luther, took St Paul as his guiding light, and Paul's insistence that "the righteous shall live by faith". The Christian was justified by faith alone. Righteousness was a gift promised by Christ to all who had faith in him. It flowed directly from God, without the priestly or institutional intercession of the Church. Such views merited the stake. Tyndale pressed on with his work, aware of the risks. Like his Lord, he was a man on the run from those who would kill him. He sought safety on the Continent. There he was betrayed, like his Lord, by a friend. There he was executed, like his Lord, at the behest of the religious authorities.

One of his most assiduous enemies was Sir Thomas More.

More has had a good press. There are streets and schools named after him, a film was made of his life, the Church canonised him and the present Pope proclaimed him patron saint of ... politicians. We Anglicans have a collect for his day, praising his "gentleness of spirit". More had his virtues, not least his courage,

but his ferocious hounding of Tyndale and others reveals a very different More. In the pursuit of heretics More was not simply economical with the truth: he lied his head off. He -- the chief law officer of the Crown -- flouted the law if to do so served his purposes. His polemical writings against Luther in particular were full of scatological obscenities. Worst of all, he relished -- he gloated over -- the burning of those he had pursued. The short fire at the stake, followed by the long fire thereafter. Gentleness of spirit" forsooth.

Tyndale is now largely forgotten. But he lives on. No one reads Thomas More today. His books gather dust on the shelves of ancient libraries. Tyndale's genius is enshrined in the KJV, to our forebears *the* Bible, and still much loved. The fifty-four translators appointed by King James leaned heavily on Tyndale where his translations were available. They used him extensively, but to my mind managed to improve on him in places. Tyndale was writing for the plough-boy -- well, the literate plough boy -- and produced a simple, plain man's translation, a translation of immediacy and clarity. The Jacobean translators aimed for richness and resonance as well as clarity. Their translation, which was to be read aloud in churches, had to appeal to what T.S. Eliot later called the 'auditory imagination', that 'feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word'. It was because of this success that the KJV took a hold on the imaginations of English Christians, a hold which it relinquished only in the last couple of generations.

Now the Church has largely abandoned the KJV, Why? Well, it's not an accurate translation. The manuscripts the translators used are no longer the best available, and in any case the Jacobean translators made mistakes (though none of their mistakes is such as to deceive the very elect). And of course, the language is, oh dear me, archaic.

So, we now have a plethora of new translations, each claiming to be more accurate than the KJV and easier to understand. Typical of the modern approach is the New English Bible. To consider it immediately raises the question "what exactly do we mean by 'accuracy?'" The great theologian Dr C. H. Dodd was director of the translation. He had asked for "a timeless prose, in which archaism and 'hallowed associations' were to be avoided, and 'a sense of reality' sought. He must have been disappointed. To quote Adam Nicholson from his splendid book "Power and Glory", "In aiming for accessibility, the NEB ended up as nothing much to anyone. Wanting timelessness, they achieved the language of the memo. Avoiding archaism, they embraced the banal. Looking for reality, they lost all feeling for the extraordinary and overpowering *strangeness* of the Bible ... they had somehow forgotten that ordinariness is not the Bible's subject". *Ordinariness is not the Bible's subject.*

Just one example. In the first chapter of St John's Gospel the Baptist sees Jesus and proclaims him the Lamb of God. The KJV, following Tyndale, has "Behold, the Lamb of God". Not the NEB. It says "Look, there is the Lamb of God". If I was out with my wife and saw a churchwarden across the street I might well say "Look, there's J.S.". I would not say "Behold J.S." That would be archaic. I would be glad to see Jane, but it would be an ordinary event. But the Baptist wasn't simply drawing attention to someone. He was making a *statement*, a statement of colossal significance, and "Behold", archaic as it is, is the right word. "Look" is not. I could multiply instances till the cows come home.

So, I come not to bury the KJV but to praise it, and to suggest that we keep it alive by reading it in our homes, aloud if possible.

I end with a Collect. [BCP Advent II]

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.