

**ADDRESS  
CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL CORNHILL**

**THURSDAY 5<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2011**

In this lovely ancient Church, with its glorious music, I am conscious of the observation by Anthony Trollope that:

“There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilised and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silent, and be tormented”.

Well I am not a clergyman, and this is not a sermon. It is an address. Standing where I do, I find it very difficult to discern the differences between a “sermon” and an “address”, at any rate when standing here. Yet it is the precision of language: its precise meaning: the exact meaning of each and every word: in Hebrew, Ancient Greek, and in English, that is at the heart of this celebration.

And of course it is a celebration. The 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the Authorised Version of the Bible is a wonderful anniversary.

But what exactly are we celebrating? Reading my newspaper and indeed an endless series of book reviews about the Authorised Version I have been struck by the thought that we are celebrating a great literary anniversary. The name of Shakespeare is always entwined with the King James Bible. So one commentator typifies many –

“What great English writing means stems so completely from Shakespeare’s peculiar virtues and from the values from the prose in the King James Bible that every subsequent writer of English has been aware of these “alternative models of excellence”.

Alternatively, with London celebrating the Olympic Games in 2012, much of the writing is about a kind of Olympic contest. To whom should the gold medal go? Is it Tyndale, or Coverdale, or King James Bible. One writer commented that the “single genius” was William Tyndale. And as is the way, everyone has piled in with his or her own preferences – as though this is the primary question. But even so, the competition is about the debt owed to whichever gold medal winner it may be by the English language and, what is more, it also overlooks the Preface to the Authorised Version. All the earlier translators:

“deserve to be had of us and of posterity in everlasting remembrance.”

The purpose of the Authorised Version is to identify:

“Whatever is sound already” so that “it will shine as gold more brightly, being rubbed and polished”.

So no special claims were being made by this extraordinary committee of writers. Is it too fanciful to be able to detect at least a thread of a still surviving belief, so influential on medieval minds, that when working for the greater glory of God, an abundance of humility should be twinned with abnegation of self? If so we are last beginning to touch on Christian virtues.

There are many lines of thought which come together in this anniversary, some related to what the individual writer believes to have been the direct impact of the King James Bible, some the impact of the very fact that the Bible was translated into the vernacular.

But in this lovely Church surely we should at least reflect for a few minutes on this simple fact. The honourable men involved in the writing were concerned with interpreting what they sincerely believed was the word of God. If we do not understand this, we are surely missing the crucial point about the Authorised Version. And that is a feature about the present celebrations which is perhaps least emphasised. Is this perhaps because we are living in a much more secular age? For the writers and the readers the objective of a translation of the Bible was simple. Words mattered. When the Gospel is read in some churches we still say, “This is the word of the Lord”. Assuming we believe it when we say it, do we understand the significance of each word?

To them it actually mattered hugely whether St Paul’s Letter to the Romans meant that salvation would be achieved through faith, or through faith alone, only through faith. But if faith alone, where stood “charity”, the greatest of the trilogy, faith, hope, and charity. If we were pre-destined, what price then, free will? It is noteworthy that in the discussion at Hampton Court on the subject of pre-destination, it is recorded that the King himself wished that this doctrine might be handled “tenderly”. No wonder: Christian Europe had torn itself asunder over the point. But again, which of the original Seven Sacraments counted? What was the role of the priest or bishop? And what happened in the sacrifice at the altar? – consubstantiation or transubstantiation? Another question at the heart of the many Wars of Religion.

I do not intend to imply that these issues are now irrelevant, but I do highlight that at the time when the Authorised Version was being written men and women had died and were dying for their faith in the utter certainty that their view of Christianity was right, and that the appalling sufferings which their bodies would endure would, when the agonies were over, lead their immortal souls to the sight of God. And they were dying horrible deaths – being burned alive, or hanged, drawn and quartered. In the end Tyndale and Thomas More, battling ferociously with each other for the souls of Christians both died for their faiths; in each case, as he understood it, the true Christian faith. And if one of them was a saint, then surely they both were. And if one was not, then surely neither was.

Let me just briefly recapitulate the historic context. Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603. What a remarkable woman. So far ahead of her time, when she did not wish to open windows into men's souls, and she wrote, or is thought to have written, that extraordinary enigmatic verse:

"Twas God the word that spake it,  
He took the bread and brake it;  
And what the word did make it;  
That I believe, and take it".

But the aged Queen was not really mourned when she died, lonely, bereft of all her old companions, in the way we look back with admiration on her memory now. Her great speech at Tilbury was but a memory. Times were very hard. The new King from Scotland represented a bright, exciting future. 237 new knights in the first 6 weeks, 906 in the first 4 months.

And so to the conference at Hampton Court itself. Its object, to resolve ecclesiastical differences. And sometimes easy to overlook, that the Gunpowder Plot, with its extraordinary impact on the life of Catholicism in this country or hundreds of years, had yet to happen.

King James himself was Head of the Church, he believed himself to be a theologian, and the wisest fool in Christendom knew that what he knew and believed must be right. And it was not long before he was claiming that his political authority stemmed from his Divine Right, with in a very short time, the lawyers, and parliamentarians challenging the idea that the King was above the law. These were tempestuous times. Let me briefly illustrate it. When the issue was raised whether a cross should be present in baptism, the ultimate question was asked:

"how far the ordinance of the Church bindeth, without impeaching Christian liberty".

This led to a monarchical expostulation that as for the suggestion that every man is to be left to his own liberty.

"I will have none of that. I will have one doctrine, one discipline, one religion, in substance and in ceremony."

That really summed it up. The Authorised Version had to be a single text to which all could and must adhere. This kind of approach is not the modern way. Nevertheless it was an astonishing achievement. For men and women of my age, largely, I would venture to suggest almost overwhelmingly, our familiarity with the words, and the cadences, and the lilt of the glorious language breathing reassurance and confidence. For many of us nowadays it is not so much what is actually written, but the way in which it is written, that is captivating. Very few of us are theologians. Very few of us burn with the passion which led to martyrdom or self-inflicted exile. But surely the Authorised Version links us to Lancelot Andrewes and his colleagues and the time in which they lived, and excites our admiration, and dare I say it, a little pang of envy for the certainty of their faith.

For those with no faith, or none worth speaking of, then their faith surely makes us think again. For those with some faith, then their faith may inspire us to burnish our own faith more enthusiastically. And those whose faith is complete, are at one with this extraordinary group of men working, through their own faith, to discern precisely the word of God, that his ordinances might be applied on earth and lead to eternal life.

If we miss this in our celebration of the Authorised Version, we have surely missed its real point.