

“In the Beginning was the Word” – Christmas Midnight 2011

Isaiah 9 vv 2-7 p693, Titus 2 vv 11-14 p1199, Luke 2 vv 1-20 p1027

There was a story doing the rounds in the Summer that, when the founder of Apple, Steve Jobs, died, he went to heaven and the first thing St Peter said to the creator of the Apple Mac was, *In the beginning was the Word*. Now I don't know whether Steve Jobs is in Heaven. God is his judge, not me. Neither am I privy to any conversations that may have taken place between the computer entrepreneur and the prince of the apostles, but I do know that *In the beginning was the Word*, because it says so in the Bible. In fact it says so in the classic Christmas Gospel which we shall hear in the morning.

2011 has been the 400th anniversary of the King James translation of the Bible and we have heard a good deal this year about the English Bible – and rightly so. The Bible is the Word of God and to have the Bible in English is an enormous privilege for English speaking people. Originally most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. A small part of it is in Aramaic. The New Testament is in Greek, with a few Aramaic words thrown in, to give us sometimes the very words of Jesus in the language which He and the first Christians actually spoke. Jesus addressed God as *Abba*, Father. Jesus Himself said *Amen, Hallelujah* and *Hosanna* – Aramaic or Hebrew words which we are privileged to use with Him when we worship God the Father through Him. He also cried *Eloi, eloi, lama, sabachtani?* when He died for us on the Cross. *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* It is wonderful to hear the actual words of Jesus, but most of us would not understand anything that He said if it had not been translated into our own language. And the same goes obviously for the rest of the New Testament and for the Law and the Prophets and the Writings which make up the Old. So the Old Testament was translated into Greek for Jews who didn't understand Hebrew and this Greek translation of the Old Testament became the first Bible for most Christians in the ancient world. The whole Bible – Old and New Testament - was translated into the languages of the many converts to Christianity who came to faith, not only from the Roman Empire, but also from lands beyond its borders, in response to Christ's commandment to preach the Gospel to all nations and Old Testament prophecies that the whole world would finally submit to the LORD. In fact some languages (like the language which became Russian) did not even exist in written form until they were formalised and given their own alphabets so that the speakers of these languages could have the Bible and prayer books in their own tongue. The Jewish faith and the Christian faith have always valued the Word very highly, the Word spoken and the Word written. The official language of the Roman Empire was Latin and there was a great need for a Latin Bible as the Empire became progressively more Christian. There are many bible texts in Latin, but the version which came to be used universally by the Church was the so-called Vulgate or common Bible, translated by the monk Jerome. This displaced all other versions of the Bible in Western Europe and continued to be used in churches long after the *decline and fall* of the Roman Empire. The Latin Vulgate was the Bible used in France and what became Germany and England and Ireland and nearly all the countries of Europe throughout the Middle Ages, but, by this time Latin was only understood by educated people – mainly the clergy. Ordinary people spoke early forms of English, French or German or whatever. They weren't able to read the Bible for themselves or to understand it when it was read to them. Moreover, in the days before printing, copies could only be made by hand with the

possibility of error creeping in each time a copy was made. The Vulgate bibles circulating in late Mediaeval Europe were not the pure text St Jerome had drafted a thousand years previously.

So there was a crying need for a more accurate version of the original Hebrew and Greek text and for the Bible to be translated into what our own Articles of Religion describe as *the language understood of the people*. John Wycliffe recognised this in the Middle Ages and his followers produced numerous manuscript translations of the Vulgate Bible in English. Remember, printing hadn't yet been invented. So these were all hand copied, but it has been calculated that there were more copies of biblical texts in English in circulation in the Middle Ages than of any other work in English.

What makes this all the more astonishing is that it was against the Law to produce, distribute or possess bible texts in English. All these people who owned parts of the Bible in English and who shared them with other people were risking their lives. And that raises two questions. Why were the authorities so determined to stop people reading the Bible in English? What were they afraid of? And secondly what was it about the Bible that people valued so much that they were prepared to risk their own lives to possess it, to read it for themselves, and to share it with their neighbours?

To cut a long story short, Martin Luther in Germany issued a bible in German. Printing had by this time been invented and so it was much easier to produce vernacular bibles in quantity. Men like William Tyndale were endeavouring to do the same for an English Bible, but King Henry VIII was still opposed the Reformation. He had Tyndale arrested on the continent and put to death and others too were martyred for their efforts to give us the Bible in English. Why did it matter so much? Why did they care so passionately on both sides of the argument?

A little bit of local interest here. Bishop John Fisher entertained the scholar Erasmus at his palace at Halling. Erasmus edited and published a new, more accurate version of the Greek text of the New Testament which was invaluable to translators of the Bible into English. But, I'm bitterly ashamed to have to admit, Fisher was among those who persecuted the English translators and distributors of the Bible.

Again, to cut a long story short, Henry was eventually persuaded to change his mind. The English Bible was now to be placed in every church in England, available to be read by anyone who could read – say a third to a half of the population, depending on whereabouts in the country you are talking about. For the rest of the Tudor period, various biblical translations circulated, waxing and waning in popularity. The establishment favoured the so-called Bishop's Bible. Most popular with the masses was the Geneva Bible. Even the Roman Catholics produced their own English Bible – the Douay Bible. King James VI of Scotland became King James I England in 1603 on the death of Queen Elizabeth I. He very much needed to unite the kingdom which threatened to split apart because of religious factionalism. He achieved this by commissioning a new translation of the Bible, which was eventually published in 1611. Hence our celebration of its 400th anniversary this year. A tremendous amount of work went into the King James Bible. The best manuscripts were

perused. Comparisons were made with other English translations. William Tyndale's earlier work was tremendously influential on the King James Version. Tyndale was a genius, both as a linguist and as a composer of plain English. Every effort was made to make the work as accurate as possible and the translators were also very careful to ensure that it read well, especially that it read well out loud in church. Over the next few decades, the KJV displaced other English translations of the Bible and came to be known as the Authorised Version, only it never seems to have been officially authorised except insofar as it is used for the readings in the Book of Common Prayer, which was authorised by Act of Parliament in 1662, the 350th anniversary of which we shall be celebrating next year.

So why the excitement about the 400th anniversary of the Authorised Version? Even atheists like Richard Dawkins have gone on and on about it. For Dawkins and a lot of people like him, the value of the King James Bible is the quality of its language and its influence on English literature. It is certainly true that the AV is up there with Shakespeare and the Book of Common Prayer among the literary giants of the English language. It is a great work of English literature as well as a powerful translation from three foreign tongues – Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. It has had more influence on English-speaking people than Shakespeare because far more people read the Bible than ever went to Shakespeare's plays. It has had more influence than the BCP because it has been so much used by English speaking Christians throughout the world, most of whom are not Anglicans, and indeed by English-speaking Jews, who regard it as a very fair rendition of the Hebrew Old Testament. I said that both Jews and Christians have been historically committed to the Word. We regard it as imperative that people can encounter the Word of God for themselves. This is one of the reasons why education for the masses has been so much stressed in Jewish and Christian (especially Protestant Christian) societies. The imperative to be able to read the Bible has been a tremendous force to encourage mass literacy. People in the past have learnt to read because they have wanted to be able to read the Bible. The Church has promoted education for all because people ought to be able to read the Bible. Because the KJV was the book millions of English-speaking people read more than any other, the language of the AV has had a tremendous effect on the way the English language has developed. Academics and, later on, the more leisured middle classes, read other books besides the Bible, but, for ordinary working class people, the Bible was one of the very few books they possessed and often read every day and had read to them every week. So the Bible has had tremendous influence in the development of our language and, therefore, of the way we understand things. Sometimes I wonder whether what seems like a decline in standards in English in C21 is related to a decline in faith in the Word made flesh. To me words matter ultimately because Jesus is the Word of God. If there were no divine Word, what would be the intrinsic value of human words?

The second reason advanced for the importance of the English Bible is political. This may in part explain why powerful people have been so anxious to prevent ordinary people getting the Bible in a language they can understand. The Bible sets you free to think outside the box. What the king or parliament or the Church or the teacher or the policeman or the judge or the expert, what any important or self-important person says ain't necessarily so. You can question them. You can think for yourself. There is a whole set of alternative ideas in the Bible. If you read the Bible, it says that all are equal. If you read the Bible, it

says you've got to look after the poor. If you read the Bible, it tells you that businesses are to be run fairly and that the labourer and the customer have rights as well as the capitalist and the merchant. The Bible has some astonishing things to say about debt. No interest charges. Be prepared to lend to desperate people who you know will never be able to pay you back. Don't take from your debtor as security anything he needs to support himself or his family. The Bible teaches us to be fair, but it also teaches to be a lot more righteous than fair, just like God is! The Bible provides its readers with many alternative versions of society and they are all based round ideas like justice and mercy and generosity, and, above all, brotherly love. The Bible holds up a mirror to society and the average human society doesn't like to look at it's own reflection. We don't want to see what we're really like. The Bible sets standards and mostly human societies fail to measure up. The Bible always calls to account the *status quo* and therefore poses a threat to those who are comfortable with the way things are, while opening up the possibility of liberation to the oppressed. We are not persecuted by the secular state for our religion in Britain today, but I do wonder if one of the reasons some politicians and bureaucrats in this country seem so keen to marginalise the Christian religion is that they do not want an alternative set of values to be on offer in the Bible and in the Church. They do not want people questioning secular values. They don't want to risk a people whose loyalties are to God rather than to Caesar. Bureaucrats and politicians have their own vision of what the United Kingdom should be and this secular vision is not the Kingdom of God. This secular consensus is threatened by the Bible and the Church which furnish us with an alternative vision in which the spiritual and the eternal are infinitely more valuable than the material and the time-bound, indeed in which the spiritual and heavenly is the only context in which the physical universe and our lives on earth may be ultimately understood.

Finally, of course, as a reason for our celebration of this 400th anniversary, there is the spiritual value of the Bible to the individual. In the pages of the Bible we meet God. This explains why so many people have been prepared to risk their lives in order to possess bibles. In some parts of the world Christians still do risk arrest and persecution for possessing the Scriptures. The Bible is such a wonderful resource for living that perceptive people are desperate to possess it. Because the Bible is about sharing the love of God, those who possess the Bible feel an imperative to share it with others and that explains why Christians are prepared to risk their lives to provide translations of the Bible into all the languages of the earth and to distribute these bibles even in countries where it is forbidden to do so. The Bible is the Word of God, impressively described as *quicker and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

If you read the Bible from the beginning to the end, you will see that the Word of God cannot be confined to the pages of a book – even of the 66 books which make up the Bible as we have it. *By the Word of the LORD were the heavens made.* So was the earth and everything in it. The prophets pronounce the Word of God, but God's Word is not mere words. God's Word effects what it proclaims. God says, *It shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereunto I sent it.* The Word of God is recognised in the Scriptures as an aspect of God. Through His Word God makes Himself known in heaven and on earth. Through His Word God

accomplishes His Work of Creation, Redemption and Sanctification. The Word is profoundly and indivisibly of the Nature of God. Thus God's Word is of infinite power and worth. God's Word is worthy of absolute trust and God's Word is the only thing in which we can put our faith unreservedly. I'm in danger of losing you here. It's late. I've been talking for a long time. I'm straying into metaphysics and Theology. But what are we here for? We're here because it's Christmas. We are here to celebrate the Birth of Jesus and all that means for us and for the world – and indeed for the heavens above. We are here to celebrate Jesus. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the Word of God become a human being. God creates heaven and earth by His Word. God communicates with His people by His Word. God saves and sanctifies by His Word. God's Word is Jesus, the Word made flesh; the Son of God, the Son of Man, and that is what we are celebrating, that God so loved the world that all this is true. If I've gone on too long and gone too deep into things which are too hard for us mere mortals to understand, just let me finish with this – the love of God manifest in the Baby in the manger, the Word made flesh, reaching out to you and me, offering us Himself in love and inviting us to offer our lives back to Him as a living sacrifice in which we shall know as we are known and experience eternally such good things as are past our understanding. May God grant us even a glimpse of the true meaning of Christmas in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen.