



Fourth Sunday of Easter

15th May 2011

Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, I Peter 2: 1-10, John 10:1-10

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia.

Let me begin by reading to you a verse from each of those readings we've just heard, and as I read I'd like you to listen for the sense of something special, something wonderful happening.

First from Acts 2: 42, *'And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul:'*

I Peter 2: 9, *'But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light;'*

And John 10 verse 7 and part of verse 10: *'Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep....*

'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.'

'A chosen generation'; 'fear came upon every soul'; 'that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly'. The phrases speak of a passionate and life-changing discovery made in those people who knew or almost knew Jesus and certainly knew the secret of the gospel of Jesus and the life he can bring us. But you might feel there's something odd about proclaiming that radical and life-changing discovery in such antique language: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you', 'ye are ... an holy nation, a peculiar people'. The language of course comes from the Authorised Version, the King James Version as it's sometimes called, four hundred years' old this year and which we are reading from this and two subsequent Sundays by way of celebrating that fact. I want to say that there is, and also there is not, a contradiction between using this ancient language to express a new and radical gospel.

So the Authorised Version: this book. Remember when all Bibles looked like this? Black leather binding, printed on rice paper with gold edges, with the pages divided into columns and split up into verses? That used to be just the way they were, the Bibles most of us grew up with. Now, this isn't only the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible, it's also the fiftieth

anniversary of the publication of *this* book, the New English Bible, which shocked people in 1961 by looking like a normal book, by having a coloured cover and pages looking like ordinary books, with paragraphs and not split up into verses and columns, and most particularly not using ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ and ‘sayeth’ and all that ancient language. People were shocked; it didn’t look or sound like the Bible at all.

This particular copy of the AV belonged to my grandfather, who was a Glasgow businessman and it was a presentation copy given to him in 1932 at the end of his year of office as the President of the Baptist Union of Scotland. It’s an odd kind of present really – didn’t they think he had a Bible, already? Presumably he did, and probably a very well-thumbed reader’s and preacher’s copy. This one was actually almost unopened, still in its box, when I inherited it from my aunt sixty years later.

Well is this what the Authorised Version is, a venerable museum piece, to be put in a box or a glass case, to be admired or ignored? Well my answer is no, it’s not. The Authorised Version came into being at a time when people were passionate about the Bible and the truth it could convey and it bears the marks of that passion.

Just think for a minute about how it came into existence. Think back beyond four hundred years ago to six or seven hundred years ago, to the time when there was no English Bible, nor French or German Bible come to that, because the Bible in the Middle Ages was in Latin and its interpretation therefore was controlled by those who knew Latin; to know Latin, to know its grammar; to be able to read it was a mark of power. Of course people knew Bible stories and could retell those but if they wanted to go more deeply into what it all meant, there was this language barrier.

The first English Bible translated out of Latin was produced by John Wycliffe in the 1380s. And his hope was that when people could read these sacred texts, and the few who could read could read them allowed to their unlettered neighbours, then the power of the gospel would come alive in people’s lives. Translation was about holy revelation. Now the bishops were not too keen about that. On the whole they wanted people to live in peace and pay their tithes and do what they were told, and they effectively suppressed that translation. That was quite easy of course because to make a new copy of a book in 1380 you had to actually transcribe it word for word onto a new page. Getting it about was a complicated business.

A hundred years later when the Protestant Reformation started in Germany under Martin Luther and English Protestants like William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale began to make new translations, their effort was inspired by the same hope: to make the Bible accessible to everyone, and this inspired the same fear in kings and bishops. But two things had changed in that time. Scholars now had the skills to go back behind the Latin text and acknowledge that that itself was a translation of Greek and Hebrew originals, and could go back to those and translate those rather than go through the Latin. And also the invention of printing meant that thousands of cheap copies of these translations could be printed and sold, whether the bishops and kings liked it or not, until you really could envisage everyone owning and reading a Bible.

So throughout the sixteenth century, those troubled times, the Protestants produced Bibles with sometimes Protestant meanings and helpful notes to make sure you read it in a Protestant way, and the bishops produced rival translations with their own more Catholic or conservative understanding and notes to make sure that you interpreted it their way. A key word, for example: when you find in the text *ecclesia*, do you translate that as 'church' or 'congregation'? If you say church it suggests an institution, it suggests one thing that we all belong to with bishops at the top; if you say congregation, it suggests Christians are divided into little groups like this and we can each decide for ourselves what the Bible says, which was what some people wanted and some people very much didn't. So it mattered which way you translated.

So when in 1604 King James, who had just come from Scotland onto the English throne and he wanted peace in his new kingdom and he commissioned forty seven scholars to produce a whole new translation, he wanted to draw all that century of dispute to an end, produce the best possible version, beyond controversy, with no one-sided notes to guide people's interpretations; he wanted a Bible everyone could agree on. It seemed like a faint hope. But in time that is what happened. Different interpretations of course went on, but for the English and later the English-speaking peoples scattered throughout the world, this became the Bible which people heard in church and read (or didn't read) at home.

Why did it succeed? Well partly I think because it took forty seven scholars seven years to produce and they did their work very thoroughly, sifting and shaping. And also because they chose to be archaic. If you think it sounds old fashioned now you should know that it sounded a bit old fashioned when it was published. Forms like sayeth and asketh were going out of fashion even then in 1611, so by choosing to keep those slightly old forms they produced an English which sounded dignified, remote, authoritative, that's the point. And that worked very well for the Old Testament which is dignified and remote - Hebrew as a language is like that. But actually it's wildly out of keeping with the New Testament which was written in a flat kind of 'News of the World', tradesmen's Greek, with no literary pretension at all. King James' translators turned the gospels into a literary masterpiece.

And the language when it isn't obscure can be very memorable: 'gird up thy loins', 'but now we see through a glass darkly', 'still small voice', 'and it came to pass in those days', and 'darkness was upon the face of the deep'. Crisp and sonorous phrases that stick in your mind. So the Bible easily became something not just read or heard but something remembered, that lives in the mind.

And in time this came to be thought of as a special holy language, the way you'd expect prophets and apostles and the Son of God to speak. I think of a bright twelve year old called Dominic at the first school I taught in in the early 1970s - he must be fifty now! The RE syllabus was rather basic, mostly Bible stories, and the exams for some reason were always marked by the headmaster, and Dominic had worked out that when he retold the Bible stories, even if he couldn't remember the facts, if he

spattered the page with ‘behold’ and ‘it came to pass’ and ‘he saith unto her’, he’d end up with full marks and he did. This antique language is hypnotic. When they first made the Revised Version in about 1880, instead of cutting it all out they actually put more in; it contributed to the Bible’s holy glow.

If you don’t happen to like Elizabethan language, that of course becomes a problem in using this version, which I guess is why it’s now unfamiliar to us and on the whole it has been sidelined.

There are other problems. The worthy translators had gaps in their knowledge, especially with Hebrew, which we can now fill in largely. For example, the psalmist laments, “I am a pelican of the wilderness, I am an owl of the desert” [Ps 102: 6]. Now they got that from an earlier translator but neither they nor the earlier translator had any idea what kind of bird the psalmist was comparing himself to, and these days sadly, that bird has shrunk to something dull like an owl or something rather vague like ‘a wild bird’ in some translations. So ‘pelican of the wilderness’ is outrageous, but wonderful! I commend them for it.

Another problem is that the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts they were translating from, called rather boldly the ‘Received Text’, were actually not very good and had lots of mostly small mistakes in them, which of course led to small mistakes in the translation and they didn’t know that, though they quite soon did and we do now. So we can do a better, more accurate job now than they could, which again is one reason for suspecting it as a translation.

But some people go the other way. In my first year of teaching here at Murdoch I had a young man in my New Testament class whose mission in life was to prove to everyone, and I mean everyone, the infallibility of the Received Text and therefore the Authorised Version that was based on it. And since that topic, the Received Text, was due for about ten minutes in the thirteen week course, but he insisted on bringing everything back to his hobby horse, he was a bit of a pain. The other students thought he was loopy, but he was very young. About fifteen years later he emailed me and said ‘Remember me?’ (Yes!) and he said, ‘Sorry about all that, I’ve changed my views.’ Well that was good to hear.

There is a sort of madness which the Authorised Version can produce in its opponents but even more in its defenders. There are those who say the Authorised Version is the one and only inspired word of God, and even if every Greek and Hebrew text in the world disagrees with it, they’re wrong, it’s right. Now that view is a bit extreme. It implies there was no real Bible for the first 1600 years of the church’s existence till King James’ people got to work and apparently there still is no real Bible for anyone who happens to speak French or German or Croatian or Chinese. And another problem: when we see the Authorised Version being taken up by conservative groups like that we might think the Authorised Version somehow supports their conservative values on issues like sexual morality or the ordination of women. But of course it

does no such thing. Let's have arguments with God or the Bible about those things but not shoot the messenger.

And though the composition of the translation committee was from our point of view wildly unbalanced – with forty seven men, of whom forty six were clergy, so women and laity were a bit thin on the ground – I don't think that makes the translation itself unbalanced. In fact I'd say it's more expressive of the feminine aspect of humanity than other more recent translations. I invite you to read the text and see whether you agree with me on that.

So I commend to you this venerable translation, not just for what it has been, for its role in shaping the English language and the English culture, but for what it still is: wonderful, flawed, beautiful, sometimes awkward, much loved, unjustly disregarded by some, unduly venerated by others. If you don't read it, then I invite you to get it down off the shelf and plunge in. You'll find it does some things wonderfully – Genesis and the Gospels; the Epistles are not so easy. If on the other hand it is your favourite version, then I'd say always use it alongside another like the New English Bible or some other, so you can correct some slightly odd impressions which come out of the Authorised Version on its own. No translation is perfect. Either way it is too good to ignore; too good also to hand over to the lunatic fringe.

So my conclusion is that any translation is only a means to an end and the question is, does it take us to where we need to go? Does it allow the power of the call of God to shine through it into our lives? So let me end by reading again those verses that I started with and I invite you to listen to them, not as examples of Elizabethan prose – don't let that get in the way – but for the sense that something special, something life-changing is happening here in these texts, something we need to take hold of:

'And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul'.

'But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'.

'Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep ... I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.'

Alleluia, Christ is risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia.

John Dunnill