

FIRST ADDRESS

400 YEARS OF THE BIBLE'S IMPACT

Have you ever noticed that the Bible begins in a garden ('east of Eden') – and ends in a city, the heavenly city of Jerusalem? It's a bit like that here: St Martin-in-the-*Fields* is actually right in the middle of London, on Trafalgar Square, facing Nelson's Column and all the tourists. However, centuries ago it was surrounded by fields, so like the Bible, it has moved from the garden to the city. A short walk south-west across those fields was Westminster Abbey, where originally Benedictine monks (like those of St John's Minnesota) copied and passed down manuscripts of the biblical books. Four hundred years ago in the Jerusalem Chamber at the Abbey, scholars were translating these manuscripts into English to produce the King James Version of the Bible, eventually published in 1611. Its impact on British culture and society was enormous.

When I was a undergraduate, our Chaplain was preaching on Isaiah 55 (which we heard read just now) – and he suddenly woke us all up by threatening to throw a cricket ball into the pews to have an impact, and to accomplish what he wanted, just as Isaiah says God's word does (Is 55.11). The King James Bible was like that cricket ball, hurled into British society and having an enormous impact through the last four hundred years. Our very language is full of biblical phrases taken from it, like 'the powers that be' or a 'good Samaritan'. Even more importantly, the biblical beliefs and Christian ideas drove the development of our society – and were exported out across the world through the missionary activities in the colonies along with copies of the King James Bible. However we might feel about some other aspects of that imperial legacy, the significance of 'the Word of the Lord' going out everywhere in English has been stupendous.

But it does not stop there. Such biblical manuscripts are now preserved in the British Museum and British Library, a short distance to the north of this church, along with many other copies, much more ancient than those available in 1611. Meanwhile, a stroll from here up the Strand to the east will bring you to King's College London, with our world-renowned Department of Theology and Religious Studies, where I and my colleagues working in biblical studies are trying to translate and interpret these ancient books – and what they still have to say to us today. You see, what unites us all, St Martin's, Westminster Abbey, those working on manuscripts at the British Library and King's College London, is that the Bible remains absolutely central for all we are doing.

And together we are looking ahead to 2011, when Christians and others will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible with a vast range of activities bringing together language and culture, scholarship and preaching. It is all being coordinated through the 2011 Trust with the Prince of Wales as Patron, including a major international conference about the Bible at King's College London. On Bible Sunday today, Isaiah's reading from this beautiful version of the Bible reminds us of the impact of the word of God going out into the world to 'accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (Isaiah 55.11). We are called to respond to that word today – and to prepare for that wonderful festival in just over a year's time. It will be just like when the Israelites would gather in the Temple to sing psalms like Psalm 47, telling us to 'clap your hands' and 'shout to God with songs of joy'.

SECOND ADDRESS

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE BIBLE TODAY

In 1611, society was much more monochrome, so the King James Bible gradually became known as the ‘authorized version’. However, King James’ instructions to scholars to translate the Bible four hundred years ago inspired subsequent generations to interpret it again and again into contemporary English – leading to the Revised Version of 1885, the Revised Standard Version in 1952 and the New RSV in 1989, as well as many other translations also ‘authorized’ for reading in church today. Some people are understandably a little confused by the diversity now available to us. But the very word ‘Bible’ comes from *ta biblia*, the Greek plural for ‘the books’, or ‘the scriptures’. We do not just have a vast range of manuscripts in the British Library, or that we study in King's College London.

The same plurality is actually there in the Bible itself, or as perhaps we should say, the Scriptures themselves. For the Bible is more like a library, containing sixty-six books, written in a rich and varied mix of genres, languages, cultures, authors, audiences over a thousand years.

This is reflected in the St John’s Bible, with its riot of colour, images, words and pictures, texts and illuminations. It is like the rich variety of the world outside St Martin’s now, with the ‘fields’ replaced by the cosmopolitan crowds thronging into Trafalgar Square. After we exported the King James Bible across the world, now all these nations and languages, cultures and ideas have come to enrich our life together, both physically in these islands and also virtually through the internet. But how can we find some unity in all this diversity? Can we still hear the impact of the ‘word of God’ in all this plurality of human words?

Traditionally, the sixty-six books of the Bible are known as the ‘canon’, another Greek word meaning ‘a measuring rod’ or ‘standard’. The rich diversity of the different scriptures

contained within the Bible is not all one voice, delivered in Jacobean English of four hundred years ago! If the divine voice is to impact upon us today, we need to listen for the Word of God in it all. The great translator J B Phillips said that working on the Bible was like re-wiring an old house, and occasionally getting a shock because something that looked dead was actually live!

The calligraphers of the St John's Bible have given us a clue by using that reading from Colossians to 'flesh out' the illumination of 'in the beginning was the Word' from John 1. This is indeed 'shocking'. Paul says that Jesus is 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1.15), while John tells us that 'the Word of God' has become flesh among us (John 1.14). The *written* word is thus illuminated by the *living* word.

The canon, the 'measuring standard' for the plurality, the unity in the diversity, is found in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We are not talking about dead texts here, but a 'lively word', the word which went forth from the mouth of God (Isaiah 55.11) to be 'fleshed out' in Jesus. All the different scriptures bear witness to him, for in him all 'the fullness of God' is pleased to dwell, and through him 'God is reconciling to himself' all this rich diversity of our universe, 'whether on earth or in heaven' (Col. 1.19-20). On Bible Sunday today, and in the anniversary year of the Bible in 2011, we are called to respond in praise to the living Word of God, communicated to us, incarnated in Jesus, wherever that may lead us in the richly coloured tapestry of God's love.