

THE KING JAMES BIBLE

Address given by P. D. James, Baroness James of Holland Park,

at Trinity College's Celebration of the 400th Anniversary

of the King James Bible

in King's College Chapel

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No one present in this chapel this evening who has had the privilege of hearing passages from scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, read with such sensitivity and understanding and so beautifully sung, will need reminding that the King James Bible is a work of great literature with a claim to be the finest prose ever written in the English language. That assertion, of course, begs the question, what do we mean when we speak of great literature? It is easier to recognise than define and we encounter it with the excitement and awe which we experienced when as a child we first looked upon the seemingly limitless expanse of the sea. Great literature is a revelation which changes the minds and hearts of those who read, enlarges our sympathies, gives us a greater understanding of ourselves and others and the world of which we are a part, opens our mind to new ideas and challenges our often comfortable assertions, while at the same time providing the joy of superb language, phrases which enter into our consciousness and become part of our inner life. It is of the King James Bible as literature and its place in the modern world that I shall be speaking this evening.

Anyone who has sat on a committee facing the task of approving and perhaps revising its final report will know that great literature does not come out of committees, and certainly not out of six companies sitting in three different places and with committees of revisers to assess their final work. Great literature is always the work of a genius, and the genius here is William Tyndale, to whom more than any man we owe the King James Bible. Like Cranmer, who gave the English Church our incomparable Book of Common Prayer, Tyndale was a master of the written word. He had a poet's ear for rhythm and stress, and could marry the terseness and vigour of English with the more complicated Latinate

words in sentences which, written to be spoken aloud, slide easily into ear and mind. The King James translation, building on his work, gave England a book of unique power and beauty which has influenced every aspect of our national life, our history, politics, culture, social reforms, our art, music, and profoundly our literature, including vocabulary.

The language of the King James Bible is rich in idiomatic phrases which, with their vitality and directness, have acquired the status of proverbs and have become so much part of spoken and written English that most are used in ordinary speech without any knowledge of their origin. 'How are the mighty fallen', Samuel. 'The root of the matter', Job. 'Set your house in order', Isaiah. 'Be horribly afraid', Jeremiah. 'A thorn in the flesh', Corinthians. 'The skin of my teeth'. Job. 'A man after his own heart', Samuel. 'New wine into old bottles', Matthew. 'Suffer fools gladly', Corinthians. 'Money is the root of all evil', Timothy.

I wonder how many people who ring the Samaritans for help in distress know the parable from which the word is taken. We hear these phrases in the speech of statesmen, in drama, on the stage, television and radio; novelists look to them for titles; they provide a useful common reference to authenticate advertisements; they are part of daily speech, one of the ways in which the Bible has influenced and made richer our language. David Crystal, Professor of Linguistics, has recently published a book in which he traces the origins of these epigrams and has discovered that relatively few were newly minted by the King James translation and that their linguistic origins can be found earlier in Wycliffe and Tyndale among others. But it was their incorporation into the King James Bible which has made them a part of our living language. How reassuring it must have been to those 17th century men and women receiving for the first time the new translation to find that it was indeed in their language, that here in the words of Tyndale, was 'grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding', and that the English they knew and spoke daily had been found worthy of God's word and of his worship.

Neither Tyndale nor the King James revisers thought of the Bible as a work of literature. To them it was the word of God, the story of man's disobedience, his redemption through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the means of grace and the hope of glory translated into the language of the people so that they needed no priest to intervene between their understanding and the word of God. And it is as a sacred book that the King James Bible has influenced both the style and the imagination of some of the greatest writers down the centuries. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is rooted in the words of scripture.

Daniel Defoe, who has been described as the father of the English novel, was brought up with the Bible almost from babyhood, and phrases from Scripture are present in almost everything he wrote. *Robinson Crusoe* is a deeply religious book in which, when Crusoe first sees shoots of English barley on his island, sees it as miraculous before remembering that after the wreck he had shaken out a little bag of corn and this seeming miracle had a natural explanation. And then he has the further thought that it was by God's providence that the rats must have left ten or twelve grains unspoiled in the bag. For him a loving God was active in every part of his life, including man's reason and intelligence.

English may not have produced the greatest musicians or artists, but she has produced the greatest poet, and one whose genius was nurtured by scripture translated into the tongue which he himself was to make glorious. Shakespeare died in 1616, only five years after the publication of the King James Version, but he would certainly have been raised on the Bible, probably the Geneva Version in which the New Testament, the first five books of the Old Testament and some of the Proverbs had been translated by Tyndale. Like other boys of his age and class, he would have been exposed to the Bible in his grammar school and it would have been read at the church services in Stratford-on-Avon which it would have been compulsory for him to attend. His borrowings in the plays are remarkably close to the text. Words from *Hamlet* echo St Matthew's Gospel. 'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come, if it be not to come, it will be now.' (*Hamlet*). And there is a clear echo of Paul's letter to the Corinthians in the humour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was.' Not surprisingly some experts have sought a personal link between Shakespeare and the King James Bible, finding a code in Psalm 46 which is said to reveal Shakespeare's name. I am profoundly sceptical, but it is not outside the bounds of possibility that the translators should have sought the help of a man whose reputation both as a poet and a published playwright was so high.

The poet and essayist John Donne also overlaps Tyndale. He had a particular affection for the psalms and the epistles of St Paul 'Because,' he wrote 'they are Scriptures, written in such form as I have been most accustomed to, St Paul's epistles being letters and David's psalms being poems.' His life and work were rooted in the scriptures and he sanctified even illness in his 'Hymne to God my God, in my Sicknesse.'

We think that Paradise and Calvarie,
 Christs Crosse and Adams tree, stood in one place,
 Looke Lord, and finde both Adams met in me;
 As the first Adams sweat surrounds my face,
 May the last Adams blood my soule embrace.

The stature of Milton as a poet was recognised early. Although he was valued for polemical prose as much as for the subtle harmony of his verse, his reputation rests largely on *Paradise Lost*, which Dryden described as ‘one of the greatest, most noble and sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced.’ Although some modern critics, notably T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, have criticised the over-embroidery of some of his later works and his complex Latinate syntax, *Paradise Lost* alone would ensure his reputation as one of the greatest of the poets whose work is rooted in Bible theology.

And name follows name of novelists who were reared in the literature of the King James Bible, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters among them. And the influence on poets following Milton has been particularly strong – Christina Rossetti, Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, Kipling, Hardy, T. S. Eliot. The influence of the Bible has over the last 400 years given us a literature of incomparable richness, variety and a power that resides in truth, not only in the beauty of words.

It was in the early 19th century, the era of the search for the historical Jesus and the one in which Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published, that the King James Bible began to be judged primarily as a work of literature, a movement which became most powerful in the first half of the 20th century. Notable among its strong advocates was an American, John Livingston Lowes. In his writings he argued that the Bible, rather than merely naming an emotion, has the power to reproduce the physical sensation that attends it. He was concerned, not with the truth of the words, but rather with their aesthetic qualities, an approach which was a secularisation of the sacred text. In the enthusiasm for the Bible as literature books were written, university courses held, papers published, the text rearranged to be read as literature, and writers who were unable themselves to read the Bible in Hebrew or Greek confidently asserted that the King James Version, made in the most vital period of the English language, was a finer and nobler literature than the scriptures in their original tongues.

Not surprisingly there was a reaction to this literary adulation, principally by T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis, churchmen who had otherwise little in common. In an essay on 'Religion and Literature' published in 1935, Eliot wrote: 'The Bible has a literary influence upon English literature, not because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered as the report of the Word of God.' While at the end of a lecture delivered in 1950, C. S. Lewis took up the argument. 'Our age has indeed coined the expression 'the Bible as literature'. It is very generally implied that people who have rejected its theological pretensions nevertheless continue to enjoy it as a treasure house of English prose. It may be so ... but I never happen to meet them. ... I cannot help suspecting ... that those who read the Bible as literature do not read the Bible. It would be strange if they did.' He concludes that the Bible is 'not merely a sacred book, but a book so remorselessly and continually sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach.' This debate seems now to have died and many readers, and not necessarily Christians, have found no difficulty in honouring the Bible as a sacred text while celebrating it as great literature.

Tyndale's biographer, Professor David Daniel, reminds us that the Bible, or parts of it, is now published in over one thousand seven hundred vernaculars in the English-speaking world. There are a dozen or so modern English translations in use today. The King James Version is still a best-seller, often given as a present at a Christening, confirmation or marriage, but T. S. Eliot was probably right when he prophesied that it would be read mainly by Christians. And although the Bible today may be chiefly valued as literature and as the book which gave us our language, as far as I know it does not appear on the reading list of candidates studying A-level English, nor do universities require any knowledge either of the Bible or of basic Christianity before students enrol for a degree in English. One graduate told me that she had to take a crash course in basic Christianity before Milton and much of Shakespeare became intelligible to her.

The Bible will undoubtedly continue to be re-translated, sometimes in the mistaken idea that the Authorised Version, as it is usually called, is not comprehensible to modern men and women. Undoubtedly many find versions such as the Good News Bible helpful, otherwise it would not be so popular. But for those of us reared on the King James Bible something deeply spiritual is lost when the phrases, the cadences which from childhood have lodged in our minds are no longer heard. We should not be too ready to believe that

the 21st century can do better than the King James revisers who were wise and humble enough to recognise and retain the best. A low murmuring sound, as of a vacuum cleaner, is not an improvement on a still small voice.

And what of the future for the King James Bible in today's world? It is, of course, indissolubly bound up with the future of the Church itself. Like Matthew Arnold, we hear faith's 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, /... down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world'. Some bishops take comfort from the large congregations which attend Christmas midnight mass and the Easter celebration of Holy Communion, but there are fewer candidates for ordination, fewer children are baptised or confirmed and increasingly marriages take place in secular buildings authorised for the purpose, including stately homes and hotels, unless the local church is particularly beautiful and the cost is significantly cheaper. The last four funerals I attended have been secular and were moving ceremonies to remember and celebrate a life, an end rather than a beginning, and often chosen by the dying who see it as dishonest to find comfort in a hope which had never been part of their life. Today England is generally described as a secular or multi-faith, not a Christian, country.

In my childhood Christian belief and the national Church rooted in scripture was respected and often revered, even by those who rarely attended its services. Every school day began by law with an act of Christian worship in which prayers were said, hymns sung and a passage of scripture read, so that even in homes where there was no churchgoing children were exposed to a daily reminder of the difference between right and wrong and the reading of scripture provided a common reference of belief and a shared language which, cutting across differences of class and education, helped to unify the nation. Now Christianity is opposed by a new militant atheism which mirrors the most repressive dogma of religious fundamentalism. The campfires of the 19th century conflict between science and religion are re-lighted with renewed fervour. Believers are to be pursued, lectured to and bullied out of their folly. Surely the only logical response to religious belief in an unbeliever is to acknowledge that the existence of God cannot be proved or disproved by any of the experimental methods available to science, and accordingly the only rational belief has to be agnosticism, which in the generous-minded is tolerant.

And what of our literature? The novelist writing today in our morally confused, technological and increasingly materialistic age no longer does so against the background of accepted social or religious values, and seldom with a familiarity with the King James Bible. We shall never see the equivalent of a John Bunyan or a Daniel Defoe. The post-enlightenment belief that we can look to benign scientific progress for our secular salvation is as dead today as belief in the perfectibility of man. We are coming to believe that we inhabit a universe which is not only stranger than we know but stranger than we can know. To some modern novelists the extremes of literary experimentation are a way of explaining the arbitrariness and chaos of human existence, an attempt to express the inexpressible. Thomas Hardy wrote that the secret of fiction lies in the adjustment of things uneven to things eternal and universal. But what adjustment can a writer make if, in a world governed for him by chance and chaos, he is no longer able to believe in things eternal and universal? And yet there is a hunger for something beyond ourselves, a reality which we sometimes dimly glimpse but which often seems as unreal as a mirage. We have intimations in Wordsworth's Christian pantheism and in art. The power and truth of the gospel words can enter our hearts and minds with stronger impact when they are sung to great music, Bach's Masses, the requiems of Verdi and Fauré, and at Christmas when the voices of hundreds of choirs, believers and unbelievers, sing out triumphantly in Handel's Messiah the words of Isaiah and the Christian gospel.

Trivial art, in music or words, seduces us; great art waits in patience for us to seek it out. And so the King James Bible, in its grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding, waits for us to discover, and rediscover it, and to honour it more faithfully. May we, as generations have before us, find in its power, its truth and its beauty, a lantern unto our uncertain feet and a light unto our path.