Labour of love: the language of the King James version

Zechariah 9: 9 - 12
Matthew 11: 16 - 19, 25 - 30

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Philip Aldridge
CEO, Court Theatre

ChristChurch Cathedral
PO Box 855 Christchurch New Zealand | Tel +64 3 3660046 | Fax +64 3 3668452
admin@christchurchcathedral.co.nz | www.christchurchcathedral.co.nz

The Archdeacon, Lynda, rang me. She said “We will celebrate the 400th Anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible with a series of sermons. Will you prepare one on the language? It is so rich and informs our culture and our language to this very day.
“Do you know,” she said “the number of idioms that we use every day that derive from the Authorised Version, the KJV?”
“I don’t even know the number of phrases we use,” I said.
She ignored that.
“Lots she said. Just listen to everyday conversation and see how often we use idio….expressions from the KJB.”

Well it was mid-afternoon and I’d been in the land of nod but when the powers that be call, you sit up and prepare to bear your cross. “The writing’s on the wall”, I thought. “Woe is me.”
I confess I tried to get out of it “I’ve got something else on to be honest and no man can serve two masters.”
I was absently mindedly staring at a rather large crack in the wall which appeared to be getting wider with every quake. I was thinking ruefully:
“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”
But Lynda pressed on “Come on,” she said “fight the good fight, it’ll be done in the twinkling of an eye and it will be a labour of love.”
I was beginning to cotton on by now.
“Hey Mr Tally-man, tally me banana!” I said. “That’s Harry Belafonte,” she said, unnecessarilly sternly I thought, “not sacred text.”
“Now, don’t give up the ghost before you’ve started” she said.
“Ah, well” I thought “All things must pass”. And so, like a lamb to the slaughter, I agreed.
“I knew we’d see eye to eye” she said. “Bye”
“What was that about idioms?” I said. But she’d gone, washing her hands of the matter.
I stood, staring at the crack in the wall, and I thought about what she’d said. There are two facts, two givens, two titans of the English language that tower above all other texts. Shakespeare and The King James Bible.
They are both so effortlessly above and beyond all other contenders that it can be difficult to assess them. Critical standards of what “Great English Writing” means stem so completely from Shakespeare's peculiar virtues and from the values of the prose in the King James Bible that all commentators and, indeed, all English-speakers subsequently, have lived within their limits.
For English speakers, King Lear is not a work with particular characteristics and specific flavour; it is just what all other plays fall short of.

The great climaxes of the King James Bible, similarly, are quite simply what English prose is, or ought to be. The standard for all who speak this wonderful language was set by two people in the 16th century – Shakespeare and, predominantly, one William Tyndale. All writers have lived in their shadow ever since.

Let me explain.

Sometime in 1611, 400 years ago, a new English Bible was published. It was the work of an almost impossibly learned team of men who had laboured since 1604 under royal mandate. Their purpose, they wrote, was not to make a new translation of the Bible but "to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one."

The originating 'good one' they referred to was William Tyndale's New Testament of 1534. Seventy seven years before the publication of the KJB. It was to be the text that defined their work and from which they predominantly drew inspiration. It was to be the basis and the backbone of the KJB.

Tyndale's aspiration was to make the testaments comprehendible by, as he put it himself, "the boy that driveth the plough." This aspiration has been repeated throughout history ever since, indeed it is a thoroughly modern aspiration and has recently given us an Australian translation into SMS text speak – which must be like watching your grandfather wear a baseball cap back to front.

And we've had the "In da beginning was da word" version. And why not? If The Good Word, like a good soap powder, reaches parts never reached before.

And that's what Tyndale was doing. He reached out to the common man, to the boy that droveth the plough and he did so in language that he knew would be understood. It's interesting then that although we celebrate the majesty of the language of the KJV what has made it so vibrant and compelling is actually the simplicity of the language.

Some translations have though produced embarrassments: The 18th century translator who replaced Peter's "Lord, it is good for us to be here" with "Oh, Sir! What a delectable residence we might establish here." Less of a fisherman and more an unctuous real estate agent.

Or the craziness of the New English Bible that improved the simple and beautiful "Cast the net on the right side of the shippe and ye shall find" to "Shoot the net to starboard and you will make a catch." Me hearties. More of A Pirates of the Caribbean bible.

There are other versions apart from the KJB with claims to great merit of course, including the French version that in The Beatitudes includes the rather agreeable and memorable sentiment "Blessed are the nonchalant".

The KJB was both plain and grand, both nobly simple and richly extravagant; simultaneously sensuous and pure. Tyndale's phraseology may have been already somewhat archaic in 1611, but his words are both elevated and rustic – the words of divinity and the words of your grandmother. The key was, of course, that the boy that droveth that plough was not necessarily educated and was most probably illiterate. But this is language that was written to be read. Aloud.

It is this that makes it enduring. The achievement is impressive. When Tyndale went up to Oxford in 1510 English was banned from his college altogether. Latin was as necessary in the common room as in the classroom. And as a result his translation promoted a national language – and then a global one. It was a significant event in the ultimate democratisation of England and the world. It passed power from the scholars, the bishops and priests to the people. A considerable political and historical milestone. And also of course, a literary one. Without Tyndale it is arguable there would not have been a Shakespeare either. There could not have been a Shakespeare.

Tyndale used words mostly of one or two syllables. It was a rural language, drawing from Tyndale's native Gloucestershire. George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language", written 400 years later is actually only a plea to return to the honesty of Tyndale's language. Short words. Short sentences. "Ask and it shall be given to you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you." Words which are immediately intimate and purposeful. Sentences in which the verb sits in the middle of the sentence, in full majesty. Not, as in Latin, at the end.

It's particularly worth noting this in New Zealand. We are a people of the land. We pride ourselves on telling it straight. We are stoic, self effacing and, mostly, honest. Or at least we hold these values in high esteem. And the roots of our language, like our character, can be traced to this formative text. NZ, like the KJB, exhibits a particular protestant placid tolerance, where God's word belongs to the people and not to the hierarchy. The strange NZ blend of obstinacy and a lack of deference to authority, of enormous tolerance of different points of view, of different creeds and faiths, is traceable directly to Tyndale — sitting at his desk in exile in Antwerp, about to be betrayed by agents, to be strangled and then burned to death at the stake.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, the 19th century British historian, called it "A book which, if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power."

I stood with the telephone in my hand, next to my cracked wall, and I reflected that the Archdeacon has a point: There is no greater way to celebrate and honour the word of God than to do so with the best of our abilities: with clarity and beauty, (because beauty is the gift of God), and with majesty and power, that communicates through the centuries through the unavoidable rhythms of good English.

I was still absent mindedly staring at the crack in the wall and thought to myself, unfortunately misquoting the KJB, "What God has put asunder I hope EQC can join together."   In the name of Christ, Amen.