

2/3/14

Theme: The Bible in plain English

Readings Ps 119.9-16

May 2011 was the 400th anniversary of the printing of the KJV in 1611.

The KJV with various revisions was the main bible used in English speaking churches for 100's of years.

It didn't have any real competition until the Revised Standard Version began to be published, first the NT in 1942 and then the OT in 1952.

Since then, many good translations have been published, but until then it was generally the KJV that was read in churches, used in mission and read in the home.

A number of you may have been brought up reading the KJV and for some it remains the version they prefer to read.

Today we are taking a break from our Big Picture Bible series to look at how we came to have the bible in plain English – or perhaps I should say the King's English.

So I am not preaching from the Bible, but teaching about the bible.

Why is this important?

We take it for granted that we are able to read the bible in English. In fact you could go into a bookshop or online and find a wide variety of bibles, an abundance of bibles in the English language. But this was not always so.

In fact there was a time when having a bible in English could at very least send you to prison, and might well cost you your life. Having the bible in English made it available to many more people, and in time even poorer people were able to have their own copy of the bible.

It meant people could read, hear and understand the bible in their own language for the first time.

As John Wycliffe said, no one should have to learn another language in order to read the bible.

To understand how the King James Version of the bible came to be published we need to think about politics, religion, reformation and the wider social context of the time.

Having a bible in English was not something that just happened. Printing the bible in English was revolutionary and came at a high personal cost.

Wycliffe translation

The first complete version of the Bible in English was translated by **John Wycliffe and published in 1382.**

Others had worked on portions of the Bible, but his was the first complete translation.

Wycliffe was an Oxford don. He pursued a number of ideas which were ahead of his time and would not really be embraced until the Reformation of the church over 100 years later.

He believed that the key task of a priest was to read and preach from the bible. Particularly, that ordinary people should be able to hear the words of the bible in their own language.

In those days the mass was read in Latin. Some of the simple parish priests did not understand Latin and did the service from memory.

When the bible was read, it was in Latin. The average person did not understand it, indeed just understanding the language used required a level of education most people did not have.

The cost of producing bibles meant only the very rich would ever have a personal copy in their own home.

So because of lack of education and lack of wealth, most people were denied access to the bible.

Wycliffe believed that if ordinary people could read the bible for themselves they could come to a personal relationship with Jesus and explore the meaning of their faith more deeply.

Wycliffe's most lasting achievement was to translate the bible into English. This offered the possibility that even the poor and uneducated could at least hear the bible read to them in words they could understand. In this way they could have a greater appreciation of the great stories of the bible and begin to think about it more clearly.

A group of those who supported him became lay preachers and were given the derogatory name Lollards, mumblers. Lollard later came to mean heretic.

There were several problems with his translation

Wycliffe's Bible was translated prior to the invention of the printing press and therefore each copy had to be carefully handmade. This limited the numbers of bibles that were available. Secondly, the church did not approve of this translation nor of Wycliffe's attitude to the church.

He was condemned by the church for his attitudes and for his writings. At times he was punished with imprisonment.

He died in 1384 of natural causes.

But in 1415 the church declared him a heretic and ordered his body exhumed and burnt with his ashes scattered, and his writings burnt.

The next couple of hundred years were a period of religious and political upheaval in England.

In the time of Henry 8th there was spiritual and social upheaval in Europe as the Reformation of the church led by Martin Luther took place.

This brought a degree of tension and uncertainty as some of these reforming ideas drifted across the channel to England.

Henry did not approve of these reforms and stood fast with the Catholic Church against them.

He did not approve of the new denominations that were forming in Europe and didn't want them to gain a foothold in England.

The Pope saw Henry as an ally and declared him to be a *Defender of the faith*.

However, things changed when Henry wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon, so as to remarry and have a son and heir to the throne.

Because the Roman Catholic Church would not permit this he broke with Rome in 1533, leading to religious reform.

After a breakdown in negotiations Henry declared that the King was the head of the church in England, rather than the Pope.

While Henry opposed the protestant reformation of the church as it was in Europe and did not sympathise with the new protestant

denominations that were forming, he wanted a Church that would permit his divorce.

Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury who did sympathise with the European reformation, helped with this divorce and also led the church towards reformation.

The reforms of Henry, guided by the hand of Cranmer, led to a religious and social upheaval in which the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and later the Puritan Churches vied for the upper hand.

The faith of the Monarch decided the faith of the nation.

When one of these churches held sway the others suffered.

Church and state were so intertwined that the preferred church of the Monarch was protected while others were seen as enemies and heretics who at times were forced from land and livelihood. In some instances they were executed as traitors and burned at the stake.

In the midst of this social upheaval **the place of the Bible varied with the preferred bible of the most powerful group** being the one in use at the time.

Perhaps the greatest figure in translating the bible into English was William Tyndale, a contemporary of Henry 8th, being 3 years younger than the King.

Tyndale was a skilled linguist who knew Hebrew, Greek and Latin as well as 4 other languages. He studied at Oxford and Cambridge. He was appalled by the lack of education and understanding of local priests who ministered to the poor.

He said that given a little time he could make a humble plough boy know more of the scripture than the local priest. He made it his life's work to make the scriptures available to the people in their own language.

Doing this put him into conflict with the Roman Catholic church who at that time believed that only priests are qualified to read and interpret the bible.

At this time under the rule of Henry 8th it was illegal to have a bible or even portions of the bible in English.

Tyndale wanted to make an English translation of the Bible, but was denied permission so he moved to Germany to do the work in exile.

Rather than simply translating the Latin Vulgate, Tyndale went back to earlier Greek and Hebrew texts. This enabled him to make a better translation into English.

He had hoped that this version would gain acceptance in London, but the church was very worried about the reformation in Europe and didn't want it to influence the church in England. They saw this translation as the thin end of a wedge and so reacted against it. The church condemned his writing and when possible confiscated copies of his translation and burned them.

15,000 copies of this English Bible were smuggled into England between 1525-1530.

Henry condemned Tyndale's work and arranged for his arrest. Henry's agents (early version of James Bond) found Tyndale near Brussels in 1535 and arrested him. He was imprisoned for a year then executed by strangulation and his body burned at the stake.

At his arrest Tyndale prayed, *Lord, open the king of England's eyes.*

This prayer was answered a mere two years later in 1537 when following his divorce and the break with the Roman Catholic Church, Henry allowed the English translation to be distributed in England.

The importance of Tyndale's translation is seen when you realise that 85% of the words of his bible were later directly used in the King James Version. Much of the prose and turn of phrase that became so loved in the King James version, was written by Tyndale

*– let there be light,
my brother's keeper,
the salt of the earth,
filthy lucre,
fight the good fight,
in him we live and move and have our being.*

This had an influence on the English language as well as on the English spirit.

Once it was permissible to have the bible in English a number of other versions were printed.

This is strange to us, but while some like Tyndale thought it was important to have a bible in English and even died for the sake of making the gospel available to people in their own language, it was not readily available until a King wanted a divorce and split the church in his nation from Rome.

A notable difference between Tyndale's translation and that of others was that he translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek whereas many other later translated from other translations like the Vulgate or Luther's translation.

For a short time after the death of King Henry, Thomas Cranmer was able to influence the new king Edward 6th, towards reform. At this time the Church of England became more recognisably a protestant denomination. Edward became ill and died aged 15.

Following this Mary 1st reigned briefly as queen and turned England back toward Rome so that the Roman Catholic Church held sway.

This was a very violent time which led to her nickname *bloody Mary*. She had over 280 religious dissenters burnt at the stake. After reigning for 5 years she died in an influenza epidemic.

At this time Elizabeth 1 became queen and turned England back to Protestantism.

She was quite practical in her relationship with the church, supporting what would become the Church of England, but repealing heresy laws so as not to have a repeat of the bloody executions of Mary's reign. Because Elizabeth ruled for 45 years she was able to solidify her policies in English life and the place of the Church of England was more secure.

Prior to Henry it was a problem that English translations were illegal and therefore scarce.

However, in the years following it became a problem that there were now a number of different English bibles.

Each of these Bibles had a slightly different background and were supported by different theologically political groups.

The Puritans/Protestants preferred the Geneva bible 1560

This was a very popular bible and was widely distributed. With the reformed ideal of reading and preaching from the scriptures, this version became well known.

As you might imagine it was very liberating and spiritually stimulating for people to hear the bible in their own language and so there was a great thirst to hear this bible read. This was particularly true outside of the established churches of the day. The Geneva Bible had an introduction by the great protestant reformer John Calvin.

Its translation was written by English Protestants in self exile in Europe where they had fled to escape the persecutions of Queen Mary. So this translation had a bias towards reformation ideals and away from words that helped support the Roman Catholic Church. This was the first English version to have numbered chapters and verses to help those reading the bible. It also had references and footnotes that were filled with pro-reform ideas.

Those who used this bible, the Puritans and other reformed churches, were seen as the radical end of reform in England and so the Bible they preferred was viewed with some suspicion by the more established church.

The Bishops' Bible 1558, was commissioned by Elizabeth 1st to counter the growth in popularity of the Geneva Bible.

The Bishops associated the Geneva Bible with Presbyterianism, a form of church government that was different from the established order. To strengthen the place of the Church of England they wanted a Bible authorised by the Queen which had official patronage and was given status as the Bible to be read in parish churches all around England.

While The Bishops' Bible did become the official bible read in church, it failed to replace the Geneva Bible which was still widely read in people's homes.

While the Roman Catholic Church no longer held authority in England, a translation into English was made for those of the Roman Catholic faith.

This was the **Douay-Rheims bible**, which for years was held in high regard by the Roman Catholic Church in England in a similar way to that which the King James Version came to be held by protestants.

The thing that separated the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible was the translation of two key words.

Greek *presbuteros*- was translated *Bishop* in the Bishops' Bible and *elder* in the Geneva Bible. It referred to the leaders of a church. In the Anglican system that person was a Bishop. In the Protestant system it referred to the mature leaders of the church and was translated Elders. What was at stake was the governance of the church either by Bishops or by Elders

Greek *Ecclesia* – was translated *Church* in the Bishops' Bible and *Congregation* in the Geneva Bible. The Bishops wanted to emphasise the place of the church as a national body over which the Bishops held sway. The protestants wanted to emphasis the individual congregation, which could be independent from a national body like the Church of England.

To the Bishops it was the Church of England, not the congregations of England.

When James came to the throne, these denominational differences were important.

Since the King was recognised as the head of the church by the Church of England and this was part of his power base, other views of church and church government posed a threat.

To help unify the church and the nation some thought it was necessary to have a translation authorised by the King which could be read in church to the public.

James viewed the Bishops' Bible as unpopular and the Geneva Bible as seditious.

When James came to the throne of England in 1603 there were many petitions to the King to deal with religious matters, to review the laws which had an effect on matters of style and freedom of worship.

One of these petitions had over 1000 signatures and it was clear that something needed to be done.

To deal with this James called a three day **conference at Hampton Court, 1604.**

The sides of the debates were very obvious to those attending. The majority were the Bishops who turned up in all their colourful regalia and the minority, the protestant puritans, turned up dressed in plain black. Some of the Bishops mocked them saying they had come dressed like common shop keepers.

Only the Bishops were allowed on the first day, with the puritans being admitted on the 2nd and 3rd days.

James presided over the conference from his throne, and began with a speech from the throne. He stated that he wanted unity and a common direction to emerge that would ease religious tensions. He wasn't looking for anything new or innovative but wanted the conference to take a conservative line that would not create waves. He wanted to diffuse tensions, not add to them.

The agenda was focused on preaching in Ireland, whether church courts could excommunicate people, and how the bible and book of prayer was to be read.

While in some regards the most important thing to come out of the conference was the commissioning of a new bible, a new translation was not on the agenda, but arose as a suggestion of the Puritan leader, John Reynolds.

The Puritans were against the Bishops' bible being used in churches.

They were open to this debate because at an earlier time in Scotland James had personally used the Geneva Bible and a publication of the Geneva bible had been dedicated to him. They may well have thought that given the opportunity James would side with them and approve the Geneva Bible.

The Puritan move to have the Geneva Bible authorised by the King backfired on them. They were unaware that James' view of this Bible had changed and so when this discussion came up, neither the Geneva Bible nor the Bishops' Bible was acceptable to all. Almost as an aside James decided to set up a committee to work on it and then moved on to the more important business of the styles of clothing that Bishops and priests could wear.

The hope was that a new translation which was authorised by King James would heal religious divisions.

It was hoped that a new version of the bible might be able to draw people of faith together and draw a line under years of religious division.

Biblical scholarship was growing rapidly at this time and there was confidence that the efforts of the best of modern scholarship could produce a Bible that would surpass the earlier competing versions.

King James was a well educated man, biblically literate and theologically trained.

While in Fyfe, before the death of Elizabeth, James began translating some of the Psalms into English. He had an interest in the work of translation.

The council drew up a set of guidelines to help guide the translators.

This stipulated that it was to be a conservative version, based wherever possible on the wording of the Bishops' Bible, but using other translations such as Tyndale and even the Geneva Bible when they were more accurate. It was to be free of notes which earlier bibles had used in a denominational way to support or reject the reformation or Roman Catholic ideas. This lack of additional information was to help it find wider acceptance. It was to contain the words of scripture not additional discussions.

This project was undertaken by forming six teams of scholarly translators who would peer review each other's work so as to find the best words and phrases to convey the message of the bible.

Fifty four scholars in six teams met at Cambridge, Oxford and Westminster to begin the work.

Later in 1609 a panel of 3 scholars again reviewed the translation. At a basic level the individual translators would meet, discuss their work and make suggestions, this would be sent to other teams who would check the work. Then once that was complete the team of 3 editors would check it again.

This was all done with great care by top scholars.

The translators acknowledged their use of older translations by writing in the original preface, *we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor to*

make of a bad one a good one, but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principle good one.

In this light the King James translation turned out to be more a revision of what went before than seeking to be a new translation.

It was finally published in May 1611 by Robert Barker.

Surprisingly, it was not popularly received and did not initially sell many copies. People of that time tended to hold fast to the Bible that was preferred and used in their own denominational group.

In some regards the great achievement of the KJV was a flop and may have remained so if not for the English Civil war.

The Puritans who came to power and who during their brief rule wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith which is still a standard of our church, promoted the use of the Geneva Bible.

However when the Monarchy was restored in 1690 the Puritans lost power and their preferred Geneva Bible went with them.

With the return of the Monarchy, the King's Authorised bible gained sway.

Overtime the KJV became the best loved and most used version of the Bible in the English language.

At the time of writing it had the benefit of nearly two centuries of scholarship beginning with Wycliffe, but most especially in the work of Tyndale. Further it had the scholarly precedent of the Geneva and Bishops' Bibles, as well as the best scholars of the day using the most modern insights available to them.

In many respects it was the most enduring of English translations.

It was written at a time when the English language had reached a maturity of expression that often soared. This was the time of William Shakespeare whose use of words sparked the imagination. Many phrases from the KJV became part of common language that is used today. Many people would not realise they are quoting the KJV when they speak of

a drop in the bucket Isaiah 40.15

a labour of love 1 Thess 1.3

a leopard can't change its spots Jer 13.23

Turning the world upside down Acts 17:6

A fly in the ointment Ecclesiastes 10:1

For all its merits the KJV has its failings.

The 54 scholars were not always in agreement as to the best reading. All translations have weaknesses and at times the KJV is wordy and **verbose** when shorter sentences may have been clearer.

Advances in scholarship – even at the time it was written, discoveries were made of older and more accurate Greek and Hebrew texts.

Not only texts of scriptures but general writings which helped give better understanding of the meaning of words and phrases.

One key failing of the KJV is not the translation itself, but the **immovability of later readers** who preferred the use of archaic English rather than modern English. We understand how English changes rapidly and at times the meaning of a word can change to the exact opposite of what it meant in a bygone generation.

Around 1987 a movement called **King James Only** began. This consists of moderate members who simply prefer the KJV, to those who feel that particular version was directly inspired by God, and some who feel it amounted to a new revelation from God.

This reminds us that we need to be careful not to idolise the Bible or any particular translation of the Bible.

The English language has changed considerably.

For many people who speak English nowadays, reading the KJV is practically reading another language which itself needs to be translated: *Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.* Mt 5:26

While this made perfect sense in 1611 it is not clear in 2014. Of the 20 words used in this verse 10 of them are not in contemporary use. When was the last time you used a farthing?

Wycliffe, Tyndale and the translators of the KJV, did their scholarly best not to translate the bible into archaic language, but into the contemporary English of their own day, so that even the plough boy could understand it.

I tend to think that if one of these was alive today, he would be surprised at the attitude of some who hold fast to this language, and that he would want to us the best scholarship to express the bible in contemporary language.

What difference does this make to us?

We are currently doing a bible series to get the big picture of the themes, people and events of the bible, but we couldn't do this if we didn't have the bible in our own language.

We couldn't meet in homegroups to read the bible.

We couldn't read the bible in our private devotions.

We owe so much to those who dedicated themselves to producing a bible that we can read in everyday language.

We acknowledge even when the Church banned it and labelled translators as heretics and even when Kings defied it, seeing it as seditious and putting translators to death, God worked through history raising up people of faith who would give us a bible in our own language.

I suppose in that light the least we can do is to read it.

The next time you read a bible at home, just hold it in your hands for a moment and thank God for it.

Recognise that you are blessed to be able to read it.

You aren't limited to hearing a minister read it and interpret it for you, rather you can read and study it for yourself.

Perhaps God would put it on your heart to share the bible message with today's equivalent of Wycliffe's plough boy, so that anyone and everyone can learn from its truth.

Perhaps today you might help support a group who works to put the bible into the hands of others. Perhaps supporting them in prayer or with a financial gift.

Bible Society who distribute bibles around the world

Scripture Union who help children and young people learn about God's word

Wycliffe Bible Translators who work to print the bible in the languages of the world and to promote literacy in developing nations.

Gideons International who distribute bibles into schools and place them in hotel rooms for people to read.

We are a church, a people who are spiritually nourished by the words of the bible.

Let us rejoice in this wonderful gift which is ours.

Let us read it diligently.

Let us put its teaching into practice.

As our Lord reminds us, *Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.* Mt 4:4

Reference:

King James Bible - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00xln78>