

# KJV – The Majestic Word

2 Samuel 1:17-27; 2 Timothy 3:10-17

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Pentecost

16 October 2011

I wonder if you ever find yourself saying things like this.

You meet someone who has been very ill and you joke with them, “Welcome back to the land of the living.” Or, maybe you are watching a soap opera on TV and you reflect that the woman whose husband left her, “poured out her heart to her friend.” Or, you realise that you just passed an exam with 51% and you say, “I just got through that by the skin of my teeth.” Then, again, there’s an acquaintance at the office whom everyone knew was going to get fired except him and you remark, “The trouble is he just couldn’t read the writing on the wall.”

Or, maybe there’s someone that’s always bugging you and you complain, “That woman is just a thorn in the flesh” but then, you think, I just have to put up with her because she is “the cross I have to bear.” And, you know, she’ll never change because, as we well know, “a leopard cannot change its spots.”

Well, I could go on and on with such sayings because quoting them is such a “a labour of love.” But there are so many, and though the few I have referred to are only “a drop in the bucket,” I fear if I did “fight the good fight” and continue to quote them, I would regret the temptation and quickly be thinking, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” And even worse, some might suspect I was “casting pearls before swine” and then, “in the twinkling of an eye”, I would become like “a lamb to the slaughter” and I would be saying “Woe is me!”<sup>1</sup>

Now all these sayings are so much a part of our daily conversations, aren’t they? We use them automatically and subconsciously. But, do we ever stop and say to ourselves: Where do they come from? Of course, they come from the Bible. And not just any Bible. But from the King James Version - a Bible that has not only had a seminal effect on the English language but a major impact on our understanding of the Christian Faith.

The King James edition of the Bible came into existence in a strange, roundabout sort of way. When King James VI of Scotland, son of Mary Queen of Scots, became King James I of England in 1603, he landed himself right in the midst of a maelstrom of religious controversy between the Puritans on one side, Anglicans on another and Roman Catholics on yet another.

In an attempt to bring some unity to the various conflicting religious parties, the King convened a conference at Hampton Court in London to examine various areas of conflict – the Book of Common Prayer, the practice of excommunication and Popish practices such as making the sign of the cross at baptism. Ironically, no agreement was reached on any of these areas of disagreement but the conference finished with a unanimous decision to undertake a matter not even on the agenda – the publication of a

completely new edition of the Bible.

King James did not really want to get into the whole business of a new translation of the Bible. But, when the suggestion was made, he saw a heaven-sent opportunity to get rid of the Geneva Bible in common use by the Puritans. This was a version of the Bible he hated because it included extended marginal notes some of which undermined the whole notion of the Divine Right of Kings. Not only that, it was a translation that he felt paid undue consideration to the moral sensitivities of Puritan women. This version, after all, was nicknamed “The Breeches Bible” because the translators, embarrassed by the idea of nudity in sacred scripture, changed the Garden of Eden passage in Genesis to say that Adam covered his nakedness, not with a “fig-leaf”, but with “breeches” or “trousers”!<sup>2</sup>

So King James suddenly saw his chance. A new Bible would unite the conflicting groups and greatly increase his royal influence. Nor was James the only one opportunistic about the whole matter. The Bishop of London also. Richard Bancroft was dead set against any new translation but saw that, if he supported the King on this issue, it would greatly increase his chances of being promoted to Archbishop of Canterbury. And other religious leaders of the day, too, saw they too could win royal favour and extract a new deal for their own churches by acquiescing to a new translation of the Bible.

So, for all these contrary and ambiguous reasons, it was decided on 12 January 1604 that a new translation of the Bible would be undertaken. But who would actually carry out this gigantic endeavour?

Well, just supposing the church today decided to embark on any ambitious task, where would it start? By forming a committee, of course! And 400 years ago things happened in exactly the same way. Though not just by forming 1 committee but 6 in all! It took 6 companies of translators, drawn from the most outstanding scholars of the day and meeting over a period of 7 years, from 1604-1611, to produce this Bible. Two groups met at Westminster in London, two at Oxford and two at Cambridge. Each was assigned different sections of the Bible and, to guide them in their work, Bishop Bancroft gave them 15 rules. Rules that covered everything from making full use of foregoing English translations, mainly that of William Tyndale, 100 years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Rules about not making any marginal notes. Rules about conferring with colleagues in their group or other scholars around the land as to the best rendering of disputed passages.<sup>4</sup>

One feature of the King James Bible is, of course, its majestic language. When people today say why they prefer this translation, they almost always remark on its literary style. So poetic is the language of the King James Bible, in fact, that there are those who have suggested that William

Shakespeare was the guiding light behind the project. Some have actually suggested that his name is there in code. They point to the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm and say count 46 words from the beginning to “shake”. Count 46 words back from the end to “spear”. “Shake-spear”. What, they say, could be more evident? But, though the Bard of Stratford was alive at the time when this translation was being undertaken, scholars are unanimously agreed that he had no part whatsoever in the creation of the King James version of the Bible. So we can count that influence out.

Strangely enough, though the King James Version’s literary merits are so often cited as being its noblest qualities, very little attention was actually given by the translators to this aspect of their work. One writer says, “As for the literary style of the new Bible – so often regarded as its greatest glory – there is little sign that the translators paid it much attention. For the most part they were content to take care of the sense and let the sounds take care of themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Also, it should be said that the much-valued literary merits of the KJV in later times took quite a while to be appreciated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the KJV met with a storm of opposition from many quarters when it was published in 1611. One learned scholar of the times wrote to King James in very hostile and uncomplimentary terms declaring that he would “‘rather be rent to pieces with wild horses’ than see the new Bible used in churches, ‘It is so ill done,’” he stated quite emphatically. Maybe, of course, his opposition was a case of sour grapes as he was upset at not being chosen to serve on any of the translating committees.<sup>6</sup>

Now, the amazing thing about this whole project of creating the King James Bible is this: Though it was undertaken by many of the political and religious protagonists of the day for all the wrong reasons, for selfish ends, to gain power and prestige and promotion, though it was the work of a very diverse group of some 51 scholars (many of whom were extremely temperamental and had seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints), though no direct attention was paid to linguistic style and though the Bible initially met with such vehement opposition, yet, out of this whole process came the finest literary rendering ever of the Christian Bible. So many of the passages read so beautifully.

Who cannot be struck by the poignancy of David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel, for instance. “The beauty of Israel is slain among thy high places. How are the mighty fallen?”<sup>7</sup> Or, the rustic calm of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.”<sup>8</sup> Or, the tenderness of Jesus’ words of invitation, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.”<sup>9</sup> Or his comforting words, “Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions.”<sup>10</sup> Or the splendour of the Christmas story, “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”<sup>11</sup>

Now, granted the King James version cannot compete

today with contemporary translations in terms of biblical scholarship which is now light years ahead. Nor can it compete in terms of sheer “understandability” with versions in the modern idiom. Yet, the KJV has a power and a majesty all of its own that no other version has or probably will ever rival. As one writer put it so fittingly, “[The King James Bible] soared to the spires of England’s great cathedrals and reached deep into the hearts of those who loved the word of God.”<sup>12</sup> And, of course, it still does. The majesty of this rendering of the word of God still uplifts us whenever we hear it read.

To think, as I have said, that this marvellous rendition came about despite the ambivalent and less-than-pure motives of those who initiated it and despite so many other obstacles laid in its path, that is truly amazing! And is a timely reminder that God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.<sup>13</sup> His purpose for this world will come about, despite the faults and failings of his servants, despite the forces that are arrayed against him.

Often, as we look at our world today absorbed in its secular ways and at our church in seeming decline, we despair. God seems far removed. His ways thwarted. His purposes brought to nought. But as we look back at the creation of the King James Bible, 400 years later, let us find inspiration in recalling that, finally, God’s purposes can’t help but prevail. The good and the right can’t help but triumph. And, with us or without us, God’s will shall be done. On earth as it is in heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Job 28:13; Psalm 62:8; Job 19:20; Daniel 5:5; 2 Corinthians 12:7; Luke 14:27; Jeremiah 13:23; Thessalonians 1:2,3; Isaiah 40:15; Timothy 6:12; Luke 4:5-8; Matthew 7:6; 1 Corinthians 15:52; Isaiah 53:7; Job 10:15. See also “English Phrases and Sayings that Derive from the Bible”

<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/bible-phrases-sayings.html>

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:7 *The Geneva Bible*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1969 (1560 edition)

<sup>3</sup> Tyndale (c. 1494 – 1536) had a major impact on the KJV. His words it has been estimated account for 75% of the Old Testament and 85% of the New Testament. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyndale>

<sup>4</sup> Alister McGrath, *In The Beginning*, Doubleday, New York, 2001 and Laurence M. Vance, *A Brief History of the King James Bible*, [www.av1611.org/kjv/kjvhist.html](http://www.av1611.org/kjv/kjvhist.html); Arnold Hunt “The Locust Tree”, TLS, Feb 11, 2011

<sup>5</sup> Hunt, Op. Cit.

<sup>6</sup> Hunt, Op. Cit.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Samuel 1:19

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 23:1

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 11:28

<sup>10</sup> John 14: 1,2

<sup>11</sup> Luke 2:8

<sup>12</sup> Leslie Scrivener, “James’ Bible, a verbal shrine”, *The Toronto Star*, 12 January 2004, pp. A1, A12

<sup>13</sup> William Cowper, “God moves in a mysterious way”, #55, *The Book of Praise*, *The Presbyterian Church in Canada*.