

KING'S COLLEGE  
CAMBRIDGE



CHAPEL SERVICES  
HOLY WEEK, EASTER  
AND LONG VACATION  
TERMS 2011

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Celebrating 400 years of the King James Bible:

1 May	The Revd Dr Jeremy Morris <i>Dean</i>
8 May	Professor Eamon Duffy <i>Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge</i>
15 May	Professor David Ford <i>Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge</i>
22 May	The Revd Roger Greeves <i>Acting Chaplain</i>
29 May	Professor Alex Walsham <i>Faculty of History, University of Cambridge</i>
5 June	Dr Stephen Cleobury <i>Fellow and Director of Music</i>
12 June	The Revd Canon Dr John Binns <i>Vicar, Great St Mary's, Cambridge</i>
19 June	Professor David Frost <i>Institute of Orthodox Studies, Cambridge</i>
3 July	The Rt Revd Simon Barrington-Ward <i>Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Ely</i>
10 July	The Revd Dr Jeremy Morris <i>Dean</i>

**DARKNESS INTO LIGHT:  
An address to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
of the King James Version of the Bible**

*Professor David Frost,  
Principal, the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge*

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**[St John's Gospel 3. 16-21, in the King James Version**

- <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.**
- <sup>17</sup> For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.**
- <sup>18</sup> He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.**
- <sup>19</sup> And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.**
- <sup>20</sup> For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.**
- <sup>21</sup> But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.]**
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My text is six verses from the Gospel you have just heard, the gospel according to St John, chapter 3, verses 16 to 21. It is, however, in a translation two hundred and twenty-seven years earlier than the King James Version whose 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary we celebrate today – that of John Wycliffe, translating into the English of 1384:

- 16 For God louede so the world, that he yaf his `oon bigetun sone, that ech man that bileueth in him perische not, but haue euerlastynge lijf.
- 17 For God sente not his sone in to the world, that he iuge the world, but that the world be saued bi him.
- 18 He that bileueth in hym, is not demed; but he that bileueth not, is now demed, for he bileueth not in the name of the `oon bigetun sone of God.
- 19 And this is the dom, for liyt cam in to the world, and men loueden more derknessis than liyt; for her werkes weren yuele.
- 20 For ech man that doith yuele, hatith the liyt; and he cometh not to the liyt, that hise werkis be not repreued.
- 21 But he that doith treuthe, cometh to the liyt, that hise werkis be schewid, that thei ben don in God.

What is clear is that this version won't do for a modern audience, whether in 1611 or today.

But what is also clear is that in words and structure this is very much what we are used to in a traditional translation of the Bible.

For the four hundredth anniversary of the so-called 'Authorized Version', we have had a veritable outpouring on television, radio and in the press: some of it illuminating as to the processes of the forty-seven translators in six committees that worked on the King James translation, two committees each in Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster. But we have also had paeans of praise, straight from 'Silly-Boys Hall', for that same version as being, with the contemporary plays of William Shakespeare, a twin-cornerstone of some fundamental British decency of character that developed over the next four hundred years – an inheritance from a highpoint of English culture that we are in danger of neglecting at our peril. (Indeed, we have been told on British television that the heritage was so twinned that Shakespeare was vastly influenced by the King James Bible – and this despite all his major plays being written before the publication of the new version in 1611.)

Shakespeare was indeed much influenced by the Bible – but in the Geneva version done by Protestant exiles in 1560, about fifty years before the King James translation. It was the most popular version in Shakespeare's day and for forty-four years after his death, till the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660. It is true that the humanity and insights of Shakespeare have greatly affected human relations, not just in Britain but world-wide. But so has the gospel of Christ and the Old and New Testaments of the Bible – and that influence has little to do with whatever translation was used. If the old translators sought striking expression, that was because they had first been struck by their Hebrew and Greek originals. And in the case of the Bible, it has been the sense not the expression, the message not the medium, that mattered.

To use the anniversary of the King James Bible to drag back our youth for their good to an archaic English version on the ground of its supposedly unique quality is to betray the principles of translation that made that version excellent and which might serve as a model for our own work.

First, the King James translators knew that the time must come inevitably when changes in the language would give any translation a false quaintness and a dangerous obscurity. Re-translation was a necessity. Seventy-one years earlier, Thomas Cranmer in his preface to the second edition of the Great Bible [1540] had observed that re-translation into current English was the ancient custom of the Church:

For it is not much above one hundred years ago, since scripture hath not been accustomed to be read in the vulgar tongue within this realm. And many hundred years before that, it was translated and read in the Saxons' tongue, which at that time was our mother tongue, whereof there remain yet divers copies found lately in old abbeys, of such

antique manner of writing and speaking, that few men now be able to read and understand them. And when this language waxed old and out of common usage, because folk should not lack the fruit of reading, it was again translated into the newer language, whereof yet also many copies remain and be daily found.

But secondly, the King James translators understood (as we do not) that novelty, originality, individualism are a dangerous temptation. Not for them the folly of the *New English Bible* and the *Jerusalem Bible* in the last century of trying to 'make all things new', expressing ancient truth in our own idiom, and deliberately avoiding the wording of older versions. The old translators would have been astonished. Why alter what had been put in such memorable form by a predecessor? Why not steal what was good? – Except that notions of ownership didn't come much into the heads of seventeenth century translators.

So it is that Wycliffe's Bible doesn't seem much different to versions centuries later. The translators of the King James Bible were under royal instruction not to attempt anything new but to revise the Bishops' Bible of 1568, published forty-three years earlier. As they summed up their brief in their 'Preface of the Translators to the Reader', they 'never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one . . .'

Hence, in the King James version of the six verses of my text, all 144 words are identical to those of the Bishops' Bible, forty-three years earlier, with one word ('howe') omitted as redundant, 'euyll doeth' reversed to 'doeth evil', and 'yt his deedes may be knowen' turned to the rather more ponderous 'that his deeds may be *made manifest*', after the example of the Geneva Bible of 1560 (which generally offers the King James translators a more elevated diction). Where Wycliffe (1395) and Coverdale (1535) had talked of good deeds being 'done in God', from Tyndale (1534), the Matthew Bible (1537), the Great Bible (1539 and 1540), the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishop's Bible (1568), right through to the King James Version of 1611, it was generally felt more fitting that your good deeds should be '*wrought*' in God.

If we look back seventy-seven years from the King James' Version to the Tyndale New Testament (which was the first version in almost modern English), out of the 144 words of the King James version 122 words are exactly as Tyndale wrote them, in the same place, in the same word-order and in the same grammatical and syntactical structure – with all that means for borrowed effects of sound, rhythm and balance.

To put it mildly – no one strove for novelty. Forty-seven no doubt cantankerous scholars subjected their egos to the task of producing the best possible version, keeping in touch with their Hebrew and Greek originals, surveying the great and by now extensive tradition of past translation, all 'diligently compared' with earlier English versions (as their title-page attested). They then had their decisions re-considered by their peers and finally overseen by the Great Committee that from January 1609 for two years went

through all that the six smaller committees had done. It was a work of corporate genius, of the Church militant together with the Church in glory, if it was a work of genius at all.

But that is not our idea of how genius works. The solitary individual, unappreciated in his lonely garret, is the one we think capable of great art. That, however, is not how the Holy Spirit works. In the first Sunday after Pentecost, it is well to remember that the Spirit came in a 'rushing wind' and 'tongues of fire' to a *committee* of the Apostles. The Jerusalem Council when deciding what to do about the Gentiles hit on what seemed 'good to the Holy Spirit and to us' – and that was in a *committee*. The great ecumenical Councils of the Church that defined the essence of Christian faith were grand *committees*. But those committees saw the Church as entrusted with 'the faith once delivered to the saints', and themselves as the guardians of a tradition. If we want the scriptures once again to strike the British consciousness with the sword of the Spirit, we must learn from the corporate humility of the makers of the King James Bible, who in their translation appreciated and stole from the past, but tailored it to fit a present and a future need.

May the six committees and the forty-seven translators of the King James Version be revered for what they did. As the Orthodox would put it, 'May their memory be eternal', in the keeping of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.