

ARCHDIOCESE OF GLASGOW



17 June 2001 Death of Cardinal Thomas J Winning

The date of June 17th 2001 had been marked in Cardinal Winning's diary for well over a year. It was an important day in that diary. No-one knew what that day's eventual significance would be.

The Bible Society had invited the Cardinal to preach at a service to mark the 400th Anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. He was "chuffed" that a Cardinal, a Catholic, should have been invited to preach at a service marking an important stage in the life of the English version of the Scriptures, a stage brought into being by the Reformers at a General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He was delighted therefore to accept the invitation and had looked forward to the event with some eagerness.

As it was to transpire, on June 8th 2001, he had a heart attack which meant the cancellation of his appointments for at least three months. The Bible Society was informed of his cancellation of this engagement, but also that the sermon he was to give already existed, it was prepared and ready. If they were willing, someone else would come and read the sermon that he had prepared for them. They graciously accepted this arrangement.

And so, Monsignor Peter Smith, the Diocesan Chancellor, left Glasgow early on the morning of June 17th heading for Burntisland where the King James Bible had been published 400 years ago. On the way to the Service he was called back to Glasgow since the Cardinal had had another heart attack and the paramedics were with him. A message was passed to the congregation of Burntisland that a "crisis" had meant a change in plan and Mgr. Smith had returned to Glasgow.

The Sermon was then faxed to the local police station in Burntisland and was being read to the Congregation by the organiser of the event when the news was made public that the Cardinal had died that morning. His death was announced to the people gathered to hear him speak and now were being asked to pray for him in death.

His last sermon, delivered posthumously, is recorded below.

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Sermon for visit to Burntisland Parish Church 400th Anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is a great privilege for me to be here with you on this Sunday morning to share with you an occasion of great ecumenical significance as well as historical importance.

I have asked that the text for today be taken from the Gospel of St Luke. There we read how Jesus went into the small synagogue in his town of Nazareth and read from the scriptures. (Chapter 4 verse 16-21)

He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

I hope that you, like me can feel the historical resonance of that passage as we gather today, just like Jesus and – to use today's parlance – his fellow parishioners. Like them we gather to listen to the word of God, reflect on it and so be challenged to put it into action in our lives.

It was here in Burntisland that 400 years ago the King James edition of the Bible came to be presented to the Church of Scotland. The impact of this event and this bible on the life and culture of Scotland in the succeeding centuries is difficult to over-emphasise.

That version of the Sacred Scriptures has nourished the piety and beliefs of countless generations of Scots over the centuries, offering them an essential anchoring in the word of God, together with an appreciation of the beauty of language at the service of faith.

I'd like reflect with you on the centrality of the Scriptures in the life of the Christian Church from the very beginning, focusing naturally on the four gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We can, as you know, distinguish three stages in the formation of the Gospels:

Firstly, the life and teaching of Jesus. The Catholic Church holds firmly that the four Gospels, "whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up." [Dei Verbum 19]

Then came the oral tradition. After the Ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by what they had witnessed and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, now enjoyed. [cf ibid]

The early Christian Church rejoiced in this oral Tradition. For them the word of God was truly alive and active – the gospel message involved the testimony of the eye-witnesses to the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We read in the Acts of the Apostles how the essential qualifications for the Apostle included his personal ability to testify to the life and ministry of Christ.

We Christians are united in our faith that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit filled these oral traditions and while it is a tribute to the piety and commitment of the early Christians that they committed to memory whole tracts of what were later to become the codified books of the Gospels, it is also a sign to us of the goodness of God who so inspired the community of the Church.

And finally came the written Gospels. In the words of the Second Vatican Council: "The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form; others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus." [ibid]

There is a common theme linking all of these stages – the presentation of the Divine Plan for humanity. "The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us: full of grace and truth" [Jn1:14]. It is the story of the Word made flesh that stirs our hearts as we read the gospels; it is the power of the word of God that inspired and still inspires people to heroic sanctity and devotion to the person of Jesus Christ the Lord.

The living vitality of the scriptures in the early Church was promoted and defended through the centuries by people like St Jerome who saw the importance of bringing the scriptures to the people by translating them into the vulgar tongue as it was then – Latin. It was Jerome who powerfully emphasized: "Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

Over the centuries the still-united Christian Church did much to open to the people of God the treasures of the Word of God – partly through art, partly through popular devotion, partly through prayer books and hymns.

In centuries when literacy rates were pitifully low, these attempts to familiarise people with the central events of salvation history were vital in keeping the flame of faith burning. Even today in our sophisticated world, the ancient hymns still move us and inspire us and people try, with varying degrees of success it must be said, to write new hymns that will speak to the hearts of God's people by using the words that God spoke first to us in the scriptures. Central to that, of course, are the Scriptural songs, the songs Divinely inspired, the psalms. Who, even if the most hard-hearted non-scripture reader, cannot sing with confidence and without a book "The Lord's my shepherd" or "All people that on earth do dwell"?

Four centuries ago, as part of that constant desire to fire the hearts of God's people with the power of his word, came the translation of the sacred text which we recall today. It would be easy to see the publication of the King James Version of the Bible as a stumbling block between those of us from a Catholic background and those from the Reformed tradition.

But I prefer to see it as part of what I have described already, part of the on-going appreciation of the whole Christian Church of the importance and centrality of the Word of God to our very existence as Christians.

King James wanted to provide a common Bible for the English-speaking world. The Church wanted scripture to have its rightful place of honour. Hence, he authorized a translation of the Bible into English that came to be known as the Authorized Version. That ambition was both noble and far-sighted. It was an idea and a vision that was both stunningly new and yet as old as the writing of the scriptures themselves: Tell the story of God's plan in the language of God's people. It was exactly what the Evangelists did in common Greek; it was what Jerome did in common Latin and now it was to be done in common English.

The King selected a committee of Greek and Hebrew scholars from the Church of England. These men were "low church" individuals with ties to the Puritans and later the Pilgrims who emigrated to America. They worked from the text of the Greek and Hebrew testaments that had been received or accepted by the reformed tradition.

Their product, the King James Version of the Bible, has been, the classical literary translation for Christians of the reform throughout the English-speaking world.

As a Cardinal of the Roman Church, I do not hesitate to give thanks for the beauty, the power and the language of the King James Bible, I do not hesitate to give thanks for all those people who have been inspired by this translation of the Sacred Texts and who, thus inspired, have given witness to their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Few books – perhaps only the works of Shakespeare come close – have shaped our language so profoundly. In shaping our language, the King James Version has also shaped our society and influenced profoundly our Scottish (and English) ways of thinking.

And while I may have some theological difficulties with the reformers' notion of "*Sola Scriptura*" nevertheless I pay tribute to the Church of Scotland for its staunch commitment over the centuries to preserving the tradition of regular scripture reading as an essential part of the Christian life.

In our own time, the Catholic Church has rediscovered, in many ways, the importance of this nourishment for our individual and community lives.

The Second Vatican Council, which took place in the early 1960s called for an ever more complete presentation of the scriptures to the faithful for their spiritual nourishment.

Now the Catholic Church follows a three-year cycle of biblical readings designed to open up the treasures of even the less-well known books of the Bible to the Christians of our own day.

It is one of the great fruits of ecumenical progress in recent years that such a model is now being used or considered for use in other branches of the Christian Church.

If anyone doubt the commitment of the Catholic Church to this topic, let me quote these words of the Second Vatican Council:

"Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. That is why the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament which is called the Septuagint; and she has always given a place of honor to other Eastern translations and Latin ones, especially the Latin translation known as the Vulgate.

"But since the Word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books.

"And should the opportunity arise and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them." (*Dei Verbum* 22)

And so, today I rejoice with you and venerate with you the scriptures. In venerating the scriptures, of course, we venerate God, whose word the scriptures are.

Pope John Paul II wrote a letter earlier this year reflecting on the Church at the beginning of the new millennium and in this letter he reflected on sacred scripture and he said:

"Ever since the Second Vatican Council underlined the pre-eminent role of the word of God in the life of the Church, great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture and attentive study of it. Scripture has its rightful place of honour in the public prayer of the Church. Individuals and communities now make extensive use of the Bible, and among lay people there are many who devote themselves to Scripture with the valuable help of theological and biblical studies. But it is above all the work of evangelization and catechesis which is drawing new life from attentiveness to the word of God. Dear brothers and sisters, this development needs to be consolidated and deepened, also by making sure that every family has a Bible. It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of lectio divina, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives." [Novo Millennio Ineunte 39]

Here in Burntisland, four centuries ago, a very significant step was taken in building a Christian civilisation which has weathered the storms of the years. But that storm still rages and our society still needs to hear God's word and be challenged by the values of God's Kingdom and the person of Jesus Christ.

Today more than ever we need to rebuild that civilisation of love in the face of waves of secularism, indifferentism, and materialism. To take on that task we must allow the sacred scriptures to be the force that "questions, directs and shapes our lives."

We will find our common inspiration in the words of the Bible.

Let me end, by quoting that passage with which we began, this time in the language of the King James Bible which we commemorate today. May these words remind us of our task in living our life as faithful Christians.

For reading the Bible is not enough. We must live according to the Lord's plan, a plan that is set out very clearly in these words:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

This is the acceptable year of the Lord. It is for us to ensure that the scriptures are not only venerated and read but lived out in our midst.

May this anniversary celebration be an inspiration to each of us to venerate, read and live out God's word.

Amen.

