

Putting words into my mouth – *by Robert Cotton* - 16 December 2011

So as we draw towards the close of 2011, I have been looking back over the various articles of this Bible Journal. I have been wondering: what's missing? Were I to do this again, I would like to have made more connection between the Bible and art, for the Bible has given us a way of looking on to the world. Just as with great art, we are not simply given something to look at – we are led to develop a new way of looking. Take the Bible seriously and you have to regard yourself, and everything under the sun, in a new light. But perhaps it is better to learn about art (and to experience the connection between the Bible and art) by gazing at pictures themselves rather than reading about them. So it may be we can do more of this – but not through the written words of a Journal.

One other thing that is missing is that I had expected to discuss more fully some of the phrases that come to the English language from the Authorized Version. I bought a book by David Crystal about this, titled 'Bogat: the King James Bible and the English Language'. It's fascinating and informative. I can recommend it – at least, I can recommend the first 50 pages, for, after reading those in the first week of January, I have not progressed any further. The author discusses all the phrases that can claim to be part of common speech in English and that come from the Bible. In particular, he analyses how much these phrases came specifically from the Authorized Version (a lot), and how many phrases are thought to be from this translation (but are not).

The first list (from the AV, and not from other translations) includes

how are the mighty fallen
a still small voice
beat their swords into ploughshares
suffer the little children
turn the world upside down.

The second list includes these phrases which all sound biblical but are not (in this exact form) in any translation of the Bible (including the AV)

Adam and Eve
two by two
burning bush
from the cradle to the grave
pride goes before a fall

no peace for the wicked.

This latter list reminds me of the fun Shakespeare has in his play, *Henry V*, in the scene where the common soldiers are talking before the battle of Agincourt. Their language is riddled with phrases that sound biblical, but are mangled. For example, they talk of 'Arthur's bosom' instead of 'Abraham's bosom'. Shakespeare, though writing before the Authorized Version was published, was perhaps getting a dig in against the protestant emphasis on the pure biblical words. One indication that the Bible is important is that people use its words – *but in their own way*. No-one can forbid this or constrain the way language is used.

So there is something wonderful about how the Bible gives us a *common* language. It is important that we have phrases that belong to no-one, but are useable by everyone. I see this in action at Christmas time, when, to use a non-biblical example, crowds sing 'Away in a manger'. Many can do this with their eyes closed, or in a darkened church. By singing together words that are sufficiently familiar that they are burned in our soul (and not merely actively recalled by our brains) we are profoundly connected with others. Charles Wesley knew this as he wrote many hymns to bind the nascent Methodist church together. We have common experiences of spiritual matters, but not everyone can put these into words. So by using well-known phrases, we find a bond with others and have our personal experiences articulated for us.

For me, one of the very powerful phrases that is around at this time of year is that which comes right at the heart of the Prologue of John's Gospel. It says: he gave them...

...power to become children of God.

The second part of that phrase powerfully states a truth that can change the way we see ourselves. If we truly recognise that we are children of God – and that all our fellow human beings are children of God – then certain sorts of racism, sexism, or class attitudes become impossible to adopt. 'Child of God' speaks of an intimacy with God: that we are connected, that we have a home, and that our true resting place is with the one who creates us. It's also a phrase that takes some meaning from the story of the Transfiguration. If God calls Jesus 'my beloved son', and we too are sons and daughters of God, then the glory of the transfigured Christ is potentially ours too. Then, in the Beatitudes recounted in Matthew's gospel, peace makers are called 'children of God'. So layer upon layer of meaning is held by this phrase; the world is different when we see ourselves as children of God.

But the first part of the quotation from John is significant too: Jesus gives us 'power to become'. We are people of potential. So being a child of God is not merely a status I own or achieve, it is something I can grow into, and therefore something that affirms that, as a human being, I am a being with a future, a potential. As St Paul says, "what we are has not yet been revealed". When we label someone, we can more readily dismiss them. When we see our neighbour as someone who has "the power to become a child of God" we have to relate to them in a more positive way.

In Genesis 4, we hear a phrase that is so evocative and succinct that it occurs in all the English translations of the time of the Authorized Version (except Wycliffe's): 'am I my brother's keeper?' The power of the phrase come from articulating the feelings we have in those moments that we want to escape responsibility and connectedness. The power of the Christmas story comes, in part, from being the moment when God clearly says "yes, you are your brother's keeper; and I will show you how to do that".