

## **William Tyndale – *by Mary Alexander***

The King James Bible of 1611 has been so successful, and has become such a part of the Church of England and of English culture, that it is easy to forget that there were earlier translations. The first of the Reformation translations was made nearly ninety years earlier by William Tyndale, a hero who should be better known. He was a tragic hero, not of the Shakespearean type brought down by a flaw in his character, but a good man and a great scholar who dedicated his life to making the Bible accessible in English and who died because of it, betrayed by a worthless fellow, for money.

He was born in about 1494 in Gloucestershire. He went to the University of Oxford, where he disliked the medieval way of studying the Bible in great detail but often ignoring what it meant. Words and phrases would be analysed at great length but to little effect. However, he studied hard and took an MA. He then went to Cambridge, which was being influenced by the continental reformers, particularly Luther, and he may have met other English reformers such as Cranmer. He certainly shared their views that the Roman church was corrupt.

In 1522 Tyndale became tutor to a gentry family back in Gloucestershire. He also travelled about preaching, and upset the higher clergy in the diocese, apparently by his great knowledge of the Bible and his ability to teach radical ideas backed up by quotations. He translated a Latin book by the scholar Erasmus who attacked the hierarchy of the church, and the stifling ideas of the universities, claiming that all that was needed was to study the Bible and live by its teaching. Tyndale fully agreed, but knew that hardly anyone could do this because they could not read the Latin Bible, and many clergy were too ignorant to teach them about it. By 1523 he mentioned for the first time the idea of translating the Bible. He was arguing with a 'learned divine' who claimed that the pope's laws were more important than God's. Tyndale replied furiously 'if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that drives the plough shall know more of the scripture than you do'. He was now in danger of being thought a heretic and moved to London.

The creaking hierarchy of the Roman church could not tolerate any criticism, even though it was clearly living contrary to the teaching of the Bible. The pope's laws, and the traditions built up over centuries, had become more important than God's laws. Refusing to change was more of an automatic reaction than a reasoned position, so that even an apparently reasonable desire to translate the Bible was not tolerated. To Tyndale the need was so great it hardly needed explaining: no-one would query why people needed light to walk in darkness, so why query why they needed the light of the Bible? The Church argued that most people were too ignorant to understand the Bible, so it was better to have it explained to them: but parish priests were not doing this. To an extent they were right – some people did interpret the Bible in peculiar ways, but this was not a reason for preventing everyone from having access to it. Unfortunately for Rome, once people could read the Bible they realised that much of the organisation and teaching of the church was not mentioned in the Bible, and they began to question it.

London was not safe for Tyndale either and he went to Hamburg in 1524, and may have gone to Wittenberg. He translated the Bible using Erasmus's Greek New Testament, the standard Latin Bible (the Vulgate) and Luther's German translation. He worked alone, and yet produced such a wonderful translation that about 85% of the AV is his words. He translated the New Testament on its own to start with.

He then had to find a printer, and went to Cologne in 1525. Although it was ruled by a catholic prince, it had many printers and many trading links, making it easier to ship the books back to England. There were many problems, but the book was printed in 1526, in Worms, in a handy pocket-size and smuggled into England, where it was illegal, but became very popular. At least 18,000 copies were imported in three years. Many were confiscated and burnt, but more circulated secretly.

Tyndale began work on the Old Testament, while moving around Northern Europe to avoid arrest. He ended up in Antwerp, where he could live safely in the English House, run by merchants who also gave him a stipend. But in 1535 he was betrayed by a man he had befriended and arrested by agents of the Emperor Charles V. In his empire there was a death sentence for anyone subscribing to Luther's doctrine of justification by faith, and as Tyndale had said in print that he believed it there was no hope for him. He was sentenced to be burnt at the stake and died on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1536.

Ironically, only three years later Henry VIII was ordering that there should be an English Bible in every church. The problem was that religion was linked to politics. On the continent Lutheran ideas were linked with rebellion, and no ruler could tolerate that. So Bible translation was seen as attacking the state as well as the church, but once Henry broke with Rome, and wanted the support of Lutheran rulers, his attitude changed.

Mary Alexander, January 2011.