

Sermon by Robert Cotton – Choral Evensong 1 October 2011

35 years ago this weekend I went up to Oxford for my first year of studies in Mathematics and Philosophy. I went into the chapel; my college was Merton. It was a fine place for music. It is an awesome building; most of the stained glass is still 13th century. With all that grandeur, perhaps it is not surprising that I did not notice the memorial to Sir Henry Saville. It is a very grand memorial, I remember it now. Saville was a warden of Merton College at the same time as he was Provost of Eton College and in his day he was one of the finest English scholars. His career at Oxford was noteworthy because he founded the professorship of both astronomy and geometry. So there you can see on his memorial 4 figures kneeling rather acronistically in adoration to Henry Saville: Ptolemy because of the astronomy, Euclid for the connection with geometry, Tacitus because of language (not many Christians, so far) - and finally St John Chrysostom: well at least he was Christian. He may not be well known now, but in his day he was regarded as the finest preacher in the church – Chrysostom meaning “golden tongued”.

What the memorial doesn't mention is that Henry Saville was a key participant in the translation of the King James Version of the Bible. This is something that obviously we regard as very significant now, but it was not so then. Nor is it mentioned in the memorial (just round the corner here in Holy Trinity Church) to George Abbot. If you have seen it you will see that he is lying on a bed of skulls: a reminder for all of us of our mortality (maybe with a slightly ironic dig pointing towards the gamekeeper that Abbot shot dead). At the corners of the memorial, the canopy is held up by four columns, each resting on a pile of books because Abbot in his day (and immediately after his death) was renowned for his scholarship and learning. And so the story goes on: in a lovely article written by Jean Wilson for The Times about a month ago, she pointed out that the memorials to all the known translators of the King James Version note their piety, their intelligence, and often their worldly achievements - but not the fact that they translated the King James Version.

None of the translators' memorials mention this except, in a gentle and subtle way, the memorial to Richard Brett, Rector of Quainton in Buckinghamshire. Brett was no great figure; he held no high office but was just a humble parish priest. He was involved because he was a great linguist. Yet he was a parish priest in the pattern best described by George Herbert which indicated that the advancement of the church is best achieved not by personal advancement of the clergy in the world, but by the theological, spiritual and moral education of the people of God. On Brett's memorial there are a number of inscriptions in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and English. This was not done to boast that he had mastered all those languages but to show the journey from the Hebrew scriptures, through the Greek New Testament to its first translation into Latin by St Jerome (because Jerome noted that most people in his day, about 400 AD, couldn't speak either Hebrew or Greek). And that is the same impulse that led to an English translation being needed – so that the people could read the scriptures in their own tongue. So Brett's memorial gently displays the journey that led towards the King James Version.

But there is a humility about this: the humility does not describe Brett himself but is a attribute of the King James Version itself. Although making the translation was historically important (following many centuries of antagonism towards compiling an English translation) – and although it was

important because this translation was commissioned by Royalty - and although it had an important theological purpose (as this was going to be the translation that somehow tried to keep the church together, in spite of all the various strands of reformers and Protestants) - and although it was very soon recognised to be a classic in terms of the quality of its English prose, with language that was regal, majestic, classically resonant - actually what was most important about the King James Version of the Bible was that it was used.

“Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest”. What I am calling the humility of this version is that its accomplishment was that it was used. The quality of the translation was exceptional; but the key significance and accomplishment was that people read it, marked it, learnt it and, by digesting it, knew how to live a better life. Yet as with us human beings, with humility often comes vulnerability. Over the centuries the King James translation has needed to be changed, to be revised again and again so that the original purpose was fulfilled. The process goes on because the purpose of these translations is that people hear clearly and understand God’s word for them.

So yes, we want to affirm the importance of the King James Version and how archetypal it has become in so many ways in our modern world. We want to say it is wonderful literature. And because we want to affirm the importance of the Bible, we will generally use today the New Revised Standard Version - because that is what, I believe, the King James Version tells me to do. This particular translation is a beautiful tool but the essence of what I am saying is conveyed poetically by George Herbert in his words:

The man that looks on glass,
on it may stay his eye
or if he pleaseth, through it pass
and then the heaven espy.

2011 is “The year of the Bible” and in particular we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of the translation of King James Version. In 2011, 2012 and beyond, our task is to use what we have been given and so to spy God’s heaven.