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Bad Language in the Church (II)

We continue with the article, by P. D. James, taken from The Sunday Telegraph, February 14, 1988.

The Bible has certainly one right to be called miraculous: it must be the only work of great literature which was produced by a committee. No book has meant so many different things to so many people, from

those who regard it literally as the word of God governing every aspect of life and conduct, through readers for whom it is merely an interesting collection of myths, old history, sermons and bloodthirsty stories of betrayal and revenge, to those who would seek to suppress it, as men throughout the generations have sought to suppress it, as a dangerous fomenter of dissent and sedition. Men have died for it and killed for it, have taken it into battle, sworn their oaths upon it, recorded their family history on its pages, attempted, however imperfectly, to live according to its precepts. And it has governed our language as well as our conduct.

The words and phrases of the Authorised Version, which our ancestors listened to every Sunday, have passed into common speech. When we talk about escaping "by the skin of our teeth: or "getting the upper

hand" we are quoting Job. If we say that someone is "the apple of our eye" we are echoing the words of Psalm 17 as we echo Proverbs when we talk about "heaping coals of fire" upon someone's head. And how many of us, when we use the expression "salt of the earth", "the left hand not knowing what the right hand does", "shaking the dust of a place from our feet" or "the blind leading the blind", know that we are quoting St. Matthew's Gospel?

Its influence runs like a golden thread through our literature. We recognize its cadences, not only in the works of such writers as Isaac Walton and John Bunyan but in the sonorous and majestic phrases of John Milton, Sir Thomas Browne and Edward Gibbon. We detect its influence in the novels of such different writers as the Bronres and Thackeray. It is difficult to see how anyone can claim seriously to study English literature or, indeed, hope to understand much of Western literature, painting or music without some knowledge of the Authorised

Version of the Bible.

And how inadequate is the New English Bible which in so many churches is now read in place of the King James Version! This, too, is the work of a committee, as the 1970 Preface makes plain. The revisers were setting out to make a translation of the Bible in the language of the present day "inasmuch as the language of the Authorised Version, already archaic when it was made, had now become even more definitely archaic and less generally understood". The language may have been archaic at the time, but King James's committee of 47 may have been wise enough to know that what is archaic can sometimes be timeless. One has only to look at what has been done to familiar passages to appreciate what we have lost.

Compare, for example, the opening of St. John's Gospel. Here is the Authorised Version:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

And in the New English Bible:

When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark. And the darkness has never mastered it.

This is not a passage which will ever be easy to understand, whatever the language. St John is attempting to explain the great mystery of the Incarnation. But it is no less difficult in its new version, merely stripped of its beauty and of much of that potent and subtle power which accrues to words rendered holy after centuries of familiar use. There is hardly a chapter in which one doesn't mourn the loss of an old felicity. In the 19th chapter of the first book of Kings where we read that God wasn't in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but that after the fire came "a still, small voice", the New English Bible substitutes "a low murmuring sound". For me this is the noise of a vacuum cleaner. Apart from this unfortunate connotation, the word "sound" is redundant.

And in the beloved 23rd Psalm the words "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" have been replaced by "Even though I walk through a valley as dark as death". That may be more conscientiously accurate rendering of the original, but is its meaning really so different that we have to lose the familiar well-loved words?

And consider this familiar text from one of the Bible's best known stories, the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the 15th Chapter of St Luke's Gospel:

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

Here the rising vowel of the third word contrasts with the sombre vowels and consonants at the end, just one example of that perfect marriage of sound and meaning which we find on every page of the Authorised Version. The New English Bible reads:

I will set off and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son.

This may be a more accurate translation, although the difference is hardly significant, but it is difficult to see how it helps our understanding of the Parable, nor is it contemporary speech.

Some of us can't help suspecting that the neglect of the Authorised Version of the Bible and Book of Common Prayer is part of that denigration of our language and our culture which in some quarters has become so fashionable. I am one of that fortunate generation who, although most of us left school at 16 or earlier, were grounded in a knowledge and love of our literature of which the Bible was regarded as the single most important book of English prose.

I doubt whether the majority of our children today ever hear the Authorised Version of the Bible read in school. It is probably too much to hope that it will ever become part of the English syllabus even if it still holds a tenuous place in religious education. May we hope, therefore, that at least it will continue to be read in our churches so that the thousands of worshippers who love and revere the Authorised Version may not be lastingly deprived of the chance of listening to that still small voice?

P. D. James

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