

On the life and work of William Tyndale *

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Thank you very much for inviting me here today to your beautiful Church. I am greatly honoured to speak about William Tyndale who is one of the most distinguished old members of my College.

He was born 500 years ago in Gloucestershire near Slimbridge, just where the Cotswolds descend into the valley of the Severn. At the age of 12 he went to Oxford to study at Magdalen Hall, which is one of the predecessors of Hertford College, and stayed there 11 years until he was 23. He studied languages, literature, philosophy and theology, becoming a great scholar, and eventually taking holy orders. Then he may have gone to Cambridge for a while to study under Erasmus, before returning to Gloucestershire at the age of 27, where he worked at Little Sodbury Manor for two years as priest and tutor. There he found himself clashing with the local clergy: for example one day he was arguing with a learned man who said to him:

"We were better be without God's law than the pope's."

Tyndale was appalled and made his famous reply:

"I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost".

From then on he knew that his life's vocation was to translate the bible from the original Greek of the New Testament and the original Hebrew of the Old Testament into everyday English that everyone could understand. Up to that time it had only been translated indirectly through the Latin, and consequently was in many places obscure and incomprehensible. Tyndale realised that both Greek and Hebrew are much closer to English than to Latin.

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In those days if you wanted to translate the scriptures it was necessary to obtain a licence from a Bishop, and so Tyndale approached the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, but alas the latter refused to give him one. Eventually Tyndale realised that the only place he was going to be able to publish an English translation was on the continent, where Luther had already paved the way with his German Bible. So at the age of 30 he went to Germany. Two years later in 1526 at Worms he published the first edition of his New Testament. He printed some 6,000 copies which he smuggled back into England in bales of wool. When the Bishop of London heard about it he bought up as many as he could get hold of and ceremoniously burnt the lot outside St. Paul's Cathedral. To-day there survives only one complete copy, which the British Library bought recently for a million pounds.

At the time Tyndale was quite shocked, but the profits he had made from successfully selling out the first edition to the Bishop enabled him to bring out a second edition in 1534, and to begin publishing the Old Testament.

Meanwhile the English branded him as a heretic, and had him arrested in Antwerp and imprisoned in the castle of Vilvoorde outside Brussels. A year later at the age of 42 on 6 October 1536 he was martyred: he was strangled and burnt at the stake in front of a special audience of church dignitaries. His last words were "Lord, open the King of England's eyes". And sure enough his prayer was answered: a year later King Henry VIII licensed a new bible called Mathew's Bible which contained all Tyndale's translations unaltered. And 75 years later in 1611 King James I licensed the Authorised Version which was 90% pure Tyndale. The Committee who wrote the Authorised Version, however, refused to acknowledge him because he was still supposed to be a heretic, and so this became the greatest piece of plagiarism in history.

Now why is Tyndale's translation so good? I would like to draw attention to five qualities: his creativity, the nobility of his language, his accuracy, his rhythms, and his freshness.

By his creativity I mean he has created phrases that have become household sayings, and part of the very tapestry of our everyday language. By the nobility of his language I mean that many of these phrases are memorable, and appeal as much to our emotions and our instincts as to our minds - or, as David Daniell says, it is the language that people speak at slightly heightened moments. Tyndale's influence upon the English language has been as profound as Shakespeare's. Indeed Shakespeare was born only 28 years after Tyndale's death, and was himself most likely to have been brought up on the Geneva Bible which contained all of Tyndale's translations unaltered.

To illustrate the creativity and nobility, let me read you a few familiar Tyndale phrases. I have picked them at random, and will read them all together one after another.

- And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.
- And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.
- In Him we live and move and have our being.
- Where two or three are gathered together in my name
- Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.
- Until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts....
- The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.
- The scales fell from his eyes.
- Am I my brother's keeper?
- The salt of the earth.
- The signs of the times.
- The powers that be.
- A law unto themselves.
- The patience of Job.
- The burden and heat of the day.
- Eat, drink and be merry.
- Let not your hearts be troubled.

So much for the flavour of Tyndale's creativity and the nobility of his language. Let me now give an example of his accuracy. Take that last phrase, which comes from St. John's Gospel at the beginning of Chapter 14. The context is the last supper: Jesus has just told his disciples that he is going to be betrayed, and will have to go where they cannot follow. They are dumbfounded, and foresee the whole of their world collapsing, and so Jesus seeks to reassure them:

"Let not your hearts be troubled."

Compare this with a modern translation such as the popular Good News Bible, published in 1976, which says:

"Do not be worried and upset."

This is what you say to someone who has just spilt the milk to cheer them up; but the whole spiritual quality has been lost. Worse still is the inaccuracy. Let us go back to the original Greek:

Μὴ παραστέςθω ὑμῶν ἡ καρδία·

This is pronounced

"may tarassestho hoomone hay cardia".

The translation word for word is as follows;

Μὴ (may) means "not".

παραστέςθω (tarassestho) is the third person passive imperative of the verb to disturb or to trouble, and so it means "let be troubled".

Μὴ παραστέςθω therefore means "let not be troubled".

ὑμῶν (hoomone) means "your" (in the plural).

ἡ καρδία· (hay cardia) means "the heart".

ὑμῶν ἡ καρδία· therefore means "your hearts" (in the plural).

The complete literal translation is therefore:

"Let not be troubled your hearts".

Finally we put the subject before the verb, as is usual in English:

"Let not your hearts be troubled".

Tyndale is not only spiritually moving, but also precisely accurate.

Another example of Tyndale's accuracy is his treatment of that beautiful enigmatic poetic opening of St. John that Sir Geoffrey Ellerton read so eloquently for us in the third lesson. I am sure you are all familiar with the first verse in the Authorised Version.

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

The original Greek is:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν,
καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

This is pronounced:

"en archay ayn ho logos, ky ho logos ayn pros ton theon,
ky theos ayn ho logos".

The translation word for word is as follows:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ (en archay) means "in the beginning".

ἦν (ayn) means "was".

ὁ (ho), and its accusative form τὸν (ton), mean "the".

λόγος (logos) means "word".

καὶ (ky) means "and".

πρὸς (pros) means "with" or "towards" or "from".

Θεὸς (theos), and its accusative form Θεόν (theon), mean "god".

However, the translation of logos into "word" is only its most trivial meaning. Logos also means logic, rationality and wisdom. To the ancient Greeks its meaning was even richer: logos meant the natural world, the laws of nature, man's perception of them, and man's expression of them. So to an ancient Greek the verse would have meant:

"In the beginning was the natural world, and the laws of nature
came from god, and god was nature."

To the ancient Jews logos meant something different but equally important: logos meant the wisdom of God before it was revealed as the word of God in the books of the Old Testament. Meanwhile to the early Christians logos meant the wisdom of God before it was born as Jesus. That is the meaning of "the word was made flesh". In renaissance paintings of the annunciation you can often see both meanings at once because the virgin generally holds a bible (which is logos in the Jewish sense) while she is being told that she is with child (which is logos in the Christian sense).

You can just imagine Tyndale sitting at his desk scratching his head and saying to himself how on earth am I going to translate that word logos? Eventually he settles for "that word" which is not a bad solution:

"In the begynnynge was that worde/and that worde was with god: and god was thatt worde".

Having resolved the logos problem he is then very accurate, in fact more accurate than the subsequent Authorised Version. For example the Committee who wrote the Authorised Version reversed the word order of the third phrase, introducing a substantial theological change of meaning. Evidently they thought it was sacrilegious to give God second billing to logos. Next, when Tyndale came to the creation in verse 3, he accurately translated the Greek as:

"All thynges were made by it" (i.e. by logos)

whereas the Authorised Version corrects this apparent sacrilege to:

"All things were made by him" (i.e. by God).

I like the way Tyndale jolts us into going back to the original Greek.

Let me now give an example of Tyndale's rhythms. In our first lesson Eve saw the tree in the midst of the Garden of Eden as:

"a pleasant tree for to make wise".

The first time you read this it seems a bit of a tongue-twister. But if you ask yourself "what was the tree for?" the answer is "to make wise", so Tyndale is being very precise: "a tree for to make wise". You may then ask what sort of wisdom? From what follows it clearly includes sexual awareness, and Tyndale cleverly anticipates this by his use of the word "lusty" (which no other translation uses). Indeed some ripe fruits can look very lusty, as modern film-makers have noticed. So Tyndale describes the tree as

"lusty to look at".

But he crosses this out and writes

"lusty to the eyes"

because he wants to make "eyes" rhyme with "wise". Then he refines it to

"lusty unto the eyes"

because he wants it to scan as well as to rhyme. At last he has achieved the rhythm that he wants:

ti dada/tititi da/titi datida/tittiti da

"and lusty/unto the eyes/ and a pleasant tree/ for to make wise".

It is clear that Tyndale wrote his Bible to be read out aloud, whether it be in public or whether it be in private alone by yourself.

Finally I want to talk about Tyndale's freshness: he is today as refreshing and clear, as direct and readable, and as understandable as any modern translation. I have been reading the lesson from him in our College Chapel every week for the last five years and I find him continually rewarding.

A nice example is the serpent's temptation of Eve, which is much subtler than in other translations. The serpent starts off by being deceptively polite "Ah Sir", and then immediately undermines God's authority by referring to him as "that god", implying that he is just one of many possible gods, and in fact a rather silly god for having forbidden the eating of fruit. Eve innocently falls into the trap and assures the serpent that it is only the tree in the midst of the garden that is lethal. This gives the serpent the opportunity to ridicule God's word: "What nonsense, you don't want to believe all that rubbish", which Tyndale manages to capture in the single word "tush". The serpent says "tush ye shall not die" and goes on to explain God's ulterior motive.

By contrast the dialogue in the Authorised Version is much weaker. Firstly the Committee felt it was sacrilegious to say "that god" because there is only one God, and so the word "that" had to be deleted. Secondly they felt it was sacrilegious to ridicule God's word, and so "tush" had to be deleted. The serpent is left saying rather unconvincingly "ye shall not surely die?", thus placing considerably more of the responsibility for the Fall upon Eve. By comparison Tyndale's serpent is much more cunning, and Tyndale's Eve is much more innocent.

Another example of Tyndale's freshness is his technique for telling stories with very short sentences strung together with repeated use of the word "and". This comes directly from the original, namely the repeated use of the Hebrew word ו (pronounced vuv) in the Old Testament and the Greek word και (ky) in the New Testament. I doubt if any schoolteachers of today would allow their pupils to string so many "ands" together, but in Tyndale it makes for vivid story-telling and impelling reading.

For example Eve saw that it was a pleasant tree for to make wise.

And took of the fruit of it
 and ate,
 and gave unto her husband also with her,
 and he ate.
 And the eyes of both of them were opened.

Similarly when Jesus was on the road to Emaus.

And he went in to tarry with them.
 And it came to pass as he sat at meat with them he took bread
 and blessed it
 and brake it
 and gave it unto them.
 And their eyes were opened.
 And they knew him.
 And he vanished out of their sight
 and they said between themselves:
 did not our hearts burn within us?

The first lesson: Genesis, Chapter 3, verses 1-15*

But the serpent was subtler than all the beasts of the field which the Lord God had made, and said unto the woman. Ah sir, that God hath said, ye shall not eat of all manner trees in the garden. And the woman said unto the serpent, of the fruit of the trees in the garden we may eat, but of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden (said God) see that ye eat not, and see that ye touch it not: lest ye die.

Then said the serpent unto the woman: tush ye shall not die: But God doth know, that whensoever ye should eat of it, your eyes should be opened and ye should be as God and know both good and evil. And the woman saw that it was a good tree to eat of and lusty unto the eyes and a pleasant tree for to make wise. And took of the fruit of it and ate, and gave unto her husband also with her, and he ate. And the eyes of both of them were opened, that they understood how that they were naked. Then they sewed fig leaves together and made them aprons.

And they heard the voice of the Lord God as he walked in the garden in the cool of the day. And Adam hid himself and his wife also from the face of the Lord God, among the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called Adam and said unto him where art thou? And he answered: Thy voice I heard in the garden, but I was afraid because I was naked, and therefore hid myself. And he said: who told thee that thou wast naked? hast thou eaten of the tree, of which I bade thee that thou shouldest not eat? And Adam answered: The woman which thou gavest to bear me company, she took me of the tree, and I ate. And the Lord God said unto the woman: wherefore didest thou so? And the woman answered, the serpent deceived me and I ate.

And the Lord God said unto the serpent: because thou hast so done most cursed be thou of all cattle and of all beasts of the field: upon thy belly shalt thou go: and earth shalt thou eat all days of thy life. Moreover I will put hatred between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. And that seed shall tread thee on the head, and thou shalt tread it on the heel.

* From Tyndale's: Old Testament, 1530.
Modern-spelling edition by David Daniell,
Yale University Press 1991.

**The second lesson:
The Gospel of St. Luke, Chapter 24, verses 13-32***

And beholde / two of them went that same daye to a toune / whych was from Jerusalem about thre score forlonges / called Emaus. and they talked togedder of all thinges which had happened / And it chaused / as they commened togedder / and reasoned / that Jesus hym silfe drue neare / and went with them. But their eyes were holden / that they coulde nott knowe hym. And he sayde vnto them: What maner of comunicacions are these that ye have one to another as ye walke / and are sadde. And the one off them named Cleophas / answered / and sayd vnto hym: Arte thou only a straunger in Jerusalem / and haste nott knowen the thinges which have chaused therin in these dayes? To whom he sayd: what thynges? And they sayd vnto hym: of Jesus of Nazareth which was a prophet / myghty in dede / and worde / before God / and all the people. And howe the hie prestes / and oure ruelers delivered hym to be condempned to deeth: and have crucified hym. we trusted that it shulde have bene he that shulde have delivered Israhell. And as touchynge all these thynges / to daye is even the thyrd daye / that they were done.

Ye and certayne wemen alsoo of oure company made vs astonyed / whych cam erly vnto the sepulcre / and founde nott his boddy. And cam sayinge / that they had sene visions off angels which sayde that he was alive. And certayne of them which were with vs / went their waye to the sepulcre / and founde ytt even soo as the wemen had sayde: but hym they sawe nott.

And he sayde vnto them: O foles / and slowe of herte to beleve all that the prophetes have spoken. Ought not Christ to have suffered these thinges / and to enter into his glory? And he began at Moses / and at all the prophetes / and interpreted vnto them / in all scriptures which were written of him. And they drue neye vnto the toune which they went to. And he made / as though he wolde have gone further. And they constrained hym / sayinge: Abyde with vs for it draweth tawardes nyght / and the daye is farre passed. And he went in to tary with them.

And it cam to passe as he sate att meate wyth them / he toke breed and blessed yt / and brake ytt and gave it vnto them. And their eyes were opened. And they knewe hym. And he vannished out of their syght / and they sayde betwene them selves: did not oure hertes burne wyth in vs / whyll he talked with vs by the waye / and opened to vs the scriptures?

* From Tyndale's: New Testament, 1526
Reprinted 1836, by Samuel Bagster, London

The
Gospell off S. Jhon.

The fyrst Chapter.



In the begynnyng was that worde / and that worde was with god : and god was that worde. The same was in the begynnyng wyth god. All thynges were made by it / and with out it / was made noo thinge : that made was. In it was lyfe / And lyfe was the light of men / And the light shyneth in darcknes / and darcknes comprehended it not.

There was a man sent from god / whose name was Jhon. The same cam as a witnes / to beare witnes of the light / that all men through him myght beleve. He was nott that light : but to beare witnes of the light. That was a true light / which lighteneth all men that come into the worlde. He was in the worlde / and the worlde by him was made : and the worlde knewe hym not.

He cam into his awne / and his receaved him not. vnto as meny as receaved him / gave he power to be the sonnes of god : in that they beleved on his name : which were borne not of bloude nor of the will of the flesshe / nor yet of the will of men : but of god.

And that worde was made flesshe / and dwelt amonge vs / and we sawe the glory off yt / as the glory off the only begotten sonne off the father / which worde was full of grace / and verite.

* From Tyndale's: New Testament, 1526
Reprinted 1836, by Samuel Bagster, London