

## PEOPLE OF THE BOOK



Sermon 865

June 18, 2014

950th Week as Priest

776th Week at St Dunstan's

41st Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

There are men and women of the faith to whom we owe a great debt. The apostles, certainly, and the church fathers and mothers of the early centuries of Christianity. But the movers and shakers of the English Reformation of the Sixteenth Century—people like Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, and Queen Elizabeth I—are individuals who truly shaped the Church of England, the worldwide Anglican Communion, and ultimately, The Episcopal Church USA.

The English Reformation was driven by a particular need for worship to be “understandeth of the people.” And I am not referring to divorce or the need for a male heir to the throne. Politics were no doubt a major aspect of the troubles, but I must tell you that politics were a

challenge to Saint Paul in his day, and church politics are still a burden to bear in our own times.

No, the major problem, the stumbling block, was the fact that the liturgy and the scriptures were in a language not understood by the people. You could read the Bible in Latin, or Greek—if you were one of a small minority of people who could read at all—and you could hear the Mass in Latin. But these were languages completely unknown to the common citizens of England.

In the mid-Fifteenth Century, John Wycliffe made an English translation in manuscript before the invention of the printing press, but it was unavailable and even suppressed by the Crown.

The English Bible came through the work of William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale, who published their able translations of the New Testament and the Psalms on the Guttenberg Press in the King's English. But even they were made enemies of the state for their noble work.

Tyndale, an English Lutheran executed in Belgium in 1536 by agents of Henry VIII, prayed at his death “that the King of England's eyes would be opened.” Two years later, the same tyrant authorized the Great Bible for the

Church in England—which was, in large measure, the fine work of William Tyndale. Coverdale was an understudy of Tyndale’s, who went on to complete much of his master’s work and is known as the author of the Psalm settings used in the original and subsequent revisions of the Book of Common Prayer.

The King James Bible, the “most widely printed book in existence,” quietly marked its four hundredth anniversary in 2011. A stately celebration was held at Westminster Abbey that year, with Her Majesty the Queen in attendance. The Most Rev. and Rt. Hon. Dr. Rowan D. Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury and President of the Anglican Communion, praised the work of the six companies of the King’s Translators in his sermon, citing,

*the absolute seriousness with which (the Translators) sought to find in our language words that would pass on to us hearers and readers in the English tongue the almost unbearable weight of divine intelligence and love pressing down on those who first encountered it and tried to embody it in writing.*

Called “the book that changed the world,” the King James Bible (also known as the *Authorized Version*) was never officially authorized by Parliament. And the last version of the English Book of Common Prayer was approved by Parliament in 1662.

In the Sixteenth Century, it was Thomas Cranmer himself who took on the task of compiling and editing the first Book of Common Prayer. He used several sources in his great work—including Coverdale’s Psalms and Tyndale’s wonderful style—and in 1549 the “new” Prayer Book was published and began to be used in the parish churches in place of the Latin missal.

Nothing in the church seems to happen smoothly and without a hitch, and that has certainly been the case with the Book of Common Prayer and all of its iterations and translations. But the amazing thing is how similar all of these versions of the Prayer Book bear such a strong resemblance and sound to the original.

I believe the reason for the Prayer Book’s durability and endurance is found in the strength of the language itself. Harold Bloom, a contemporary literary critic, says

The King James Bible achieved (or adopted from Tyndale) a cadence, a beauty, and a turn of phrase not found before in any language.

The King James Bible is for Bloom an “inexplicable wonder.” He is frankly surprised that such a “rather undistinguished group of writers” could have produced “a magnificence almost to rival Shakespeare’s.” The King James Bible itself has gone through many revisions and translations—the Revised Standard Version in 1952, the New Revised Standard Version in 1979, and a jillion others besides. Still, as my plumber said years ago, and many would agree today, “If it ain’t the King James, it ain’t the Bible.”

This is almost equally true of the Book of Common Prayer, which after all is about eighty-percent Biblical in content. The American Prayer Book has gone through quite a few editions of its own—1789, 1896, 1928, and 1979. There are Prayer Books for South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and many other countries and members of the Communion.

To quote one of Miles Coverdale’s magnificent psalms, “Indeed we have a goodly heritage.” We are people of the Book—and here I mean Bible *and* Prayer Book—

both written in a language, vocabulary, and style created particularly, sometimes peculiarly, for their purposes.