

Sermon by Adele Davidson December 4th, 2011

[As many of you know I traveled to the University of York in England last summer for an academic conference celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible. It was wonderful to participate in a tiny way in one of the many events held this year to mark that anniversary, and it's great to have the opportunity to think about that translation with you today.]

"Speak ye comfortably"

December 4, 2011

If you're like me you hear in the reading today, in the heart's ear, the music of Handel's Messiah, its majestic melodies inspired by passages that the librettist, Charles Jennens, took virtually verbatim from the King James Bible: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God." As we turn to the King James Bible for our readings this Advent, we celebrate the wonder of God's word, and the power of its translators to speak comfortably to us, to speak *com fortis*, with fortitude or strength. "Lift up thy voice with strength," Isaiah urges us. Today the latches of our sandals may be made of Velcro, but whether read by candlelight, coal-oil lamp, or Kindle Fire, the King James Bible, the most published work in the English language, remains for us a living, breathing book, shared throughout the ages in creative increase, inspiring Donne and Handel, passing from believer to believer and heart to heart, in ecstasy and in extremis, in panic, prayer, and peace, comforting and blessing us. Translation is in word origin a "carrying over," and it is good to consider how the words of the King James Bible, four centuries on, carry over into our own lives. How do these words translate us?

Like Handel and Donne [Note: A poem of Donne's was read in place of the psalm today], we continue to find inspiration in this most famous of translations: in one recent series, the Pocket Canon editions, individual books of the King James Bible are published separately: the rock star and philanthropist Bono introduces the Psalms; the Dalai Lama, some of the epistles; and the introduction to Genesis in the U. S. edition is written by E. L. Doctorow, who as a Jewish student at Kenyon, working with the poet John Crowe Ransom, was required to attend chapel in this very building. With a hand on the King James Bible, President Obama, like George Washington, took the oath of office: Obama used Abraham Lincoln's bible, whose cadences and language Lincoln drew upon for majestic effect in his own writing, writing that shaped the identity of this nation. Martin Luther King turned to the King James Bible when he cried out, with Isaiah, "I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." As King knew, the words of comfort strengthen us to serve.

I grew up in a part of the country, where they say people sometimes claim, it ain't the bible if it ain't the bible that King James wrote. King James's role, of course, was to convene a committee of translators, some fifty-four of the best biblical scholars, all incredibly learned, from Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster Abbey. Lancelot Andrewes, the Dean of Westminster who oversaw much of the work, knew fifteen languages. These scholars studied language as if their lives, their eternal lives, depended on it. They staked their futures on their faith that "the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever." The translators were men on a mission: not to build the King James Word Ride for some Antiquarian Theme Park in the future, but to make straight in the deserts of our hearts a highway to our God. Mark echoes these lines from Isaiah as he begins his gospel: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The translators smoothed out the rough and crooked spots in the terrain of translation to supply a pathway to peace. In Isaiah the lifting of valleys and the toppling of hills is not a tale of environmental degradation. Rather, the rough and risky places, the obstacles to salvation, will be evened out and made straight: there is urgency for the approach of the divine. In October 2010 an estimated one billion people—including some of us—watched live as the Chilean miners were rescued from darkness and brought into freedom and light. Thousands of people worked tirelessly to make as straight a path as possible for their release. Now in Advent we are seeking, and God is seeking for us, to prepare a spiritual rescue, a coming of Light into our darkness: "I will not leave you comfortless," the Savior promises in John's gospel, "I will come to you." The Words of promise rush cascading down the centuries as streams of living water, wellsprings of life and light, and we remember that the words *day* and *deus*, or *deity*, have the same word origin in the Indo-European word for light. As the poet George Herbert says of the bible—he was about the age of our College students when the King James Version was published—"this book of stars lights to eternal bliss."

The poetry of the King James Bible is language under a spell, a good spell, the god spell of the gospel. Poetry, says Robert Frost, is "the speaking voice somehow entangled in the words." The King James translators met in groups and weighed their phrases aloud, on the tongue, heightening the intensity of the language. Words "speak comfortably" to us because the power put into them is the skill of the wordsmith, the maker. The beauty of a well-chosen word gives holy moments of aesthetic insight. The word origin of the word "aesthetic" is "something perceptible to the senses," felt in both body and soul: the opposite of an aesthetic experience is an anesthetic experience, something we cannot feel. T. S. Eliot defines poetry as "the creation of a sensuous embodiment...it is the making the word flesh." The translators wrote with feeling, making the Word flesh for us. The translators revered the Word as a tangible Person, the ultimate word origin—"In the beginning was the Word"—and the ultimate Creator: "without Him was not anything made that was made."

In celebrating the divine word, John Donne meditates on translation, saying “All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language.” Donne praises translations of the psalms and finds that their beauty of holiness anticipates the sacred song that will arise on our lips in the moment when we see God face to face:

And, till we come th' extemporal song to sing
—Learn'd the first hour that we see the King,
Who hath translated those translators—may
These their sweet learned labours all the way
Be as our tuning, that when hence we part,
We may fall in with them, and sing our part!

We celebrate this Advent the “sweet learned labors” of the bible translators. We celebrate in Advent the preparation of tuning our instrument, our song, for the eternal moment of encounter and fulfillment, when, beyond the destiny of death, all life shall pass into life, now and in time to come, through the birth of one tiny infant: the Logos fills the cosmos. It seems to me that I can almost hear Isaiah and the ancient translators, and the seekers they inspired, singing to us in the Choir of Saints, filling us with the light of God—Listen: can we hear and share the timeless tidings of comfort, love, and joy? [Note: at this point Professor Jonathan Tazewell, the cantor of Harcourt Parish, sang the following verse from Handel’s Messiah:]
“Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God.”