

Prime Minister's King James Bible Speech

Friday 16 December 2011

Commemorating the version's 400th anniversary



Prime Minister:

It's great to be here and to have this opportunity to come together today to mark the end of this very special 400th anniversary year for the King James Bible.

I know there are some who will question why I am giving this speech.

And if they happen to know that I'm setting out my views today in a former home of the current Archbishop of Canterbury...

...and in front of many great theologians and church leaders...

...they really will think I have entered the lions' den.

But I am proud to stand here and celebrate the achievements of the King James Bible.

Not as some great Christian on a mission to convert the world.

But because, as Prime Minister, it is right to recognise the impact of a translation that is, I believe, one of this country's greatest achievements.

The Bible is a book that has not just shaped our country, but shaped the world.

And with 3 Bibles sold or given away every second...

...a book that is not just important in understanding our past, but which will continue to have a profound impact in shaping our collective future.

In making this speech I claim no religious authority whatsoever.

I am a committed – but I have to say vaguely practising – Church of England Christian, who will stand up for the values and principles of my faith...

...but who is full of doubts and, like many, constantly grappling with the difficult questions when it comes to some of the big theological issues.

But what I do believe is this.

The King James Bible is as relevant today as at any point in its 400 year history.

And none of us should be frightened of recognising this.

Why?

Put simply, three reasons.

First, the King James Bible has bequeathed a body of language that permeates every aspect of our culture and heritage...

...from everyday phrases to our greatest works of literature, music and art.

We live and breathe the language of the King James Bible, sometimes without even realising it.

And it is right that we should acknowledge this – particularly in this anniversary year.

Second, just as our language and culture is steeped in the Bible, so too is our politics.

From human rights and equality to our constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy...

...from the role of the church in the first forms of welfare provision, to the many modern day faith-led social action projects...

...the Bible has been a spur to action for people of faith throughout history, and it remains so today.

Third, we are a Christian country.

And we should not be afraid to say so.

Let me be clear: I am not in any way saying that to have another faith – or no faith – is somehow wrong.

I know and fully respect that many people in this country do not have a religion.

And I am also incredibly proud that Britain is home to many different faith communities, who do so much to make our country stronger.

But what I am saying is that the Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals which make Britain what it is today.

Values and morals we should actively stand up and defend.

The alternative of moral neutrality should not be an option.

You can't fight something with nothing.

Because if we don't stand for something, we can't stand against anything.

Let me take each of these points in turn.

First, language and culture.

Powerful language is incredibly evocative.

It crystallises profound, sometimes complex, thoughts and suggests a depth of meaning far beyond the words on the page...

...giving us something to share, to cherish, to celebrate.

Part of the glue that can help to bind us together.

Along with Shakespeare, the King James Bible is a high point of the English language...

...creating arresting phrases that move, challenge and inspire.

One of my favourites is the line "For now we see through a glass, darkly."

It is a brilliant summation of the profound sense that there is more to life, that we are imperfect, that we get things wrong, that we should strive to see beyond our own perspective.

The key word is darkly – profoundly loaded, with many shades of meaning.

I feel the power is lost in some more literal translations.

The New International Version says: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror"

The Good News Bible: "What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror"

They feel not just a bit less special but dry and cold, and don't quite have the same magic and meaning.

Like Shakespeare, the King James translation dates from a period when the written word was intended to be read aloud.

And this helps to give it a poetic power and sheer resonance that in my view is not matched by any subsequent translation.

It has also contributed immensely to the spread of spoken English around the world.

Indeed, the language of the King James Bible is very much alive today.

I've already mentioned the lions' den.

Just think about some of the other things we all say.

Phrases like strength to strength...

...how the mighty are fallen...

...the skin of my teeth...

...the salt of the earth.

... nothing new under the sun.

According to one recent study there are 257 of these phrases and idioms that come from the Bible.

These phrases are all around us...

...from court cases to TV sitcoms...

...and from recipe books to pop music lyrics.

Of course, there is a healthy debate about the extent to which it was the King James version that originated the many phrases in our language today.

And it's right to recognise the impact of earlier versions like Tyndale, Wycliffe, Douai-Rheims, the Bishops and Geneva Bibles too.

The King James Bible does exactly that...

...setting out with the stated aim of making a good translation better, or out of many good ones, to make "one principall good one"

But what is clear is that the King James version gave the Bible's many expressions a much more widespread public presence.

Much of that dissemination has come through our literature, through the great speeches we remember and the art and music we still enjoy today.

From Milton to Morrison...

...and Coleridge to Cormac McCarthy...

...the Bible supports the plot, context, language and sometimes even the characters in some of our greatest literature.

Tennyson makes over 400 Biblical references in his poems.

...and makes allusions to 42 different books of the Bible.

The Bible has infused some of the greatest speeches...

...from Martin Luther King's dream that Isaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled and that one day "every valley shall be exalted..."

...to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address which employed not just Biblical words but cadence and rhythms borrowed from the King James Bible as well.

When Lincoln said that his forefathers "brought forth" a new nation, he was imitating the way in which the Bible announced the birth of Jesus.

The Bible also runs through our art.

From Giotto to El Greco...

...and Michelangelo to Stanley Spencer.

The paintings in Sandham Memorial Chapel in Berkshire are some of my favourite works of art.

Those who died in Salonika rising to heaven is religious art in the modern age and, in my view, as powerful as some of what has come before.

And the Bible runs through our music too.

From the great oratorios like J S Bach's Matthew and John Passions and Handel's Messiah...

...to the wealth of music written across the ages for mass and evensong in great cathedrals like this one.

The Biblical settings of composers from Tallis to Taverner are regularly celebrated here in this great cathedral...

...and will sustain our great British tradition of choral music for generations to come.

It's impossible to do justice in a short speech to the full scale of the cultural impact of the King James Bible.

But what is clear is that four hundred years on, this book is still absolutely pivotal to our language and culture.

And that's one very good reason for us all to recognise it today.

A second reason is this.

Just as our language and culture is steeped in the Bible, so too is our politics.

The Bible runs through our political history in a way that is often not properly recognised.

The history and existence of a constitutional monarchy owes much to a Bible in which Kings were anointed and sanctified with the authority of God...

...and in which there was a clear emphasis on the respect for Royal Power and the need to maintain political order.

Jesus said: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

And yet at the same time, the Judeo-Christian roots of the Bible also provide the foundations for protest and for the evolution of our freedom and democracy.

The Torah placed the first limits on Royal Power.

And the knowledge that God created man in his own image was, if you like, a game changer for the cause of human dignity and equality.

In the ancient world this equity was inconceivable.

In Athens for example, full and equal rights were the preserve of adult, free born men.

But when each and every individual is related to a power above all of us...

...and when every human being is of equal and infinite importance, created in the very image of God...

...we get the irrepressible foundation for equality and human rights...

...a foundation that has seen the Bible at the forefront of the emergence of democracy, the abolition of slavery...

...and the emancipation of women – even if not every church has always got the point!

Crucially the translation of the Bible into English made all this accessible to many who had previously been unable to comprehend the Latin versions.

And this created an unrelenting desire for change.

The Putney debates in the Church of St Mary the Virgin in 1647 saw the first call for One Man, One vote...

...and the demand that authority be invested in the House of Commons rather than the King.

Reading the Bible in English gave people equality with each other through God.

And this led them to seek equality with each other through government.

In a similar way, the Bible provides a defining influence on the formation of the first welfare state.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says that whatever people have done "unto one of the least of these my brethren"...

... they have done unto him.

Just as in the past it was the influence of the church that enabled hospitals to be built, charities created, the hungry fed, the sick nursed and the poor given shelter...

...so today faith based groups are at the heart of modern social action.

Organisations like the Church Urban Fund which has supported over 5,000 faith based projects in England's poorest communities...

...including the Near Neighbours Programme which Eric Pickles helped to launch last month.

And St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London's Bishopsgate...

...a building once destroyed by an IRA bomb...

...but now a centre where people divided by conflict, culture or religion can meet and listen to each other's perspective.

In total, there are almost 30 thousand faith based charities in this country...

...not to mention the thousands of people who step forward as individuals, as families, as communities, as organisations and yes, as churches....

...and do extraordinary things to help build a bigger, richer, stronger, more prosperous and more generous society.

And when it comes to the great humanitarian crises – like the famine in Horn of Africa – again you can count on faith-based organisations...

...like Christian Aid, Tearfund, CAFOD, Jewish Care, Islamic Relief, and Muslim Aid...

...to be at the forefront of the action to save lives.

So it's right to recognise the huge contribution our faith communities make to our politics.

...and to recognise the role of the Bible in inspiring many of their works.

People often say that politicians shouldn't "do God."

If by that they mean we shouldn't try to claim a direct line to God for one particular political party...

...they could not be more right.

But we shouldn't let our caution about that stand in the way of recognising both what our faith communities bring to our country...

...and also just how incredibly important faith is to so many people in Britain.

The Economist may have published the obituary of God in their Millennium issue.

But in the past century, the proportion of people in the world who adhere to the four biggest religions has actually increased from around two-thirds to nearly three quarters...

...and is forecast to continue rising.

For example, it is now thought there are at least 65 million protestants in China and 12 million Catholics – more Christians than there are members of the communist party.

Official numbers indicate China has about 20 million Muslims – almost as many as in Saudi Arabia – and nearly twice as many as in the whole of the EU.

And by 2050, some people think China could well be both the world's biggest Christian nation and its biggest Muslim one too.

Here in Britain we only have to look at the reaction to the Pope's visit last year...

...this year's Royal Wedding...

...or of course the festival of Christmas next week, to see that Christianity is alive and well in our country.

The key point is this.

Societies do not necessarily become more secular with modernity but rather more plural, with a wider range of beliefs and commitments.

And that brings me to my third point.

The Bible has helped to shape the values which define our country.

Indeed, as Margaret Thatcher once said, “we are a nation whose ideals are founded on the Bible.”

Responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion, humility, self-sacrifice, love...

...pride in working for the common good and honouring the social obligations we have to one another, to our families and our communities...

...these are the values we treasure.

Yes, they are Christian values.

And we should not be afraid to acknowledge that.

But they are also values that speak to us all – to people of every faith and none.

And I believe we should all stand up and defend them.

Those who oppose this usually make the case for secular neutrality.

They argue that by saying we are a Christian country and standing up for Christian values we are somehow doing down other faiths.

And that the only way not to offend people is not to pass judgement on their behaviour.

I think these arguments are profoundly wrong.

And being clear on this is absolutely fundamental to who we are as a people...

...what we stand for...

...and the kind of society we want to build.

First, those who say being a Christian country is doing down other faiths...

...simply don't understand that it is easier for people to believe and practise other faiths when Britain has confidence in its Christian identity.

Many people tell me it is much easier to be Jewish or Muslim here in Britain than it is in a secular country like France.

Why?

Because the tolerance that Christianity demands of our society provides greater space for other religious faiths too.

And because many of the values of a Christian country are shared by people of all faiths and indeed by people of no faith at all.

Second, those who advocate secular neutrality in order to avoid passing judgement on the behaviour of others...

...fail to grasp the consequences of that neutrality...

...or the role that faith can play in helping people to have a moral code.

Let's be clear.

Faith is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for morality.

There are Christians who don't live by a moral code.

And there are atheists and agnostics who do.

But for people who do have a faith, their faith can be a helpful prod in the right direction.

And whether inspired by faith or not – that direction, that moral code, matters.

Whether you look at the riots last summer...

...the financial crash and the expenses scandal...

...or the on-going terrorist threat from Islamist extremists around the world...

...one thing is clear: moral neutrality or passive tolerance just isn't going to cut it anymore.

Shying away from speaking the truth about behaviour, about morality...

...has actually helped to cause some of the social problems that lie at the heart of the lawlessness we saw with the riots.

The absence of any real accountability, or moral code...

...allowed some bankers and politicians to behave with scant regard for the rest of society.

And when it comes to fighting violent extremism, the almost fearful passive tolerance of religious extremism that has allowed segregated communities to behave in ways that run completely counter to our values...

... has not contained that extremism but allowed it to grow and prosper...

...in the process blackening the good name of the great religions that these extremists abuse for their own purposes.

Put simply, for too long we have been unwilling to distinguish right from wrong.

“Live and let live” has too often become “do what you please”.

Bad choices have too often been defended as just different lifestyles.

To be confident in saying something is wrong...

...is not a sign of weakness, it's a strength.

But we can't fight something with nothing.

As I've said if we don't stand for something, we can't stand against anything.

One of the biggest lessons of the riots last Summer is that we've got stand up for our values if we are to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations.

The same is true of religious extremism.

As President Obama wrote in the Audacity of Hope:

“...in reaction to religious overreach we equate tolerance with secularism, and forfeit the moral language that would help infuse our politics with larger meaning.”

Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism.

A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will just leave you alone.

It stands neutral between different values.

But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and

actively promotes them.

We need to stand up for these values.

To have the confidence to say to people – this is what defines us as a society...

...and that to belong here is to believe in these things.

I believe the church – and indeed all our religious leaders and their communities in Britain – have a vital role to play in helping to achieve this.

I have never really understood the argument some people make about the church not getting involved in politics.

To me, Christianity, faith, religion, the Church and the Bible are all inherently involved in politics because so many political questions are moral questions.

So I don't think we should be shy or frightened of this.

I certainly don't object to the Archbishop of Canterbury expressing his views on politics. Religion has a moral basis and if he doesn't agree with something he's right to say so.

But just as it is legitimate for religious leaders to make political comments, he shouldn't be surprised when I respond.

Also it's legitimate for political leaders to say something about religious institutions as they see them affecting our society, not least in the vital areas of equality and tolerance.

I believe the Church of England has a unique opportunity to help shape the future of our communities.

But to do so it must keep on the agenda that speaks to the whole country.

The future of our country is at a pivotal moment.

The values we draw from the Bible go to the heart of what it means to belong in this country...

...and you, as the Church of England, can help ensure that it stays that way.