

THE GOOD BOOK

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IT is undoubtedly one of the glories of our English language that normal usage, both in speech and in writing, is so frequently in debt to the text of the Bible. It is probably true that the speech of civilised man has for centuries everywhere been greatly influenced by the words of Scripture, but it may perhaps be claimed that this is particularly true of the speech of Englishmen. Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly quoting Scripture, or using phrases or metaphors coming directly from the Bible. Often enough we are unaware that we are quoting the Sermon on the Mount, when we describe someone as the 'salt of the earth' (Matt. 5, 13) or 'a wolf in sheep's clothing' (7, 15), when we speak of 'blowing one's own trumpet' (6, 2), not caring a 'jot' or 'iota' (5, 18), putting a light 'under a bushel' (5, 15), or serving 'God and mammon' (6, 24). How often we speak of 'filthy lucre', forgetting that it is St Paul's phrase (I Tim. 3, 8 and Tit. 1, 7), as is also being 'all things to all men' (I Cor. 9, 22). Many of us could not easily trace the quotation 'Charity covereth a multitude of sins' to St Peter (I Peter 4, 8), nor be certain of the context of 'The letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth' in II Corinthians 3, 6—both texts that we sometimes quote only too glibly, together with 'All things are clean to the clean' from Titus 1, 15.

It is worth noticing that these well-known phrases are (with so many others) almost verbally identical in the Catholic Rheims Version of 1582, the Protestant Authorized Version of 1611, and the current Catholic text of Bishop Challoner's revision of 1749: they are part of the general English heritage from the Bible. It is interesting that the text 'We have here no abiding city' (Hebrews 13, 14) comes from the Westminster Version, while Rheims has 'permanent', Authorized 'continuing', and Challoner 'lasting', and the graceful phrase apparently received currency through the title of Father Bede Jarrett's book.

The influence of a particular version on current speech is often interesting: everyone knows what is meant by 'cockle' sown in a field—some evil weed, even if unspecified, and sown as a hostile

act towards a neighbour. Yet 'cockle' in the parable (Matt. 13, 25) is proper to the Catholic Rheims Version, the Authorized Version having 'tares'. When Coriolanus therefore (Act III, Scene i) says

. . . We nourish 'gainst our senate

The cockle of rebellion, insolence, sedition,

Which we ourselves have ploughed for, sow'd and scattered

By mingling them with us. . . .

there is evidence that Shakespeare thought of the parable in the Catholic terms of the Rheims Version.

The parables in particular have provided many images in that universal heritage: we all speak of 'leaven' (Matt. 13, 33, Luke 13, 18), of the 'pearl of great price' (Matt. 13, 46) and of the 'lost sheep' (Matt. 18, 12, Luke 15, 3), and we all know what we mean by a 'good Samaritan' (Luke 10, 30ff.) and a 'prodigal son' (Luke 15, 11ff.).

This heritage is now for the most part unconscious: many people who use these phrases or images have never read them in their context, but have merely inherited them as detached quotations—as indeed many of the quotations we use have reached all of us. Some of us are even prepared to admit, on re-reading or seeing certain great plays, for instance, that we are struck by the number of familiar phrases, whose context we had quite forgotten, or perhaps never knew before. Yet it is obvious that such verbal quotations entered the current heritage of speech at some time when they were frequently being read, or read out aloud. And the English used to be a nation of great Bible readers, or listeners. From the sixteenth century onwards both Catholics and Protestants had English Bibles and evidently both read them and heard them read, in church or chapel, or at home in the family circle. That this was true of Catholics as of Protestants is shown by the great number of editions published of the Catholic Bible, especially after the latter part of the eighteenth century—a great number relative to the small numbers in penal times. And among the Protestants it was the standard Authorized Version, or King James Bible, that was in their eyes and ears, and similarly it was the Challoner Bible among the Catholics.

In the twentieth century the emphasis has shifted. The former way of being steeped in the old text, of constantly turning to the Good Book (and what other nation has this loving phrase?), has passed away. More than ever before it has become an age of

new versions, seeking to elucidate the meaning, bringing the message in the language of the age, and detaching it from the still vaguely echoing quotations whose contexts had been lost. Official ecclesiastical status has even been given to some of the new texts, in particular among Catholics that of Monsignor Knox, and among Protestants in America the Revised Standard Version. In this way people are hearing the Scriptures afresh. The reading public buy, for instance, the Penguin Classics text of the Gospels, and people find themselves for the first time reading the Gospels 'like a book' and being fascinated for the first time, for Dr Rieu's translation does read like a new book. And how many people, hearing the Knox version in church, on the 4th Sunday in Lent, have declared that for the first time they have understood what 'the one from Mount Sina, engendering unto bondage, which is Agar' (Gal. 4, 24) is all about.

Even the Catholic clergy, reciting their psalms in Latin, have been officially offered an alternative Latin text, wrenching them away from the familiar cadences and purporting to tell them afresh what the psalms are all about. Yet the new Psalter will not, I think, crystallize into quotations: it is the nature of a careful verse-by-verse translation, intended to tell us what the original probably meant. It has not the cadences of the old text, which, almost meaningless though it occasionally is on the surface yet lingers in the ear. And the text of Monsignor Knox or that of Dr Rieu will not, for quite a different reason, provide a quarry of quotations. These texts lead us on, we are following the argument, we want to read on, we pause sometimes as we go, to savour the lovely diction, but we want to read on, we want to understand what the book is speaking to us, telling us, teaching us. The old texts, with their hieratic diction, quite unfamiliar to modern ears except as texts of the Bible, strike us as special, mysterious phrases, whose lapidary quality echoes in our memory and thus becomes a quotation. But this only happens when the particular text is heard or read repeatedly, when we live among the echoes. The modern texts are hardly designed to come into our minds in that way, the way of repeated familiarity with the mysterious oracles of the Book; they are rather designed to be read or heard as a modern work is read or heard. And the lapidary style is not the style of today. Hence, I think, for the quotation of a single phrase or sentence, it is, as it were, unfair to the modern

version to extract a few words from what is essentially designed as a continuous whole, to be read or heard and understood as a whole. The modern versions are not meant to provide quotations, but are meant to convey God's message in Scripture, and whole sections of that message as complete arguments or histories. A quotation, a lapidary phrase, is not uttered to argue, to convince or to inform: a quotation is an echo, a memory, clothed with the mass of memories of the surrounding context. It is an evocation of a whole spiritual background, and in a certain sense presupposes this also in the hearer.

It need hardly be said that this use of quotation, with its background taken for granted, is not the situation when biblical passages are quoted in everyday speech today, but it may be claimed that it was so when the phrases entered the current heritage.

This makes the difference between a modern Bible-reading public—however small it may be—who are reading the Bible in a modern version, seeking to learn from Scripture and understand its teaching, and the Bible-reading public of an earlier age, for whom the 'sacred oracles' formed a background of experience, who grew up knowing at least what Mount Sina stands for and who Agar was, and to whom the mysterious words had many connotations and associations.

This background of association and familiarity with the themes and images of Holy Writ—so absent nowadays, so that people now read the Bible as a new book—was a heritage which lasted into the nineteenth century, deriving from medieval times when the whole Catholic Faith was the normal background. The decay of this heritage—so that all that is now left is a considerable collection of phrases detached from their context—may be attributed partly to the fact that the Protestants made the Bible the only norm, and were therefore constantly at pains to adduce texts of Scripture to defend their doctrines, thus detaching them from the whole body of Catholic belief, with the consequence that even devotion to the Book, detached from its roots in Catholic faith and practice, began eventually to wither away. Another important element in the decay of the heritage is probably the habit of wide and ephemeral reading which became general in the nineteenth century, be it the wide reading of the lettered, or the ephemeral reading of the unlettered. People became distracted by the

multiplicity of reading matter, and the reading of the Good Book was ousted from its place of privilege.

But the development of reading in general, that came with the invention of printing shortly before the Reformation, also had an influence. We hear of the simple people flocking to read the new vernacular Bibles of the reformers, and of the avidity with which they were received. Is it possible that when the common people began to read the Bible for themselves—if they really did on the scale described—that the Bible became thereby gradually detached from the background of Catholic Faith, when their reading was not protected and guided by Catholic preaching and instruction? In medieval times, when few, other than the clerks, could read and there were no printed books, the people relied for their instruction in the Faith and the Bible on the teaching of the clergy and especially on their preaching. And the clergy, particularly in the monasteries, had from the earliest days been constantly formed by Scripture. One who takes part in the full round of the liturgy is bound to become steeped in Scripture (assuming that he understands his liturgy, which in medieval times he generally did), and the monastic practice of *lectio divina* or meditative reading of the Scripture again built up a deep familiarity with the text. These things inevitably produced a very scriptural kind of preaching: instruction in the Faith or moral exhortation from the pulpit was inevitably built out of scriptural material. We can observe this in many of the patristic homilies in the breviary, when the very words and phrases of the exposition are constantly echoes of Holy Writ. We read of St Anthony of Padua (in the breviary, for instance) that his sermons were apparently mainly composed of scriptural texts, so that it seemed that he knew the whole Bible by heart and the Pope called him the *Arca Testamenti*. This is not a matter of adducing texts to defend doctrines, but it is exposition of Catholic belief and living in the terms of the Scripture, which have become part of the preacher himself. It was then to be expected that the piety of the faithful should be intimately bound up with a familiarity with the Bible against the background of Catholic thought.

It was on this attitude to the Bible that the Reformers were able to build, and such were the people they urged to read the Bible for themselves. Vernacular Bibles had indeed appeared before the Reformation, and at the time also the Catholics were

alive to the situation, as is shown by the work of Rheims (1582) and Douay (1609), where the text was elaborately annotated to show the constant connection with Catholic Faith and practice. Later on too, in the mid-eighteenth century when Challoner became Vicar Apostolic in London, one of his great concerns was the provision for English Catholics of a readable and portable English Bible: his first revision of the New Testament appeared in 1749, and that of the Old in 1750. Catholic families in the nineteenth century (like the good Protestant families) had their family Bible, and scores of editions of Challoner's text were printed. Yet by the twentieth century these had nearly all become 'old books' lying unread in dusty cupboards. Most Catholic adults of today were not given Bibles in their youth, and Catholic families have rarely got a family Bible. Nor were they taught much about the Bible at school: they were only taught 'Christian Doctrine'. We suggested above the reasons, applying both to Catholics and Protestants: the Bible was detached from its background of belief, the multiplicity of reading-matter ousted the Good Book, and (the priests being recruited from the laity) the preaching they were hearing no longer had a scriptural basis.

The modern reading public has to some extent found its own way back to the Bible: there are the new versions that the reading public will read, and does read. Probably more people have read the Bible in Monsignor Knox's translation, reading it as a new book, than ever opened a Bible during several decades past. Modern Bibles have even been best-sellers. And this is a good sign and a new sign.

Furthermore, scriptural studies both in school and seminary have been receiving a new impetus, and preaching is becoming increasingly scriptural. (It is remarkable how much sermons with a scriptural angle are appreciated.)

And the new six-shilling 'Bible in every home', published by the Catholic Truth Society, has been bought by the hundred, and frequently by people who have never had a Bible in their hands before.

These things are signs that we may gradually return to the old familiarity with the Good Book. But the faithful need help: many people do not know what to do with this book, where to begin, what to read. They have mostly not got the time or the inclination to read through solidly from the beginning—when the whole

thing is unfamiliar, it is a little baffling. But having perhaps read one of the new versions, having heard expositions from the pulpit, they may become less strangers to Holy Writ.

There is indeed much hope in the present-day trends of scriptural education and preaching, of new versions and cheap editions, that the Bible may once more be the normal spiritual background of the Christian, and that the heritage of biblical phrases may once more carry with them their true context.

Let us conclude with three practical suggestions. (1) Let us encourage our people to get texts for themselves, make them available on our bookstalls, indicate the cheap editions: the C.T.S. 6s. Bible is a great achievement here; there are cheap New Testaments, and separate Gospels—Knox's text with Burns and Oates, and Challoner's with the C.T.S.—and Dr Rieu's Penguin Gospels, for instance. (2) Let us help people to read them: a parochial discussion group has specially asked for biblical sessions: they will each have a C.T.S. text. In the same parish, leaflets by way of 'reading guides' will be given with the Bibles, at the suggestion of the discussion group, indicating easier passages in both Old and New Testament to make encouraging reading for beginners. Such help can be given not only by the clergy, but by friends, who already know their Bible, to others who do not. Similarly in schools and Catechism on Sundays, there is now opportunity when the young people can have a text so easily. And for the leader's purposes there are the new versions by which to elucidate the mysteries. (3) Lastly, we of the clergy need an urgent reminder. Sunday after Sunday we read the Scripture to the people from the pulpit, either in Knox or Challoner. So often we read it dully and unworthily. Good reading is vital. We need to read it as if we were really telling them something, and for this we need to know what it is we are telling them. Most Sunday congregations have the habit (such an odd habit, when one comes to think of it) of reading the text in their missals as we read it to them. Is this due to the laudable habit of reading the English while the priest reads the Latin (if we don't know Latin), carried on to the English reading? Or is it because we read it out so badly, that they would not otherwise understand? But the fact remains that a congregation is rarely captured by the hearing of the Scripture: yet *fides ex auditu, auditus autem per verbum Christi* (Rom. 10, 17). We of the clergy are the first custodians of the Good Book, and we have a

special duty to present it worthily to our people.

Indeed, all Christians can help one another to come to know and love more intimately the holy word of God, and to impart to one another the joy thereof, once they have found the treasure hidden in a field.



THE USE OF MIME IN SCRIPTURE TEACHING

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THIS is the account of an experiment. While the need for the teaching of the Old Testament in Catholic schools is gradually becoming more widely recognized, our children do not, in general, have that familiarity with the language of the Old Testament which is so often found among Christians brought up in other surroundings. While this is neither the time nor the place to discuss the pros and cons of a vernacular liturgy, it is obvious that a child who hears some portion of the Scriptures read at the daily Assembly will acquire a familiarity with the language and images employed therein. To attempt to teach the New Testament without a good grounding in the Old, is to deprive it of considerable significance, and it is in the Junior School that such a foundation can be laid.

While there are many collections of Bible stories (and nowadays even strip-cartoons) for children, the real value of all these attractive aids should be to lead the child to a desire for the real thing: the inspired word of God. It is not always realized how soon children can cope with the Scriptural text, and in this connection, tribute must be paid to the Knox version, which can be read aloud, almost uncut, to boys and girls from the age of eight onwards, and they love it. Children are said to relive the history of man's development, and the Hebrew method of story-telling, tough, earthy, and repetitive, seems to catch the imagination of Junior children.

The object of the experiment was to show the Old Testament as foreshadowing the New, and the New as fulfilling the promise of the Old; to familiarize the children with the chief characters and incidents in the Old Testament, not as isolated happenings