

A sermon 'In Praise of the King James Bible,' preached by Dr Alison E.M. Shell, of the Department of English, University College London, on Sunday 22 May 2011, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

'Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.' (1 Peter 2:5)

We've just heard a typical passage from an epistle full of images of rock and stone, one that has traditionally been ascribed to St Peter. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the attribution, it certainly sends us back to the Gospels and Christ's pun on Peter's name: 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18). That version is taken from the King James Bible (KJB), published 400 years ago this month, and it would have surely been one of the trickiest verses for its translators to tackle, working as they were in Protestant England and defining themselves against the Roman Catholic belief that St Peter was the first pope. Today's passage is much less controversial. Even though it does consider the structure of the church, it doesn't concern itself with top-down authority, but with how Christian individuals become a church in aggregate. It's an metaphor of how, just as stones support each other in a wall or a house, the members of Christian communities become more stable when they're together, and more than the sum of their parts.

We're assured that in God's house there's a place for even the most awkwardly shaped stones as building material: 'the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner.' It's an image that reminds us how impossible it was for Christ's contemporaries to find a place for him within existing structures; there was no middle way between casting him out or basing everything else round him. But it has a previous life too, deriving from the Old Testament; the passage contains an allusion to the words of the prophet Isaiah, where he refers to Zion, the community of God's people, as 'a chief corner stone, elect, precious.' It's another context in which one's invited to remember the unifying and stabilising function of cornerstones.

And most strikingly and paradoxically of all, not only Christ but the body of Christian believers are referred to as 'living stones'. Whatever does this phrase mean? Well, oxymorons like this are calculated to startle you and then to make you think, and this contradictory phrase invites us to consider ways in which inanimate stone *can* be said to live. Just to take a handful of examples: a stone monument is set up to have a lasting impact on our memories; or, to shift ground, a fossil preserved in stone reminds us of how we became what we are.

Let's consider the idea of a monument first, since I've been asked to preach in celebration of the King James Bible today: surely a monument of our cultural heritage if ever there was one. Many of you will know the joke that the King James Bible was the only work of genius ever to be composed by a committee. It obviously needn't be the case that collective works of artistic endeavour are aesthetically compromised. If we laugh at the joke we're laughing at the associations of committees with dullness and a tendency to go with the safe option rather than the best; we should also, I think, be laughing at our very culturally determined notions of genius. We do tend to be very wedded to the idea of brilliant, counter-cultural individuals. In the context of bible translation, it's so much easier to warm to the story of William Tyndale, martyred for his

politically premature commitment to translating the scriptures into his mother tongue, than it is to the group of unheroic, largely anonymous, Jacobean churchmen to whom we owe the KJB.

Yet this is where the idea of a church, lively stones built up into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, can help us gain an appropriate sense of the inspiration they afford. As the recent spate of books on the KJB have reminded us, the project was a model of what collective endeavour should be: delivered on time, by scholars who reviewed each other's work constructively. More than that, they interpreted the scriptures to each other and to their wider audience just as churches are supposed to do; you can see them as forming a virtual church, long before the Internet. No wonder they comprised a committee of genius.

It's routine to praise the KJB for its language: for its felicitous and memorable phrasing; for the supple way it accommodates itself to the speaking voice; for its proverbial utterances that have been, and continue to be, part of this country's collective wisdom. That, of course, is why it's also been very common for people of literary sensibilities to lament its discontinuation and prophesy its demise. Listen, for instance, to what David Martin, writing in 1979 in reaction to modernising measures in the Church of England, had to say: 'What loosens the keystone of this classic text touches the whole arch of rhyme and imaginative reason. The common poetry of English life is now being abandoned, in church and in school. This will be a national loss comparable to the wholesale destruction of our churches and cathedrals.' Like so many writers he turned instinctively to architectural images to express the monumentality of the KJB and the ruination of its loss, which he's comparing to Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries – another cultural landmark of the Church of England, understandably less celebrated.

I hope that he's pleased to have been belied by the profuse celebrations of the KJB that have marked 2011. Churches across the land, and even secular cultural organisations like the Globe Theatre, have been reading it and revisiting it, engaging with the text and appreciating just how well it's lasted. Yet, after all, it's never been really absent from Anglican worship. So much of it survives in every subsequent English-language translation, just as it benefits everywhere itself from earlier translations and translators: from William Tyndale, whom I've just mentioned; from the scholars responsible for the English church's earlier official translations; from the Geneva Bible composed by the Protestants exiled in the reign of Mary I; even, more covertly, from England's first Catholic translation of the Bible, the so-called Douai-Rheims version; and many others. To that list we must surely add all the anonymous wordsmiths of England's oral culture.

It was the translators' skill that enabled them to recognise, preserve and carry forward so much of the best of what had gone before, while adding felicities of their own. And it's not to underplay their excellence to admit how that their work achieved wide and long-standing diffusion through a piece of historical luck. It benefited from seismic shifts outside any committee's control: the growth of cheap printing, the increasing social advantages of literacy, the authority of the Stuart monarchy on the one hand, and on the other, the puritan emphasis on personal encounter with the Bible. Theirs was one of the historical and literary moments that conduce to marvellous preservations, a fossil stratum in which the Jacobean past is revealed with unique richness. It was, and is, a reason to be proud of being Anglican.

But it would be triumphalist to stop there, and not admit that the fact that it's so good has been a mixed blessing from the evangelical point of view. Most of those who've praised the KJB in the secular media this year have paid scrupulous tribute to the power of Christianity to shape culture and inspire great art, but have been at pains to point out that they aren't Christians themselves. It's not for nothing that the KJB has been dubbed the 'atheist's bible': even Richard Dawkins has famously pronounced that 'not to know the King James Bible is, to be in some small way, barbarian'. It's as if the KJB's literary merit and cultural centrality has become, for some, a way of actually nullifying its religious message, and that's an uncomfortable thing to happen to any sacred text. There's a suggestive phrase in this very epistle for what I mean: a 'stone of stumbling', meaning an obstacle to religious faith. We've heard a lot recently about the phrases that the KJB has given to our language; but here's one that didn't make it. A more usual idiom among recent bible translators is 'stumbling-block', a phrase that they get not from the King James Bible but from Tyndale (his use is the first in the Oxford English Dictionary). The KJB's translators must have bypassed this option so that the imagery of stones could be continued.

The phrase 'stone of stumbling' has now become an ironic one, for reasons that the translators couldn't possibly have anticipated: not so many generations ago in mainstream English intellectual life, as still in some fundamentalist religious communities, it wasn't unknown to hear the view that God had put fossils in rocks to set up a kind of false trail, as a test for the believer. I think I'm right to assume that most of us here today think that religious belief and scientific enquiry can productively co-exist; that all of us have run up against and would reject the common assumption that all Christians have a profoundly unscientific view of the world; and also that, day to day, the Christians among us have to find common ground with those of other religions or none, in the attempt to build communities even more diversely sourced than the one that's pictured in this Epistle. Here, turning back to the idea of living stones is of help, since it encapsulates something that Christians, other religious believers and atheists can share: a sense of wonder in contemplating the natural world.

And it brings me back as well to the livingness of fossils. Anyone who's ever seen Sir David Attenborough's classic TV series 'Life on Earth' will remember the sequences in which Attenborough strides heroically about in a safari suit over jagged terrain, picking up chunks of rock and as discovering a fossil that illustrates the evolutionary point he wants to make next, if by pure serendipity. It's very visually effective, but it has a serious motive too: one of Attenborough's chief concerns throughout the series was to remind his viewers how their own bodies preserve what we once were. This had some powerful interactive effects, at least on this viewer; as he pointed to a fossil of one of the first fishes and explained how its backbone marked an evolutionary leap forward, I became very conscious of my own backbone, and felt an unexpected flash of kinship with that fossil fish – a living stone indeed.

The KJB celebrations have surely been a riposte, at some level, to the atheist merrymaking called forth by the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth in 2009. But I see no reason not to enjoy both parties while keeping clear of the rowdier elements in each. Natural history and church history are both way of discovering earlier forms of life, and understanding how crucially they shape us today. Both chart a story of progress, but also one of sideways moves, of different evolutionary stages co-existing, of diversity and multitudinous adaptation. The KJB celebrations this year are a splendid opportunity to reflect upon how this translation has shaped us, our society, our

language and our church, and how lively it is in itself; after all, fossils often preserve life-forms still with us today. We shouldn't be sorry to have moved on; the KJB's translators would have been the first to admit that biblical scholarship has to evolve. It's probably right to use more accurate versions for day-to-day worship, while having recourse to the KJB as an occasional treat. But I think we should do so regularly, to remind ourselves of this defining moment in Christian collaboration. It's a fossil matrix that explains us to ourselves; a linguistic mosaic that commemorates the translators' dialogue with the first Jews and Christians, with their immediate predecessors and with each other. It demands our engagement just as much as it ever did.