

Richard Major: *The Epic of God*
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Chapter xv: *Lections.*

IN OUR LONG TRAWL through the rite of Mass we've reached the Lections, or readings from the Bible, which follow on from the Collect. As we discussed last time, three small sections of the Bible – forming a Lesson, an Epistle, and a Gospel – are read aloud each Sunday by three different people, and while the reading is going on everyone sits or (up in the sanctuary) stands, listening in silence, meditating or letting his mind wander as conscience, mood and temperament prompt.

Beauty.

WITH A FEW EXCEPTIONS EACH YEAR, these three readings are always interesting and even marvellous in themselves. Even if they were originally drab, they'd still make lovely listening, because we hear them coated in gold: the translation of 1611, which would make a telephone directory sound pleasing. This translation is called (in America) the [King James Version](#) or (in England) the [Authorised Version](#), because it was commissioned and authorised by King James I, a repulsive little man but not such a bad king. James' commissioners worked with the original Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek texts, and they paid attention to the Latin Vulgate, which for a thousand years *was* the Christian Bible, and still has a certain authority. But most of their task was revision work: their version was the descendent of a century of English translations, each translation dependent on the one before. English heretics, such as Tyndale and Coverdale, sound English churchmen and learned English worldlings, between them produced in the course of a century the translation of 1611, which was at once recognised as so excellent that no sensible English-speaker has ever wanted any other version.

For English prose had its golden age under the Tudors: almost nobody was capable of writing badly, and the Bible we inherit is the accumulation of a century of men writing very well indeed. The result is language sonorous, deliberately archaic and elevated (even then), varied, musical, dignified, as lucid as it need be, delicious, pleasant – and so forth: it would be silly to try to praise the version of 1611. No other book has had such an influence on the development of the English language, and to rend ourselves away from it would be like rending our own flesh. We can hardly praise what has helped make our speech and our minds. We can only rejoice at it.

If you've heroically trudged this far through *The Epic of God*, you'll have recognised a certain pattern: when we praise something extravagantly, the next paragraph records that in the general catastrophe of the 1960s this thing was lost. And that's indeed what we have to note now. There had been a certain amount of tweaking of the text in the nineteenth century, when energetic pedants tried to cut out of the Authorised Version some of its nicest words – such as *unicorn* – on the weary grounds that some anonymous Hebrew scribe, thousands of years back, might have meant *wild desert donkey*. In the modernist age, more fundamental vandalisms began, with self-appointed translators producing deliberately gaunt prose; and in the 1960s, when the Church lost her nerve and fell into her present bemused and giggly state, churchmen began using these chilling translations in worship. The resonant Word of God got brought up to date, and sounds like a memo in an office with low standards for office memos. The English Bible of 1611, which is in its way improbable, rare and noble as a unicorn, got replaced with donkeys.

I'm not going to soil my page by quoting from donkey-translations, and in any case if you have not had the bad luck to hear them being read in church, you would simply not believe me. These books are often *incredibly* ugly. They keep amazing and paining ears that hoped they were inured to brutality. Just when you think you're grown used to ghastly English, there comes a ker-*THUMP* and you are back where you started from, cringing, wincing, whimpering, astonished.

No, I've changed my mind. Why shouldn't we hear the worst? Here are a few slithers of the Bible, chosen at random; in the Authorised Version, and then in modern parody-translation:

- ☞ For the love of money is the root of all evil.
- ☞ Because people love money they do all kinds of wrong things.

- ☞ I have been a stranger in a strange land.
- ☞ I have become an alien in a foreign land.

- ☞ Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou.

☞ Keep away; don't come near me, for I am too sacred for you!

☞ And He saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

☞ Jesus said unto them, "Come with me. The work I will give you will be to catch people."

Even if you don't have any Latin, say this aloud: *venite post me*, Come after me, *et faciam vos fieri* and I'll make you *piscatores hominum* fishermen – of men! Savour that rhythm and wit: and then relish the simple, noble regularity of this: *I will make you fishers of men*. Now slam against it this cacophony: *The work I will give you will be to catch people*. – Occasionally, instead of such seedy and banal modern phrases, modern translations make a sickly attempt at archaism:

☞ And the Lord said unto Cain, where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

☞ And Jehovah saith unto Cain, "Where is Abel thy brother?" and he saith, "I have not known; my brother's keeper – I?"

ker-THUMP.

But, as always in these notes when we come to twentieth century deviancy, the point is that travesties don't matter. The Authorised or King James version is integral to the English language and the Anglican tradition; there is no reason for the liturgical use of any other translation; sooner or later Anglicans will have to return to it; the gross and rough Bibles now used will be forgotten in a generation; and meanwhile at Ascension and St Agnes we continue to use the real English Bible, depriving ourselves of none of the delight and romance that comes from listening to its inexhaustible beauty.

So much for aesthetics.

Truth.

THERE IS IN A SENSE not much to say about the workings of the Ministry of the Word, the reading of the Lections – the wordy portion of Mass. There's a lot to say about the more active parts of our rite, where there are movements and gestures to be accounted for. Now we are to sit and listen, and chatter less, even within our own minds. We are to be receptive.

Still, listening to the Bible read in church as a way of hearing God is such a mysterious business – and so often misunderstood – that we ought to stand back for a minute and consider what is happening. Let us reflect.

Last week we were saying what the Bible is not. It is not a long book which happens to be uniquely, magically free of factual errors historical, moral and theological. It is not a secret memorandum from God to the individual, detailing what He is up to and what we are to do. Much of it is not, frankly, very illuminating read in solitude. If we steal off to a corner with a copy of the Bible and mull over it, without listening to how the Church understands it, we are deadly trouble: *for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life, littera enim occidit Spiritus autem vivificat.*⁹ The Spirit of God is alive in the Church, and the Bible is one of the means God the Spirit uses to speak to the Church.

⁹ II Corinthians iii⁶.

Wrenched away from liturgical use (which is what the Bible was assembled for), the letter of the Bible can easily be misused. *The letter killeth.*

We might put it this way: the sacred nature of the Bible is not in what the text says, but in what it does. The whole Bible is *used* by the Church as a way of hearing God. That is certainly how Christ used it:

there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me . . .* And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, *This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*¹⁰

Isaiah's heady verses meant God-knows-what when Isaiah wrote them; no one without the clue could ever make anything of Isaiah's poetry. But Christ, *using* this poetry liturgically, turns it into a revelation of the incarnate God. And that is what the Body of Christ, the Church, still does with the Bible. That is how she uses it; and that is what it is for. Again: a few years after this the finance minister of Ethiopia, a learned fellow, was whiling away time as he was driven along the high-way by reading Isaiah. A Christian clergyman named Philip who was trotting along the same road asked him: *Understandest thou what thou readest?* To which the finance minister sensibly replies:

How can I, except some man should guide me? ... of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.¹¹

That is what the Church does. She takes the Bible, that extremely diverse and irregular heap of writings – we meditated last week about just how diverse they are – and uses them in her services. Beginning at whatever scripture lies to hand, she preaches to us Jesus. She takes words which, in themselves, may well be obscure, remote, chaotic, dubious, ambiguous, or inexplicable, and uses them to show us the Incarnation. That is how the Bible becomes the Word of God. It is sacred because of its sacred use: sacred, if you like, not on the page but as we hear it faithfully. At every service it is true that *Hodie impleta est hæc scriptura in auribus vestris, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*

Opposite is a picture, copied from an October bulletin, showing the most significant parts of the anthology we call the Bible – the four Gospels, MATTHÆUS with his mascot the winged man, MARCVS with his mascot the winged lion LVCAS with his winged ox, IQANES with his eagle – venerated as they ought to be: ritually, in Church, on the altar, in the context of Mass.

The words of the four Gospels and of the rest of the Bible are beautiful (if heard in the right translation!); and true when, as here, used properly; and therefore good. They do not clash with sceptical intellect. The Bible does not require us to suspend our reason or turn credulous. Used as it ought to be used, it is the most serious writing in the world. It is inexhaustible. It lights up the mind.

¹⁰ Luke iv^{17-18a, 20f}.

¹¹ Acts viii^{50f, 54, 55b}.

Goodness.

THE CHURCH HAS GONE TO A LOT OF TROUBLE to preserve the Bible against misuse, and therefore misunderstanding. For almost a thousand years, when literacy was largely limited to the clergy, who necessarily understood Latin, the Bible was the Vulgate translation of St Jerome. The clergy shared the book with the people of God in the liturgy, but also by way of sermons, and pictures, and plays, and stained glass, so that the Word of God sank deeply into people's minds. When, at the end of the Middle Ages, an educated middle-class reëmerged in Western Europe – capable of reading but not inclined to learn Latin, capable of tetchy argument but not necessarily well-informed about theology – the Church foresaw the danger of misuse of the Bible, and wisely discouraged attempts to produce vernacular translations. When the Protestant Reformers loosed on the world a legion of such translations (not always scrupulously honest translations) the result was pandemonium. Every man reading such a translation to himself thought he had discovered a secret message from God, hidden through all ages from every man but himself. Dozens of 'Bible-believing' sects sprang up, and are still with us. These errors are not produced by the Bible, but by the misuse, the bizarre habit of regarding private Bible-reading as the norm. But it isn't the norm: hearing the Bible ritually recited in the public liturgy is the norm; that is the reason all these disparate ancient writings were assembled together in the first place, by Israel and by the Church, to form the Bible. The anthology is liturgical. We are now, at this freeze-frame of the Mass, seeing it do what it is made to do.

Enough reflection. Hearing these texts read to us now, publicly, ritually, formally, we cannot help asking the Ethiopian statesman's wise and humble question:

*Quomodo possum si non aliquis ostenderit mihi,
How can I [understand], except some man should guide me?*

And the whole shape of the Mass is our guide. The rites the Church provides for us show us how to hear the Bible.

The ceremonial of the readings forces us to acknowledge differences: the Lesson is less important than the Epistle, and the Epistle is less spectacular than the Gospel. These passages are not revelation in themselves: they point to revelation, the Old Testament pointing to the New, and the Epistle discussing Christ pointing to the Gospel of life of Christ – which itself points to the person of Christ and His incarnate Body, shown to us and given to us at the climax of the Mass. Just as Philip

*incipiens ab scriptura ista evangelizavit illi Iesum,
began at the same scripture and preached unto him Jesus,*

so the Mass takes these three passages, strange though they sometimes are, and uses them to point toward the definitive divine revelation, which is not mere word but Flesh. The words do not stay words, the promise is not merely promise: it is consummated.

*Hodie impleta est hæc scriptura,
This day is this scripture fulfilled.*

Enough abstract reflection. The Lesson, or Old Testament reading, for Quinquagesima, is under way: a story of a mystical ascent up a desert mountain by the

half-legendary nomadic hero Moses, written some three thousand years ago. Devouring fire sits on the peak, and Moses vanishes into it for forty days.

This is stirring stuff, but it can only be understood, it can only be taken seriously, it only turns into liberating wisdom, when we see where it points: and the liturgy shows us where it points. We are led up from the Lesson to the Gospel, in which another and greater Man goes up and mountain, and again there are devouring flames and brightness, so that the witnesses quail and fling themselves down; and when they look up to contemplate what it all means, *they saw no man, but Jesus only.*¹²

By next week the hurrying Christian year will have leapt on to purple Lent, but we'll still be moving thoughtfully through the Lections. We'll be observing the details of how the Church opens up these magnificent writings to us each Sunday. We'll be mounting upwards from the Lesson to the Epistle, and so up to the climactic Gospel, the height of the trilogy, the herald of Christ in the Flesh, like white fire on a mountain-top.

¹² From today's Gospel, Matthew xvii⁸.