Appendix II

A Sermon preached by Professor Dodd in Westminster Abbey to commemorate the 350th Anniversary of the Authorised Version and the inauguration of the New English Bible.

When your Advocate comes, whom I will send you from the Father—the Spirit of truth that issues from the Father—he will bear witness to me. And you also are my witnesses, because you have been with me from the first.

John 16: 26-7

In the Acts of the Apostles we are told how the incipient church set about filling a vacancy in the apostolate—a vacancy created by the defection of Judas Iscariot. The apostle Peter, acting as presiding officer, states the minimum essential qualification required in a candidate for the vacant post. This is what he says: ‘One of those who bore us company all the while we had the Lord Jesus with us, coming and going, from John’s ministry of baptism until the day when he was taken up from us—one of those must now join us as a witness to his resurrection.’

One might have expected that a candidate for so responsible an office in a new community, with its way still to make, would be required to show qualities of leadership, or of intellect, or of prophetic utterance, or the like. Such qualities were certainly to be found among early Christians, and they were highly prized; but apparently they were not thought indispensable for the office of an apostle. What was indispensable was that he should have personal acquaintance with the facts of the ministry of Jesus Christ from beginning to end, and out of such acquaintance should be able to give first-hand testimony to the fact of his resurrection.

So much we learn from the Acts of the Apostles. The passage I read for text takes us a step further: ‘The Spirit of truth that issues from the Father—he will bear witness to me. And you also are my witnesses, because you have been with me from the first.’ Here again, the apostles are to be witnesses: that is their special function. And the qualification is the same: they have been in the company of Jesus all through, and therefore know the facts about him. But we now learn that behind, and within, the witness of the apostles is the witness of the Spirit. Their testimony is inspired testimony. I take it you do not need special inspiration to give an honest report of events that happened under your eyes. But it did call for very special insight in these men to see what it all meant: what was the bearing of these disconcerting facts upon their personal problems and upon human life and destiny at large, what difference they made to the total relationship between God and man. This was the work of the Spirit of truth, interpreting to the apostles the things they had seen and heard. The facts were not less factual for being interpreted, not less historical. On the contrary, the meaning they were now seen to bear was that which made them a turning point in history. Fact and interpretation are one in the witness of the apostles.

And here it lies before us, in the scriptures of the New Testament. The first witnesses said their say; they spread the message abroad through the mouths of others; it was written down and bequeathed to the church as a permanent possession. Here in the New Testament—in gospels and epistles alike without distinction or separation—we have the final deposit of the witness borne in the earliest age, when the memory was still fresh. And that is the fundamental reason (whatever other good reasons there may be) why the public reading of the Bible, and the study of the Bible, must always keep its commanding position in the life of the Christian society.

Not that the apostolic testimony comes down to us in one channel alone: it filters through the whole common tradition of Christian belief and practice; it is heard in the preaching of the gospel from age to age; it is set forth in the unbroken ministration of the sacraments from the earliest times. But it is documented and certified by the written word of scripture, which remains unchanged, and is accessible to all. Not only Christian preaching and teaching, but Christian worship itself is what it is because of the special place it gives to the reading of the Bible. The language of devotion and praise, of contrition and aspiration, is not peculiar to the Christian religion; but in Christian worship such language receives a peculiar content because, through lesson, gospel and epistle, the worshipping congregation is continually brought back to the facts about Jesus Christ and the meaning of those facts.

For the presupposition of our whole approach to God is that the Word became flesh: the eternal and divine entered history and fell under human observation. This provides a point of reference for every act of worship. The Christ in whose name we pray, to whom we ascribe glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Christ who gives himself to his people in
sacrament, is the same who once worked and taught in Galilee and Jerusalem, and suffered under Pontius Pilate. And how are we to know what he taught and did and suffered except through the testimony of those who were there? And where can we go for that except to the New Testament? No speculative theology, and no mystical vision, could give us facts of history, and our faith is anchored to the gospel history in which it pleased almighty God to make Himself known to men. In the New Testament itself the boldest flights of theological speculation are still an effort to interpret the given facts. 'Our theme,' says one of the New Testament writers—certainly not one of the least theologians—'our theme is the word of life. This life was made visible; we have seen it and bear our testimony... What we have seen and heard we declare to you.' And at every reading of the New Testament it is declared afresh. That is what gives the Bible its unique character. Here we renew our faith where it first began. And in this all Christians are at one. All Christians are at one. That is something to think about when we are despondent about our continuing divisions. After all, we read the same Bible; we nourish our faith on the same testimony; and in this we already possess a real measure of unity. This great assembly of Christian people of different communions is (within its limits) a sign of such unity. Over a wider field in recent years the study of the Bible on a scholarly level has become a truly co-operative enterprise, in which Catholic and Orthodox, Lutheran and Reformed, Anglican and Nonconformist, find themselves drawn together across the barriers, to learn from one another and to discover afresh how close we are, in spite of everything, when we get down to the 'grass roots' of the faith. I say this as one whose privilege it has been during the past forty years to have some part in it, and I am persuaded that we have here one of the most promising channels through which the spirit of unity is making its way and preparing for the time (perhaps still distant) when the whole Christian people shall be visibly one.

This new translation of the Bible on which we are engaged is also a co-operative enterprise among members of various Christian communions. Our fellowship in the work has been a great experience. Ecclesiastical or denominational differences fell away as we became absorbed in our task: our one concern was to reach a common mind about the meaning of the text before us. For the purpose of our enterprise is the same as that which has governed the broad movement of return to the Bible all over Christendom. It is, quite simply, to find out just what the Bible means, resisting (to the best of our ability) the temptation to make it mean what we should like it to mean, or, alternatively, to take refuge in a safe ambiguity. Of course the assumption behind it all is that the Bible (whatever other demands it makes of us) demands to be understood. Is that something that might go without saying? I think not. The Bible may serve various purposes which are served also by other religious books. It may kindle feelings of devotion, or supply language for such feelings when they are barely articulate; it may suggest elevated thoughts that might never visit us without such aid; it may provide the first step towards heights of contemplation. For such purposes much hangs upon the suggestive or evocative power of words; their exact meaning may for the time lie in the penumbra of consciousness. Thus the language of the Authorised Version, or of the Prayer-book version of the Psalter, often noble in itself, has acquired layer upon layer of hallowed association through the centuries; it has overtones which call forth an instinctive, almost an inherited response in those who were brought up within the tradition. But of how many in our society is this no longer even remotely true? And of those of whom it is true, is there not the danger that they may be so soothed by the flow of splendid words half understood that they escape the harsh challenge of the Bible to mind and conscience? If, as I have urged, the special quality of the New Testament is that of a testimony to intractable facts of history, and to the meaning of the facts borne to people who stood directly under their impact, then it does demand to be understood. The more precisely we come to understand the words of the scripture, the more open we must be to the initial witness of the apostles and within it the witness of the Spirit of truth which gave them, and can give us, living knowledge of the Word made flesh.

It was this conviction that moved the early translators of the Bible into English—Wyclif, Tyndal, and Tyndal's successors whose work ultimately issued in the Authorised Version. It is the same conviction that has inspired those who are working on the New English Bible. Because we hold that conviction, we have thought no labour lost in trying to understand as precisely as possible what the Hebrew or Greek of the biblical writers means, and to bring that meaning to English readers in language as clear, and as comely, as we can make it. This has been our aim, and our ideal. That it should be realised completely is not to be expected of fallible mortals. But we trust the promise is not vain, and that our all too human infirmity has not left us altogether impervious to the illumination of the Spirit of truth that issues from the Father.

There is an ancient Latin prayer, attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, which has often been used in our sessions for translation. In English it might run somewhat as follows:

Lord God, and our God, who art called the true Fountain of light and wisdom, be pleased to pour upon our dark minds the clear radiance of thy light, removing from us the twofold darkness, of sin and of
In the spirit of that prayer we have tried to handle our task, and in that spirit we now render up the first fruits of our labour to those from whom we received our commission.

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