
Thomas Cranmer's Preface to the Great Bible

Thomas Cranmer was Archbishop of Canterbury under King Henry VIII. He convinced the King to commission an authorized English version of the Bible from Coverdale, who in fulfillment of his commission presented a revision of the earlier "Matthew's Bible." The new version was first published in 1539, but was quickly followed by a somewhat revised edition in 1540. This second edition bore a preface by Cranmer, and at the foot of the title page appeared the words, "This is the Bible appointed to the use of the churches." This was the first officially approved English Bible, sometimes called "Cranmer's Bible" after the name of its sponsor, and sometimes the "Great Bible" because of its large size. The Cranmer Preface was later also included in the front matter of the Bishops' Bible

The text of Cranmer's Preface below is based upon the electronic text in the Chadwyck-Healey "Bible in English" CD-ROM. I have modernized the spelling and punctuation, and have supplied some explanatory notes in square brackets. - M.D.M.

A prologue or preface made by the most reverend father in God, Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury, Metropolitan Primate of England

FOR two sundry sorts of people, it seemeth much necessary that something be said in the entry of this book by the way of a preface or prologue, whereby hereafter it may be both the better accepted of them which hitherto could not well bear it, and also the better used of them which heretofore have misused it. For truly some there are that be too slow and need the spur, some other seem too quick, and need more of the bridle; some lose their game by short shooting, some by overshooting; some walk too much on the left hand, some too much on the right. In the former sort be all they that refuse to read or to hear read the scripture in the vulgar tongue; much worse, they that also let or discourage the other from the reading or hearing thereof. In the latter sort be they which by their inordinate reading, indiscrete speaking, contentious disputing, or otherwise by their licentious living, slander and hinder the word of God most of all other, whereof they would seem to be greatest furtherers.

These two sorts, albeit they be most far unlike the one to the other, yet they both deserve in effect like reproach. Neither can I well tell whether of them I may judge the more offender: him that doth obstinately refuse so godly and goodly knowledge, or him that so ungodly and so ungodly doth abuse the same. And as touching the former, I would marvel much that any man should be so mad, as to refuse in darkness, light; in hunger, food; in cold, fire.

For the word of God is light: *Lucerna pedibus meis, verbum tuum.* (See Psalm 119) *Thy word is a lantern unto my feet.* It is food: *Non in solo pane vivit homo, sed in omni verbo dei.* (See Matthew 4) *Man shall not live by bread only, but by every word of God.* It is fire: *Ignem veni mittere in tertam, & quid volo nisi vt ardeat?* (See Luke 12) *I am come to send fire on the earth, and what is my desire but that it be kindled?* I would marvel (I say at this) save that I consider how much custom and usage may do. So that if there were a people as some write, *de Cymeriis*, which never saw the sun, by reason that they be situated far toward the North pole, and be enclosed and overshadowed with high mountains, it is credible and like enough, that if by the power and will of God, the mountains should sink down and give place, that the light of the sun might have entrance to them, at the first some of them would be offended therewith. And the old proverb affirmeth, that after tillage of corn was

first found, many delighted more to feed of mast and acorns wherewith they had ben accustomed, than to eat bread made of good corn. Such is the nature of custom, that it causeth us to bear all things well and easily wherewith we have been accustomed, and to be offended with all things thereunto contrary. And therefore I can well think them worthy pardon, which at the coming abroad of scripture doubted and drew back. But such as will persist still in their wilfulness, I must needs judge not only foolish, froward and obstinate, but also peevish, perverse, and indurate.

And yet, if the matter should be tried by custom, we might also to allege custom for the reading of the scripture in the vulgar tongue, and prescribe the more ancient custom. For it is not much above one hundred years ago, since scripture hath not been accustomed to be read in the vulgar tongue within this realm. And many hundred years before that, it was translated and read in the Saxons' tongue, which at that time was our mother tongue, whereof there remain yet divers copies found lately in old abbeys, of such antique manner of writing and speaking, that few men now be able to read and understand them. And when this language waxed old and out of common usage, because folk should not lack the fruit of reading, it was again translated into the newer language, whereof yet also many copies remain and be daily found.

But now to let pass custom, and to weigh - as wise men ever should - the thing in his own nature: Let us here discuss what it availeth scripture to be had and read of the lay and vulgar people. And to this question I intend here to say nothing but that was spoken and written by the noble doctor and most moral divine, saint John Chrysostom in his third sermon *de Lazaro*; albeit, I will be something shorter, and gather the matter into fewer words and less room then he doth there, because I would not be tedious. He exhorteth there his audience, that every man should read by himself at home in the mean days and time, between sermon and sermon, to the intent they might both more profoundly fix in their minds and memories that he had said before upon such texts whereupon he had already preached, and also that they might have their minds the more ready and better prepared to receive and perceive that which he should say from thenceforth in his sermons, upon such texts as he had not yet declared and preached upon.

Therefore saith he there, My common usage is to give you warning before what matter I intend after to entreat upon, that you yourselves in the mean days may take the book in hand, read, weigh, and perceive the sum and effect of the matter, and mark what hath been declared and what remaineth yet to be declared, so that thereby your mind may be the more furnished to hear the rest that shall be said. And that I exhort you (saith he) and ever have and will exhort you, that you not only here in the Church give ear to that that is said by the preacher, but that also when ye be at home in your houses, ye apply yourselves from time to time to the reading of holy scriptures, which thing also I never lin [i.e. spare] to beat into the ears of them that be my familiars, and with whom I have private acquaintance and conversation. Let no man make excuse and say (saith he), I am busied about matters of the commonwealth; I bear this office, or that; I am a craftsman, I must apply mine occupation. I have a wife, my children must be fed, my household must I provide for. Briefly, I am a man of the world. It is not for me to read the scriptures. That belongeth to them that have bidden the world farewell, which live in solitariness and contemplation, and have been brought up and continually nuzzled in learning and religion.

To this answering, What sayest thou man? (saith he) Is it not for thee to study and to read the scripture, because thou art encumbered and distracted with cares and business? So much the more it is behoveful for thee to have defense of scriptures, how much thou art the more distressed in worldly dangers. They that be free and far from trouble and intermeddling of worldly things live in safeguard and tranquility, and in the calm, or within a sure haven. Thou art in the midst of the sea of worldly wickedness, and therefore thou needest the more of ghostly succor and comfort! They sit far from the strokes of battle, and far out of gunshot, and therefore they be but seldom wounded. Thou that standest in the forefront of the host, and nighest to thine enemies, must needs take now and then many strokes, and be grievously wounded, and therefore thou hast most need to have thy remedies and medicines at hand. Thy wife provoketh thee to anger; thy child giveth thee occasion to take sorrow and pensiveness; thine enemies lie in wait for thee; thy friend (as thou takest him) sometime envieth thee; thy neighbor misreporteth thee or picketh quarrels against thee; thy mate or partner undermineth thee; thy lord, judge, or justice, threateneth thee; poverty is painful unto thee; the loss of thy dear and wellbeloved causeth thee to mourn; prosperity exalteth thee, adversity bringeth thee low. Briefly, so divers and so manifold occasions of cares, tribulations, and temptations, beset thee and besiege thee round about. Where canst thou have armor or fortress against thine assaults? Where canst thou have salves for thy sores but of holy scripture?

Thy flesh must needs be prone and subject to fleshly lusts, which daily walkest and art conversant among women, seest their beauties set forth to the eye, hearest their nice and wanton words, smellst their balm, chive, and musk, with many other like provocations and stirrings: except thou hast in a readiness wherewith to suppress and avoid them, which cannot elsewhere be had, but only out of the holy scriptures. Let us read and seek all remedies that we can, and all shall be little enough. How shall we then do, if we suffer and take daily wounds, and when we have done, will sit still and search for no medicines? Dost thou not mark and consider how the smith, mason, or carpenter, or any other handy craftsman, what need soever he be in, what other shift so ever he make, he will not sell nor lay to pledge the tools of his occupation. For then how should he work his feat, or get his living thereby? Of like mind and affection ought we to be towards holy scripture. For as mallets, hammers, saws, chisels, axes, and hatchets, be the tools of their occupation; so be the books of the prophets, and Apostles, and all holy writers inspired by the holy ghost, the instruments of our salvation. Wherefore let us not stick to buy and provide us the Bible, that is to say, the books of holy scripture; and let us think that to be a better jewel in our house than either gold or silver. For like as thieves be loth to assault an house where they know to be good armor and artillery, so wheresoever these holy and ghostly books be occupied, there neither the devil nor none of his angels dare come near. And they that occupy them be in much safeguard, and have a great consolation and be the readier unto all goodness, the slower unto all evil; and if they have done anything amiss, anon even by the sight of the books their consciences be admonished, and they wax sorry and ashamed of the fact.

Peradventure they will say unto me, How and if we understand not that we read, that is contained in the books? What then? Suppose thou understand not the deep and profound mysteries of scriptures. Yet can it not be but that much fruit and holiness must come and grow unto thee by the reading, for it cannot be that thou shouldst

be ignorant in all things alike. For the holy ghost hath so ordered and tempered the scriptures, that in them as well publicans, fishers, and shepherds may find their edification, as great doctors their erudition. For those books were not made to vain glory, like as were the writings of the gentile philosophers and rhetoricians, to the intent the makers should be had in admiration for their high styles and obscure manner and writing, whereof nothing can be understood without a master or an expositor. But the Apostles and prophets wrote their books so that their special intent and purpose might be understood and perceived of every reader, which was nothing but the edification of amendment of the life of them that read or hear it. Who is it that reading or hearing read in the Gospel, *Blessed are they that be meek*, *Blessed are they that be merciful*, *Blessed are they that be of clean heart*, and such other like places, can perceive nothing except he have a master to teach him what it meaneth? Likewise the signs and miracles with all other histories of the doings of Christ or his Apostles. Who is there of so simple wit and capacity, but he may be able to perceive and understand them? These be but excuses and clokes for the rain, and coverings of their own idle slothfulness. But still ye will say I can not understand it. What marvel? How shouldest thou understand, if thou wilt not read, nor look upon it? Take the books into thine hands, read the whole story, and that thou understandest, keep it well in memory; that thou understandest not, read it again, and again. If thou can neither so come by it, counsel with some other that is better learned. Go to thy curate and preacher; show thyself to be desirous to know and learn, and I doubt not but God - seeing thy diligence and readiness (if no man else teach thee) - will himself vouchsafe with his holy spirit to illuminate thee, and to open unto thee that which was locked from thee. ... The reading of the scriptures is a great and strong bulwark or fortress against sin; the ignorance of the same is a greater ruin and destruction of them that will not know it. That is the thing that bringeth in heresy; that is it that causeth all corrupt and perverse living; that is it that bringeth all things out of good order.

Hitherto all that I have said, I have taken and gathered out of the foresaid sermon of this holy doctor, saint John Chrysostom. Now if I should in like manner bring forth what the selfsame doctor speaketh in other places, and what other doctors and writers say concerning the same purpose, I might seem to you to write another Bible, rather than to make a preface to the Bible.

Wherefore in few words to comprehend the largeness and utility of the scripture, how it containeth fruitful instruction and erudition for every man: if anything be necessary to be learned, of the holy scripture we may learn it. If falsehood shall be reproved, thereof we may gather wherewithal. If anything be to be corrected and amended, if there need any exhortation or consolation, of the scripture we may well learn. In the scriptures be the fat pastures of the soul, therein is no venomous meat, no unwholesome thing; they be the very dainty and pure feeding. He that is ignorant, shall find there what he should learn. He that is a perverse sinner, shall there find his damnation to make him to tremble for fear. He that laboureth to serve God, shall find there his glory, and the promissions [i.e. promises] of eternal life, exhorting him more diligently to labor. Herein may princes learn how to govern their subjects; Subjects obedience, love, and dread to their princes; Husbands how they should behave them unto their wives, how to educate their children and servants; and contrary, the wives, children, and servants may know their duty to their husbands, parents, and masters. Here may all manner of persons, men, women, young, old,

learned, unlearned, rich, poor, priests, laymen, lords, ladies, officers, tenants, and mean men, virgins, wives, widows, lawyers, merchants, artificers, husbandmen, and all manner of persons of what estate or condition soever they be, may in this book learn all things what they ought to believe, what they ought to do, and what they should not do, as well concerning almighty God, as also concerning themselves and all other. Briefly, to the reading of the scripture none can be enemy, but that either be so sick that they love not to hear of any medicine, or else that be so ignorant that they know not scripture to be the most healthful medicine. Therefore, as touching this former part, I will here conclude, and take it as a conclusion sufficiently determined and appointed, that it is convenient and good the scriptures to be read of all sorts and kinds of people, and in the vulgar tongue without further allegations or probations for the same, which shall not need, since that this one place of John Chrysostom is enough and sufficient to persuade all them that be not frowardly and perversely set in their own willful opinion, specially now that the king's highness, being supreme head next under Christ of this Church of England, hath approved with his royal assent the setting forth hereof, which only to all true and obedient subjects ought to be a sufficient reason for the allowance of the same, without further delay, reclamation, or resistance, although there were no preface nor other reason herein expressed.

Cranmer continues in his second and latter part to advise Bible readers to come to the word of God, that 'most precious jewel' with all reverence for God, seeking his honor as well as edification. See more... <http://www.bible-researcher.com/cranmer.html>