

## Which Bible?

If you are planning to join us on the Bible in a Year journey in 2012, well done! I thought it might be handy to make a few suggestions which may help. To that end I will post a few tips here as I think of them and invite you to follow them if they help.

Firstly, some people have asked me about which Bible to use. There are a great many bible translations now, and they vary quite a lot. Generally speaking, there are two types of bible to choose between, depending on your reading and learning style:-

- (i) *“Word for word”* or *“essentially literal”* translations, that seek to capture the wording of the original text and the personal style of the writer.
- (ii) *“Thought for thought”* translations, where *today’s meaning* is the priority (how it would be said today in equivalent phrasing).

Here are a few points to consider, and some examples.

### **1. The King James Version**

The beloved King James version was published in 1611 (400 years ago!), updated in 1629, 1638, 1762, and 1769 and is one of the most significant translations in history. However, the English language has changed a lot in 400 years and many KJV words and phrases are no longer meaningful. Worse still many KJV words, such as *charity*, *trespass*, and *profit*, have different meanings today and could even mislead the reader. Some still say the KJV is the “only authentic” and accurate version, but the vast majority of Bible scholars and Christians reject all these objections to modern translations and do not consider the KJV to be more accurate or more sacred.

### **2. Modern Bible Versions**

Recent developments in archaeology and Biblical scholarship have been spectacular such that many modern English translations are, if anything, more accurate, as well as easier to read. Any text differences are relatively minor and no significant changes of belief or interpretation would result from the many minor corrections. These newer versions are translated from the best available ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, many of which are older than those available in 1611. Some verses found in the KJV are omitted but only because these verses are not verses are not found in the oldest and best Bible manuscripts. The most famous example is the doxology, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen." that the KJV adds to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:13. That phrase is not found in the oldest manuscripts of Matthew and modern translations therefore omit it.

Many modern versions, such as the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) and *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) also use “gender-inclusive” language. This is not “politically correct” or “feminist”, and translators use gender-inclusive language only where it would have been understood that way in the original Hebrew and Greek languages. Because English lacks a “common gender” third person singular pronoun, language that applies equally to men and women in the original Hebrew and Greek has traditionally been translated as “he” or “him”, giving the mistaken impression that a verse applies only to men. Such verses have been phrased in some modern translations to accurately convey the gender-inclusive sense of the original.

### 3. So which one?

Any of the following, plus quite a few others, are fine. The choice will depend on which one you find the most helpful in covering the bible in a year, which means you need to be able to read it and reflect on it comfortably.

#### 3.1 Literal Translations

- (i) ***The New International Version of the Bible (NIV)***, is the one we have in St Paul's church and usually read from the lectern. It is a completely new translation of ancient Greek and Hebrew texts, published in 1978, and is relatively clear and easy to read and understand. The TNIV (***Today's New International Version of the Bible***), is an update of the NIV, using appropriate gender-inclusive language.
  
- (ii) ***The New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV)***, is very commonly used today, published in 1989, and an update of the highly regarded Revised Standard Version of 1952. The language is very modern, though the style more traditional than the NIV. The NRSV also uses gender-inclusive language.
  
- (iii) ***The English Standard Version (ESV)*** is becoming more popular and follows an essentially "literal" philosophy of translation, aiming to translate the precise words of the original text, in a way that allows modern readers to read what the original author wrote but still understand it.

#### 3.2 Dynamic Equivalence or "Paraphrase" Translations

There are a number of highly popular paraphrased versions translated "thought-by-thought" instead of word-by-word. These adopt a style that is thoroughly modern and these Bibles are suitable for all ages and easy to understand. By definition, these texts involve some interpretation, using an approach to translation known as "dynamic equivalence." If something in the original text is difficult or obscure for a modern reader, the original text is translated with words or phrases intended to communicate the *same general concept* (a dynamic equivalent). A list of such popular translations would include the *Good News Bible* (1976) and the *New Living Translation* (1996).

These bibles are very easy to read and the language flows more than literal texts. The main potential danger however is that they can blur the line between *translation* and *commentary*. Literal translations attempt to translate what the author actually wrote and either explain a difficult word or phrase in a footnote, or leave explanation to commentators. Dynamic equivalence translations generally attempt to remove such difficulties from the text by offering what they believe to be a more understandable modern English equivalent.

This will always increase the risk of a more subjective interpretation, but can produce bibles which are easy to read, and even hugely enjoyable. Examples are:

***The Living Bible (TLB)***, published in 1971, is a popular paraphrased version written by Kenneth N. Taylor, who began this version to help his own children understand the New Testament Letters of Paul.

***The New Living Translation (NLT)***, published in 1996, is a thought-by-thought translation by 90 Bible scholars from various theological backgrounds and denominations. It is similar to *The Living Bible*, but the language is more traditional.

***The Message Bible***: *is a unique paraphrase of the bible written by Eugene Peterson published around 2000, and it is not really a bible "translation". This is what Petersen says about it in the foreword : "The Message is a reading bible. It is not intended to replace the excellent study bibles that are available. My intent here is simply to get people reading it who don't know that the Bible is readable at all, at least by them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in t bible to read it again, But I haven't tried to make it easy.....and at some point along the way ...it will be important to get a standard study Bible to facilitate further study. Meanwhile, read it in order to live, praying as you read, "God, let it be with me just as you say."*

The choice is yours. If you struggle with literal word-for-word texts, and do not wish to go in for in-depth bible text "study", then a paraphrase is excellent. If you prefer to read something which is as near as possible to the actual words written, then choose the NRSV or ESV (or similar). God speaks though all these versions and the important thing is that you are able to read and enjoy, and hear Him speak to you.

Choose the version that you enjoy and which enables you to cover the ground, enjoy the experience, and look forward to tomorrows reading!

**Barry Hingston (Rev'd), St Paul's Church, December 2011**