Diocesan Conference: Presidential Address 2026

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This year marks the 500th anniversary of William Tyndale's pioneering translation and publication of the New Testament in the English language. Until that point, the only copies of the bible available to the people of the UK were in Latin or in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, and the translating of the bible into the language of the people was strictly forbidden. But Tyndale's conviction that the bible should be accessible to all held firm. Having been refused permission by the then Bishop of London to translate the New Testament into English, he went to live in mainland Europe where he continued his work, finishing the translation in 1526 - the first to be done from the original Greek.

His now famous words sum up his passion to place the word of God in the hands of ordinary folk: 'If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy who drives a plough to know more of the scriptures than you do.'

Thousands of these texts were then smuggled across the channel into England, often in bales of cloth, and distributed to the wealthy families who were able to read them. The bishop of London, when he got to hear about it, is said to have required all the copies of the English translation to be bought, collected up and burned.

Some 10 years later, as Tyndale was beginning his translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew, he was betrayed and then imprisoned before being executed by being strangled and burnt at the stake. His last words were reported to have been 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes.' It was a prayer that was to be fulfilled two years later when Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's Chancellor ordered that there should be an English bible in every parish church. We owe Tyndale a huge debt of gratitude.

His translation set the bar for all future translations of both Old and New Testament into an accessible text for the day. Some say that his legacy is so profound that he might well be the most important Englishman who has ever lived.

Over the centuries, many people have risked their lives, with some even dying, in order to bring the word of God to people who have never had access to it. Some of you will know about Open Doors which was founded in 1955 by the Dutchman, Brother Andrew, who began his life's work smuggling bibles to persecuted Christians behind the iron curtain, as was. Chinese bibles and Russian bibles followed, and the work continues today with the translation of God's word into the language of indigenous communities across the world. Closer to home, two and a quarter centuries ago in 1800, a young Welsh girl walked barefoot for 26 miles in order to buy a copy of the bible in her native tongue. That's the equivalent of Newport to Penarth and back. 15-year-old Mary Jones spent 6 years saving money by doing odd jobs in order to be able to afford her own Welsh bible.

Such stories demonstrate not just how important owning a bible has been to so many people, but how important it's been, and still is, to have one that speaks to the language of the heart.

So what of us, you and I? What would you risk, I wonder, in order to have a bible of your own? And what part do the scriptures play in your Christian discipleship and prayer? As with all anniversaries, celebrating William Tyndale's work 500 years ago provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the place of the bible in our own lives and the life of our church.

I think it's fair to say that it's not been a strong point of the Anglican church to teach the bible to its congregations. Central to our worship has tended to be the Eucharist, the sacrament, with congregations getting somewhat restless if the sermon goes on much beyond 10 minutes. Even when the Eucharist was not a weekly occurrence, even when communion was only received three times a year at Christmas, Easter and Whitsun, the focus tended to be on the liturgy rather than the sermon, with both Mattins and Evensong populated by psalmody, canticles, hymns and an Old and New

Testament reading. Lots of scripture there, but not in a way that's opened up, explained or explored.

Contrast this with the chapels and the experience of our non-conformist sisters and brothers, who were and still are in many places, treated to sermons of 45 minutes or so, with the preacher unpacking the scriptures in great detail and using the time as an opportunity to teach as much as to preach the word of God. I remember well my time at a Baptist church in London when I was a student there. The sermon was central to the act of worship and weeks would be spent going through one of the letters of St Paul or one of the gospels. Verse by verse, with a nod to the original Greek and its meaning at the time and in the context in which it was written, we'd be treated to a comprehensive exposition of the passage. And I learnt a lot.

But knowing our bibles and understanding our bibles is one thing. What's really exciting is when we allow the bible to form us and shape us as disciples of Jesus Christ. God's word is not static or stuck in the past. It's not simply a record of what happened thousands of years ago. It's alive and active, as we read in the letter to the Hebrews: 'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it pierces, even to dividing the soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' (Heb 4:12)

So, the text is something not simply to learn *about* but to engage *with*. This is God speaking to us, directly through his word – both his written word on the page and his Word (with a capital W) who is the person of Jesus. When we come to it with open and curious hearts, when we read or listen to it expecting God to speak to us through it, then we enter into dialogue with it. We engage with it and it engages with us in turn. And then, it comes to life; motivating and inspiring us, challenging and comforting us and, yes, correcting us. As Paul writes in his second letter to Timothy: 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness…' (2Tim 3:16).

We might think we know our bibles reasonably well. But even if that is the case, we might ask ourselves the degree to which we allow ourselves to be

changed and challenged by the stories, the parables, the miracles and the life of Jesus?

Take the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance. The parable is straightforward in its simplicity. A man is attacked and left for dead. Two people choose to ignore him and walk by on the other side. A third stops to look after him and ensure his ongoing care. Go and do likewise, says Jesus.

But the implications of the story are immensely challenging if we allow it to speak into our own norms, prejudices and inclinations. Jesus says 'love your neighbour as yourself' and told the parable in response to the rich man's rather provocative question, '…and who is my neighbour?' Who is my neighbour? Is that not one of the questions at the forefront of our politics at the moment? The attacked man was a Jew. The man who rescued him was from a group of people that the Jews hated and despised and would have nothing to do with. Translate that into today's context – in our own village or town or city – and we come up with some interesting scenarios. Who are the people we hate, distrust and fear? How willing would we be to tend one of them lying in the streets, show care and compassion for them and ensure their ongoing wellbeing?

And what of the two who walk by, who were conforming to society's norms of the time and following their religious rules in not rendering themselves unclean? Were they simply not wanting to risk being ostracised or criticised for going beyond what was deemed acceptable by their family, society and religious grouping? What do we choose, when going against our current society's norms will risk hostility, criticism perhaps even worse from friend, family or even a complete stranger?

The bible can indeed be sharper than a two-edged sword if we engage with it and allow it to speak to us in the here and now of our lives.

This coming year as a diocese, we're focussing on discipleship and I'm delighted that later this morning Archdeacon Ian is going to be introducing both the Love Your Neighbour Campaign and the Discipleship Course that focuses on living out our faith in a way that serves the needs of others. It's been immensely encouraging to hear the many stories of what's already happening across the MAs of our diocese. It's clear that in so many places

and in so many ways, people are seeking to pattern their lives on the one who came not to be served but to serve. Which is wonderful to see.

Tomorrow is the Feast of Christ the King. Again, given the politics of the world in which we live, it's worth each of us sitting with our bible for a few minutes and allowing it to speak to us about Jesus our King and what kind of King he was and is. In his earthly life, according to our scriptures, Jesus's kingship is demonstrated by humility, service and sacrifice: riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, kneeling in front of his disciples and washing their feet, being willing to be arrested and killed that we might come to understand what God's love for us looks like.

Tomorrow's gospel seems to suggest that this king comes to us as a stranger, a prisoner, a person who is hungry, thirsty and in need of clothing, and he invites us to respond. Not demanding anything of us. Not even asking. Simply being there amongst us. And we hear the king say to us, 'just as you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it to me.' Equally, 'just as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

Service requires us to give. To give of ourselves and to give what we have, be that as individuals or as a church. Not to give what is left when we've had all that we want, but to be generous, self-sacrificial, even, and thereby find joy and blessing in sharing the gifts God has given to us.

I was greatly challenged many years back, hearing the story of a single mum who was bringing up her two children on a fairly basic wage. I guess that most of us in her shoes, if we're honest, would want first to ensure that we've got everything we need to pay the bills and care properly for our children, before thinking of ourselves and what we might give to the church. But this woman believed in the principle of tithing and before spending anything, gave a 10th of what she had as her gift to God through God's church. She claimed that neither she nor her children ever went without but that God blessed her and cared for them all by providing all that they needed.

Every time we read the bible or listen to a passage, God is there to speak to us through it: to comfort and heal, to inspire and to motivate, to challenge

and to convict, whatever is needed in the moment. And when we take notice, God changes us. We're honed, purified and transformed into the likeness of Christ. It's a serious business. But this is what God calls us to and invites us into. An amazing journey, which is the only journey worth making.

What a privilege it is and how blessed are we to have the bible available to us in our own languages without fear of reprisal or risk of death. Here in these pages we have access to the very word of God who calls us by name, makes us his own and leads us into life in all its fulness. There can be no greater privilege or gift. Here, in and through these pages, we're formed into the likeness of Christ as we immerse ourselves in God's word, and therefore in his Word who is Jesus. In our prayer time and in our worship, God longs to engage with us, to speak with us and to give us what we need. We simply need to come with open, curious and expectant hearts.

And this is why I'm so pleased that we have the discipleship course that's being brought to us today to guide us on our way. Meeting in small groups to explore God's word has to be one of the best ways of growing as disciples of Jesus. We do our congregations a disservice if we don't provide opportunities for our people to explore their faith in the light of God's word and to share that faith and growing understanding with one another.

Some of you will have heard me tell the story of my group of elderly ladies in one of the parishes I served in Manchester. All of them had been going to church all their lives and none of them, in all that time, had been given any opportunity to explore the bible other than through the sermon on Sunday. They were simply not used to exploring, talking about or sharing their understandings of what God was saying to them through his word.

When we first started meeting, all of them were reticent to speak. But after a few weeks, after they'd grown in confidence and discovered that there was no such thing as a silly question, each of them started to share, in a way they'd never done before. It was both humbling and moving to listen to them talk about their faith and their life experience. And together, we grew as our faith was deepened and animated.

‘How sweet are your words to my taste’, says the Psalmist. ‘Sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’

May God bless us with a zeal to engage with his word, that we might become the people he has created us to be and live our lives together as faithful disciples, for his sake and the sake of his gospel.