

## A HISTORIC TREASURE

On Sunday, February 7th 1954, Queen Elizabeth II and her consort the Duke of Edinburgh attended the first public service of their tour of Australia. This was held in St. Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney. As a gesture of friendship between the Old World and the New, the Churchwardens and Parochial Church Council of St. Andrew's Church, Barnwell, Northamptonshire, the parish Church of the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, gave to Sydney Cathedral their copy of the Great Bible of 1539. The historic treasure was placed on the lectern at this memorable service

After experts of the Mitchell Library, Sydney had carefully undertaken certain repairs, the Great Bible, now the oldest in Australia, was formally presented on behalf of Barnwell Church and was received by the Dean of Sydney on behalf of St. Andrew's Cathedral on St. Andrew's Day, 30th November, 1954. The presentation was made by the Rev. Harry Bates, B.Sc. (Rector of Barnwell 1945- to 1953) who left Barnwell to become Resident Tutor and Chaplain of Moore Theological College, Sydney. At the service Mr. Bates preached the following sermon.

### THE ROMANCE OF THE GREAT BIBLE OF 1539.

#### INTRODUCTION.

The old Barnwell Bible which has just been formally received into the safe keeping of Sydney Cathedral is one of those Bibles which history books refer to as the 'Chained Bible'. In the days when that Bible was used, to replace its copy in the event of loss would have cost a parish the modern equivalent of about £60, so it was chained to the lectern. Sometime in its long history the rib of this present volume was torn away, and the evidence of its having been chained destroyed.

This version of the Bible is also known as the "King Henry the Eighth Bible" because he gave his royal sanction to its publication. It is also referred to as "Cromwell's Bible" because Thomas Cromwell, who was Chief Secretary of State, issued the injunction in the name of the king to each parish in the realm that "one booke of the whole Bible of the largest volume be sette up in some convenient place within the saide churche". Yet again it is sometimes known as "Cranmer's Bible" because Thomas Cranmer Archbishop of Canterbury wrote a preface to the second edition.

All these names, the Chained Bible, the King Henry Eighth Bible, Cranmer's Bible and Cromwell's Bible give pride of place to the more familiar title, "The Great Bible of 1539". It was thus called on account of its size. During the previous few years similar translations, at first in part then of the whole Bible, had appeared, but these were small and were intended for private use. THIS WAS THE FIRST BIBLE EVER TO BE PRINTED WITH THE PRIMARY AND EXPRESS PURPOSE OF BEING USED IN PUBLIC WORSHIP and was the forerunner of the lovely large and legible volumes which grace the lecterns of



our cathedrals and parish churches to this day.

As we trace the way in which the Great Bible came to occupy a prominent place in the public worship of England, we shall realise that its mere size was its least claim to greatness. IT WAS GREAT IN THE FINEST SENSE OF THE WORD IN AT LEAST THREE DISTINCT WAYS, a consideration of which justifies, I believe, the title of my address, "The Romance of the Great Bible of 1539".

#### I. THE 1539 BIBLE WAS A GREAT TRANSLATION.

William Tyndale, an exceptional Christian scholar, became deeply impressed at Cambridge with the influence which a Greek translation of the New Testament by Erasmus was having amongst university men. What would not the influence upon the nation be if copies were made available in the dialect of the day to everyone who could read. This vision of a whole nation reading the Word of God, made available through the medium of the printing press, held the soul of Tyndale in a vice-like grip until he had translated the entire New Testament and the greater part of the Old into the English tongue. Moreover he set himself the stupendous task of translating from the oldest authorities available, from the Greek for the New Testament, and from the Hebrew for the Old Testament.

Our indebtedness to Tyndale for his monumental work cannot be over-estimated. He not only set the standard for accurate and reliable translation by going back to the oldest texts available to him but he produced a translation in the simple, melodious yet vivid language of his day. And let us note this, that spoken English in Tyndale's day had achieved a beauty and flexibility unsurpassed in the history of the nation. Thus in presenting to his fellow-countrymen the Bible in their own tongue, Tyndale also captured for all time the genius of the English language at its best. The Authorized Version found in our churches today, the language of which we are so familiar, is basically the same as the Great Bible of 1539, a truly great translation loved throughout the English speaking world.

#### II. THE 1539 BIBLE WAS A GREAT ANSWER TO PRAYER.

From the first Tyndale's work received scant sympathy from the bishops in England. His translations were novelties and were condemned as heresies. Henry VIII had not yet broken with the Pope, and Tyndale was merely a Reformer, a follower of Luther, a heretic. It was not safe therefore for Tyndale to carry out the work of translation and publication in England. But the conception of a widespread distribution of a readable edition of the Word of God had determined for him his life-work which he would pursue at all costs, and if it were not safe for him to stay in England he would grapple with his enterprise on the Continent.

Here he found a refuge, but even the Continent became unsafe for him. The unrelenting arm of the persecutor reached after him as a heretic. Agents of an unknown foe in England tracked him down and secured his imprisonment, and in 1536 he died a martyr's death in Antwerp. It seemed as if the longing of a life time was to go unful-



filled. But to the end Tyndale endured in faith as seeing Him Who is invisible, and a few moments before he was strangled at the stake he prayed in the hearing of his executioners, "Lord open the King of England's eyes".

Meanwhile a movement was taking place in England amongst the common people that could not be silenced. Over a considerable period Tyndale's translations had been smuggled into England often in bales of merchandise. When they could lay hands on them the bishops bought them up and publicly burnt them nevertheless many reached the hands of the laity. Their mental and spiritual appetites were whetted for the revealed truth of God to Man and they petitioned the King to authorize an English translation of the Bible. On the second petition he yielded, and in 1537, the year following Tyndale's death, there appeared Matthew's or Roger's Bible. Though the King could hardly have known it, this was in fact a reprint of Tyndale's work and, where he had ended, of his friend Coverdale's.

The King had granted much, but one final step remained to be taken. Thomas Cranmer Archbishop of Canterbury, Miles Coverdale friend and pupil of the deceased Tyndale, and Thomas Cromwell Chief Secretary of State were determined that the Bible should become nothing less than a national institution. The obvious thing was to introduce it into the parish churches of England. The King was again approached and royal consent given. For this purpose a large volume would be required rather than the small quarto and octavo ones previously published for private reading. Better paper was to be obtained in Paris than in England, so Cromwell despatched Coverdale to France to see the new work through the press. When on the point of completion the mission almost ended in disaster for agents of the Inquisitor General of France seized the press, and Coverdale had to flee for his life. Then by a miracle of Providence the entire press and completed sheets, as waste paper, were purchased and transported to England where the first copies of the Great Bible were bound. It is not outside the realm of possibility that this Barnwell Bible was one of those first Great Bibles printed on French paper.

Tyndale's prayer - a lifelong prayer - had been wonderfully answered. His very translation, proscribed by the King, hated by the clergy, burned by the bishops was now published under another name with royal permission in the most systematic and influential way possible by insisting, despite its cost, that each parish in the land should procure its own copy.

### III. THE 1539 BIBLE WAS A GREAT LITURGICAL PRECEDENT.

A new piece of furniture, the lectern, was now introduced into and given a prominent place within the cathedrals and parish churches of England to hold the Great Bible. Folk from the parish would stand around the lectern with eager interest whilst one who was literate would read from the best of all books.

It was only a step from the introduction of the Bible into parish church to the introduction of lessons from the Bible into the actual services of the Church. Imagine the astonishment this must have created, to hear in the midst of public worship passages in English being read from the Scriptures for the first time.



The expression 'public worship' is really a misnomer. For hundreds of years the people in the Church of England had taken no intelligent part in the services of their parish churches. The Latin tongue in which the service was said or sung had no meaning for them, so they merely stood and stared, or knelt and gazed at the mysterious ceremonial. Now for the first time ears and minds and hearts were opening to receive the Revelation of God to Man.

Is it not significant that in 1549, ten years after the publication of the Great Bible, there appeared the First Book of Common Prayer in the mother tongue, a book which was to displace the various Latin usages. The reading of lessons in English out of the Great Bible, from 1539 onwards, created such a hunger in the hearts of Englishmen for a mode of worship that was intelligible and scriptural that the publication of a Book of Common Prayer was sooner or later inevitable.

You will be interested to know that when I found this Bible in an old chest three years ago, I hurried to Cambridge University to have it assessed. Dr. Basil Atkinson, the Under-Librarian of Cambridge University Library quickly confirmed that it was indeed the Great Bible. Then to my astonishment he took a pen-knife, and with one deft stroke slit the inner binding. He sensed my amazement, which almost amounted to a protest, and explained that he was looking for a fragment of an ancient Latin service book which book-binders used in their work. Sure enough there was a leaf of a service form dating from the time of William the Conqueror, i.e. five hundred years or so older than the Bible itself. Historically interesting, yes, but in that discovery we may discern a parable. The old Latin service forms which were meaningless to the people were now hidden out of the way and in their place a Book of Common Prayer rich with meaning, written in the mother tongue, was substituted. And it was the 1539 Bible, a great liturgical precedent, which paved the way for the Reformed Worship.

Whenever therefore in days to come we look at the Barnwell Bible which has been skilfully repaired by experts at the Mitchell Library so as to preserve it for the inspection of future generations, yet so as to retain its original doeskin binding, let us recall that the reading of this very Book would be the means of bringing parishioners out of Medieval darkness into Reformation light. There it will lie, we hope to the end of time, in its attractive glass case in Sydney Cathedral, an original and representative copy of that noble version of the Bible, beautifully printed, strongly bound, and prominently placed in churches throughout the Old Country, the Great Bible of 1539, which was nothing less than the spear-head of the Reformation in England.