

Sunday 25 October – Bible Sunday

Sermon by Wendy Borgartz

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](https://tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Bible Sunday is when we celebrate the gift of God's word, but 2026 is a particularly special year. It's the 500th anniversary of the English New Testament which was translated by William Tyndale in 1526. The Bible Society has provided information on this anniversary, which I am using today.

William Tyndale was born around 1491 in Gloucestershire. He studied at Oxford at Magdalen Hall – later to become Hertford College and graduated in 1515 as an ordained priest in the Catholic Church. Around this time Erasmus, a Dutch scholar, gathered Greek manuscripts and printed an edition of the New Testament in Greek. In 1522 Martin Luther produced a German New Testament based on Erasmus's version. Then in 1523, in France, a French New Testament was translated. Tyndale decided he would translate the Greek New Testament into English. Up until that time the Bible was almost always read in Latin, and most ordinary people did not understand Latin, only the wealthy and educated classes. Tyndale wanted ordinary people to be able to read (or hear) the Bible for themselves in their own language.

At the time there was a law saying that you couldn't translate the Bible into English unless you had permission from the Bishop – as you can see rules over what you can and cannot do in a church are far from new. Tyndale asked permission from the Bishop of London, but the Bishop refused which meant that no printer in England would print Tyndale's work.

Instead, Tyndale travelled to Wittenberg, which is near Leipzig in modern Germany and studied in Luther's university. In 1525 Tyndale finished translating the New Testament into English and started printing. But it looked like he might be arrested so he fled to Worms (pronounced Vorms), which is near Strasburg. It was here in Worms, 500 years ago, in 1526 that the complete edition of the New Testament in English was published and it was smuggled into England. This was the first New Testament in English and also the first to be printed. The Church ruthlessly looked for, confiscated and destroyed the smuggled books and Tyndale was condemned as a heretic, for going against the teachings of the Church. But

Tyndale continued to work on translating more of the Bible into English whilst in Germany over the next ten years, publishing the book of Jonah and the first five books of the Old Testament, having learnt Hebrew. In 1535 Tyndale was betrayed and he was arrested and charged with heresy. He was executed in 1536 in Vilvoorde near Brussels.

Just a year later in 1537 a new law was passed allowing people to read the Bible in English. Then in 1538 King Henry VIII declared that every parish church should have an English Bible, and in 1539 the government commissioned the printing of an English Bible called the Great Bible and one went to every parish church. Today just three original Tyndale Bibles remain in the world, one at each of the British Library, in St. Paul's Cathedral (with some pages missing) and the State Library in Stuttgart.

Tyndale is widely regarded as the single best translator of the Bible into English. His influence not just on the Church but on the English language was immense. Many of the phrases we use today were coined by him:

- no man can serve two masters
- The signs of the times
- the powers that be
- the law unto themselves
- fight the good fight
- He gave up the ghost
- it came to pass

And many future editions of the Bible stem from Tyndale. If you've ever read

- The King James Version
- The New James Version
- The Revised Standard Version
- The New Revised Standard Version (which is the one we use in church)
- The English Standard Version ... they all stem from Tyndale's original version!

Scholars have calculated that the New Testament you read in the Bibles just listed are about 85% Tyndale. What a legacy!

In our Old Testament reading, when Ezra and the Levites read the first five books of the Old Testament to the people, they also provided interpretation, giving the sense so that the people understood. What

Tyndale and those producing the modern Bible translations we use today were doing is no different to what Ezra was doing when the Israelites returned from Babylon and rebuilt Jerusalem, they are all helping us to understand scripture in ways that work for us.

One thing about me you may not know is that in the early 1980s I did a degree in French and Russian, so I learnt about translation from one language to another, and the difficulties. Do you do a literal translation of each word? Or do you try to convey the underlying sense and symbolism in the original version? Or do you try to do both? This last option is exceedingly difficult. I can give you a silly example of this. I was in France as part of my course when the film ET came out and I saw the film at home and again dubbed into French while in France. I don't know if you have seen the film, but there is a scene where ET is feeling homesick and the little girl is trying to understand why. She draws pictures of a house and a telephone and gets across the message about ET phone home to help ET. I know phone home is an Americanism to get from a drawing of a house and a phone, but we all understand the word home means more than just a physical house. But in translating it into French, they had to go with the word '*maison*' which just means house, there isn't actually an equivalent word in French that links a physical house with what is implied also by the word home, so the scene lost some of its deeper meaning in French to the English version.

I often wonder when I read the Bible in English what, if anything, may have been 'lost in translation' so to speak, whether we are getting the full meaning that was in the original version. That is partly why, especially when I find a passage difficult to understand, I try to look at different translations to help me. But we have to understand that all those scholars, from Tyndale onwards, who have completed translations of the Bibles into other languages would have no doubt had the help and support of the Holy Spirit to guide them to come up with the best translation possible.

I wonder when you last read your Bible? Was it today, yesterday, last week, last month, last year? Reading the Bible is one of the ways we come to know God. The Holy Spirit will guide each of us as we read our Bibles in versions we can understand as we learn more of God through the scripture. Amen.