

## Clerics and Queen gather to mark 400 years of Bible translation

Westminster Abbey hosts ceremony to celebrate the authorised version of the Bible as presented to King James in 1611



The Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles attend a service marking the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible at Westminster Abbey, London. Photograph: Chris Jackson/AP

When the quarrelsome clerics who composed the authorised version of the Bible 400 years ago presented it to King James I of England, they laid it on a bit thick as they believed their spluttering, suspicious, wily Scottish sovereign was anointed by God rather than the beneficiary of a political fix. On Wednesday, their successors at Westminster Abbey laid it on for James's modern-day counterpart, the Queen, too.

Today, even the most devoted monarchist might hesitate to describe her as "the Most High and Mightie ... by the Grace of God," as the Bible's dedication had it, but most of those at the abbey's 400th anniversary service of thanksgiving probably believe, like their 17th-century predecessors, that "great and manifold were the blessings bestowed upon us when first He sent your Maiesties Royall Person to rule and raigne over us". The current royal person brought the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles – naturally a great enthusiast for the authorised version – with her to the service.

The ceremony, with the full pomp of the Church of England in its most shimmering gold vestments, had the archbishop of York reading the Gospel – in the authorised version of course – the archbishop of Canterbury preaching the sermon and the dean of the abbey pronouncing the blessing. There was even a Catholic cardinal – "a Popish person at home" – Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, former archbishop of Westminster, whose presence the translators would definitely not have approved.

The service was the culmination of a year marking the anniversary of the translation, produced over

seven years between 1604 and 1611 by teams of Jacobean bishops, academics and theologians – the loved and the loathed, the abstemious and the alcoholic – who argued, intrigued and conspired to produce a text which would be read aloud in Anglican churches across the world, scarcely amended, for most of the next four centuries.

Its most felicitous phrases – the powers that be, feet of clay, reap the whirlwind, the writing on the wall, the apple of his eye and a law unto themselves – have entered the language and its cadences have influenced virtually every significant writer in English since.

The abbey was a suitable place for the service because it was there that the compilers met, in the Jerusalem Chamber, to test their translation by reading it aloud before it was sent for printing.

The Very Rev John Hall, the abbey's dean, told the 2,000-strong congregation: "We acknowledge with gratitude the work's lasting influence on our national language and culture and on the faith, language and culture wherever the English language has reached throughout the world. Above all, we pray that we and all people may continue to be uplifted and transformed by the great story the Bible tells."

Perhaps mindful of the disputatious power of its words – some American fundamentalists believe God really spoke in 17th-century English, though at least one US tele-evangelist refuses to use the King James version because he suspects the sovereign was a homosexual – Rowan Williams warned in his sermon of the imperfectability of translations: "We have all suffered from a mindset in the last couple of centuries that has assumed there is an end to translating and understanding and thus that there is something wrong with any version of a text that fails to settle disputes and to provide an account of the truth that no one could disagree with. But what the 1611 translators grasped was that hearing the word of God was a lifelong calling that had to be undertaken in the company of other readers and was never something that left us where we started."

That did not mean they brooked disagreement. The translators warned against "self-conceited brethren, who runne their own ways and giue liking unto nothing but what is framed by themselves and hammered on their anvil," almost as if they were thinking of Richard Dawkins.

Stephen Bates - The Guardian