



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

Reflections

December 2018 – *THE REAL BEAUTY OF THE INCARNATION*

In 1947, C.S. Lewis wrote the preface to the first part of a new translation of the New Testament by J.B. Phillips. Church-goers at this time were very familiar with the “Authorised” or “King James” version of the Bible. In addressing the benefits of modern translations, Lewis considered, among other things, “the real sanctity, the real beauty, the sublimity” of the New Testament and the life of Jesus Christ. An excerpt follows:

It is possible that the reader who opens this volume on the counter of a bookshop may ask himself why we need a new translation of any part of the Bible, and, if of any, why of the Epistles. ‘Do we not already possess’, it may be said, ‘in the Authorised Version the most beautiful rendering which any language can boast?’ Some people whom I have met go even further and feel that a modern translation is not only unnecessary but even offensive. They cannot bear to see the time-honoured words altered; it seems to them irreverent.

There are several answers to such people. In the first place the kind of objection which they feel to a new translation is very like the objection which was once felt to any English translation at all. Dozens of sincerely pious people in the sixteenth century shuddered at the idea of turning the time-honoured Latin of the Vulgate into our common and (as they thought) ‘barbarous’ English. A sacred truth seemed to them to have lost its sanctity when it was stripped of the polysyllabic Latin, long heard at Mass and at Hours, and put into ‘language such as men do use’ — language steeped in all the commonplace associations of the nursery, the inn, the stable, and the street. The answer then was the same as the answer now. The only kind of sanctity which Scripture can lose (or, at least, New Testament scripture) by being modernized is an accidental kind which it never had for its writers or its earliest readers. The New Testament in the original Greek is not a work of literary art: it is not written in a solemn, ecclesiastical language, it is written in the sort of Greek which was spoken over the Eastern Mediterranean after Greek had become an international language and therefore lost its real beauty and subtlety. In it we see Greek used by people who have no real feeling for Greek words because Greek words are not the words they spoke when they were children. It is sort of ‘basic’ Greek; a language without roots in the soil, a utilitarian, commercial and administrative language. Does this shock us? It ought not to, except as the Incarnation itself ought to shock us. The same divine humility which decreed that God should become a baby at a peasant-woman’s breast, and later an arrested field-preacher in the hands of the Roman police, decreed also that He should be preached in a vulgar, prosaic and unliterary language. If you can stomach the one, you can stomach the other. The Incarnation is in that sense, an irreverent doctrine: Christianity, in that sense, an incurably irreverent religion. When we expect that it should have come before the World in all the beauty that we now feel in the Authorised Version we are as wide of the mark as the Jews were in expecting that the Messiah would come as a great earthly King. The real sanctity, the real beauty and sublimity of the New Testament (as of Christ’s life) are of a different sort: miles deeper or *further in*....¹



As we prepare for Christmas this year, let us ponder the real sanctity, the real beauty, of the Incarnation of Jesus and what it means for us and all of humanity.

*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman,
born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as sons.*

GALATIANS 4:4-5 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, “Modern Translations of the Bible” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, pp. 229-230).