

The Bible Societies in Ireland

Sermon File

200 years on...So what do we have to celebrate?

Scripture focus: Luke 4.14 –30: Jesus reads from the Scriptures.

Note: Sections in blue refer to PowerPoint slides in the PP file AND Photos files that can be downloaded.

Introduction: In 1806 a group of people came together to commence what became known as the Hibernian Bible Society. A year later their enthusiasm had spread to Belfast, all driven by the desire to make the Scriptures affordable and available to a poor population - **exemplified by the young Welsh girl, Mary Jones**. What is the Bible Society movement contributing now as it moves into its third century, at a time of unprecedented prosperity and personal insecurity, ridicule of the Bible and its neglect by many Christians?

1. Jesus as our example

- We read Luke's record of Jesus standing up in the synagogue to read. **Amazing!** - the **Son of God** reading the **Word of God**.
- Luke's account records the graceful way in which he spoke and how well, initially, his words were received.
- His short sermon set out to show that God's grace was for *everyone*, not just Jews, but there was a riot from which he walked away unhurt.
- Jesus' lifestyle, which applied his Scripture knowledge to real life situations, is a model for us today – as is the regular pattern of his prayer life. He was often to be found in a quiet place, reflecting.

2. Jesus proclaims his claim not just on us, but on the lives of everyone

- How are people to know of Jesus unless we share the good news of the Gospel with them? As Paul put it: *"How can people have faith in the Lord and ask him to save them, if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them?"* (Romans 10.14)
- How can we respond to the call of Jesus unless the Bible is open and close to our own heart? If **we** do not value the Scriptures for ourselves, we will not care whether or not **others** receive it. How can we participate in the Great Commission unless we first accept and celebrate that God speaks to us through the Scriptures, in our language, and in our lifetime?
- The Bible Societies are called to serve the Churches by making Scripture available to everyone. As the Church and as individuals, we are called to empower the Bible Societies in that task through prayer and support.

3. So much has been achieved:

- A wide range of translations is available in English (and Irish) so that every home here can have the Scriptures in a style to suit them.
- The complete Bible is available in 426 languages so that even the stranger in Ireland can hear God speak to him in his heart language.
- 372 million Scriptures were distributed by the Bible Societies in the year 2005 alone - a massive international effort.

4. But what is missing?

- In Ireland there is much to dishearten the Christian in terms of declining spirituality, church attendance, Bible reading and behavioural norms. However, in other countries there is a growing hunger for the things of God, especially access to Scripture. To find the growth of the Christian church we need to look to Africa and Asia.
- Here, the Bible is seen as old and irrelevant. There, the Bible is sacred, regarded as God's living breathing word for today. Bible reading groups are a popular way of sharing the Bible experience. For those unable to read, Scripture is available for groups to sit and listen and discuss.
- In short, we in Ireland need to re-engage with the Scriptures; to discover that they are precious, (not just old), and that they, with prayer, form the basis for a new relationship with Jesus Christ.

5. What part is each of us to play in this great enterprise?

- How can we **celebrate** unless we **participate**?
 - In daily Scripture reading and use of Study notes to guide us.
 - In regular informed prayer about the people and the projects through which God's Word is being made available today.
 - In supporting specific translation projects so that we too can rejoice when people in other countries receive Scripture in their hands for the first time.

The Bible in action (1): (Pictured) Edward Mutema is General Secretary of the Bible Society in Zimbabwe. He underlines the difference between our two cultures: "For us", he said, it's hard to believe that young people in the West don't really care about the Bible. When you get the Bible into our context people rush for it as if they are going for gold and it's amazing!"

The Bible in action (2): (Pictured) In Sudan, audiences in their thousands gather to watch the Jesus Film which, based on Luke's Gospel, has been translated into local languages. In places like Darfur where there is no electricity and the projector has to be powered by a portable generator, hundreds of thousands of people have encountered Jesus with thousands coming to faith, hundreds undertaking discipleship training and six new churches being set up in 2005 alone.

The Bible in action (3): (Pictured) Eltoma Ngor came to faith as a child attending church in Sudan and began to share her faith with others at school. Now she has brought more than 200 people to follow Jesus.

- But....**how can we honestly celebrate** having the Scriptures when hundreds of millions of people **have yet to see their first Scripture verse** in their mother tongue? Can we be content with that?
- It took almost **20 years** to complete the translation of the New Testament into *Kituba* for 1 million speakers in the Republic of Congo. On the day in 2006 that the newly completed book was dedicated, there was a realisation that they had joined a privileged group for the first time. 'God speaks *Kituba*', it was said.
- In 2007, the translation of the **Ámharic Bible** for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church will be completed – a language that has 30 million speakers. That would not be achieved in an impoverished country

without the support of the Bible Societies in Ireland? **But what about the work not yet started in thousands of other languages?**

6. The key to our response must be through:

- Regular, well informed prayer at home and within our wider fellowship.
- Reading Bible Society news, and using their websites and E-mails to keep ourselves up to date.
- Incorporating Bible Mission within our strategy as we seek to be a church committed to reaching out in Christ's name.
- Providing our gifts of money and our talents of time in support of some of the Bible Society projects abroad which span over 200 countries.

7. Bible distribution has an immediate impact:

- Throughout China there are stories of how entire families have been changed as a result of Scripture being placed in their hands. **Now that the 40 millionth Bible has been printed at China's Amity Printing Press in Nanjing, how could we begin to measure the impact of God's Word in that country of 1.3 billion?**

The Bible in action (4): (Pictured) The young Chinese Han mother had toiled to morning worship up a mountainside near Kunming, carrying her 6-month old child. It took her two hours to get there. She had come to faith while reading a second-hand Bible to her mother and her mother's group of friends. Now she was the leader of a House group church of over 200 people. That is the result when we set the Gospel free.

- **With the support of churches and individuals throughout Ireland, our local Bible Societies are supporting Scripture translation and distribution in around 30 countries this year – a vital contribution to a world-wide effort. They covet our prayers and support to do even more.**

The Bible in action (5): (Pictured) People like the families in Zimbabwe who have been decimated by HIV/AIDS with millions left as widows and orphans. Specially designed Scriptures are being provided for them with support from Northern Ireland to point them to the spiritual encouragement that they need.

8. Conclusion

Luke 4.18 records Jesus reading publicly from the scroll of Isaiah:

*"The LORD'S Spirit has come to **me**, because he has chosen **me** to tell the good news to the poor". **We have also been called** - to hand on the great truths of the Gospel to this and the next generation. If we do this faithfully, then we can truly join in the celebration. It is only through the physical copying of the Scriptures down the centuries that **we** have been able to encounter Jesus, to hear him speak in **our** language, and grow in **our** faith.*

After all those centuries, we dare not drop the baton by failing to pass on what we have heard. (Chinese crowd pictured) If we do, we will have failed the generations who will follow us – the millions who have yet to hear about Jesus.