

Hubris. Nemesis. Words, until very recently indeed, little heard outside of certain pockets of academic history and literary pretension. In the past month, however, it's been almost impossible to turn on the TV news, flick on a radio, read a newspaper without hearing the words proclaimed. Unless of course you only watch Channel 5 and read the Daily Star.

Hubris. Nemesis. I know the way we use them we've actually got the precise semantics of the words wrong, but we're not ancient Greeks anymore, and words mean what we mean them to mean, and what we mean by hubris and nemesis is overreaching proud arrogance forcing the hand of fate; pride's taunting 'come on if you think you can' leading to the inevitable fall; destiny's deflating response to braggadocio; a banana skin perfectly placed in the path of a pair of strutting leopard print shoes. Apart from the absence of a chorus flouncing in diaphanous dresses and scary masks the past month in the news has been almost exactly like watching a Greek tragedy unfold, except as far as we're aware nobody has yet unknowingly done away with dad and married their mother.

Anyway, with the light hearted intro to hubris and nemesis done, we've suitably introduced the theme for the evening and anyone who doesn't want to pay attention to the serious bit can grab some speedy shut eye now because the next few minutes will be all about hubris, nemesis and the Reformation, that latter, unless we've all been missing something, not an event famed for its comedic potential.

This year we observe the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, an occasion marked worldwide with a flood of Protestant pride and self-congratulation as Luther's successors have sung their successes and congratulated themselves on a half millennium of freeing the minds of Christianity from the shackles of Godless superstition and Paganistic papistry. One might be tempted to warn these partying Protestants that they may be tempting Fate to react to such hubris, but alas, such a warning would be too late. About 500 years too late. Nemesis came, almost unnoticed, a long time before today.

How? The best way to explain a complex suggestion in theological history is, as usual, to turn to Oscar Wilde, and these lines from the Ballad of Reading Gaol.

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

The tragedy of the Protestant Reformation was not the destruction it wrought on the rich tapestry of mediaeval Christianity. The tragedy of the Reformation is, in its pride, how close it has come to destroying the very thing it professed to love: the Bible.

Christians have done many many terrible things because of the Bible- we should all know that. Less well known, they have also done lots of really bad things *to* the Bible. Most, paradoxically enough we can trace back to the Protestant Reformation. Let us be clear that the Reformers loved the Bible, because they loved God and to them the Bible was the clearest, purest way they could hear God. Impeccable motives, but so often passions lead us to extremes and extremes end with us doing the very things we set out to avoid.

So what terrible things had those Reformers done?

Well, start at the beginning and translating the Bible out of incomprehensible ancient tongues into the vernacular shouldn't really be a problem. There is no good reason for it to be in Latin, only read by priests and lots of good reasons for us to read it in our own tongue. But there *is* a problem if you then go on to say- which you will, as this is why you translated it in the first place- 'this is the literal, inerrant word of God.' Because, well, it isn't. It's in English for a start which, whatever fantasies British Imperialists later held, God didn't speak to the peoples of the ancient Middle East. The Bible texts can be cruel, crude and contradictory which, if you're on the 'literal inerrant' trip means either you have to be too or you have to engage in all manner of egregious contortions to explain the inexplicable or, the usual solution, you just select the bits that don't really apply to you and bang on relentlessly about them.

Related to this is our next exhibit of vandalism which is to cut bits out that you don't agree with. You may or may not have noticed that, ironically enough, a Protestant Bible is quite a lot shorter than everybody else's. The bits that are missing are, conveniently enough, the bits that support things like praying for the dead or purgatory, all that stuff that Puritans really hate.

And then, with perhaps the sharpest of ironies, the statue smashing image-burning iconoclasts quickly got themselves to the point where, if they're not actually worshipping the good book, it takes a subtle mind indeed to see that. Human brains are notoriously lazy: once you start to say 'this is the Word of God' very soon you start shortening what you say for convenience sake, and before you know it this is no longer the word of God, 'this is God'. And then you start burning people for being unbiblical. Bad move boys.

One of the worst things we have done to the sacred scriptures, however, was done by a person you have probably never heard of. I certainly hadn't till I was googling for this sermon and that man (it always is) goes by the name of Robert Estienne. In 1551 our Bob decided to take the Bible and to divide it into numbered verses. Great idea! Chapter and verse are a major aid to micro-studying the Bible. And also, such numbering means we have taken an incredible written gift from Heaven and turned it into 31,102 bullet points, 31,102 separate aphorisms, 31,102 (34,244 if you include the Apocrypha) lego building blocks that can then be assembled and reassembled in an almost infinite variety to say *precisely what you want them to say*. You'd have to be *really* sure of yourself to not see the danger of that.

Slice the Bible into verses and if you're not careful you've been on a visit to Legoland, taken a brick from each exhibit and then used them to make your own model; before then claiming that it is the only true meaning of Legoland. Or more even obsessively you've skipped along to Legoland, taken all the red bricks out of the exhibits and used them to build your own model (most likely something like a stick or a cudgel) and declared 'this is what Legoland means'. Which of course is *not* what it means: if it means anything at all, Legoland means a fun day out for all the family or being stuck in a hot car on a traffic jam on the M4 or a capitalistic exploitation of children's desire to be creative.

I think I've pushed the Legoland metpahor to it's limit (there's a phrase you don't hear very often - see how special this evening is turning out to be). We've pushed the analogy as far as it will go but I'm sure you get the gist. Not long after chopping the Bible into verses we insidiously started to think of it and treat it as though it consists of thousands and thousands of tiny bricks. Context is all, and that's a guaranteed way to lose context.

Those of you of a certain age may remember the Eastenders character Dot Cotton. Entirely unknown to herself Dot Cotton is an almost perfect embodiment of the Reformation thanks to her habit of periodically dropping a Bible verse into the conversation, complete with chapter and verse references. She might have had a heart of gold- somewhat nicotine-stained but gold nonetheless- but Ms C was a lousy Bible scholar because very, very little of the Bible is actually intended to be aphoristic, and for most of it, if you really want to understand it, context is all.

There we go. Our brief investigation of Reformation Hubris is drawing to a close. As we've been to Walford it really should end at this point with... but alas, we dont have the drums.

Here's what we can take away from this. Read your Bible. It's a unique gift. But when you read it, try to ignore those little verse numbers- they're not there in the original. Keep in the back of your mind that what you're reading is always an interpretation, as all translations are. Bear in mind that though the Bible talks about God and can bring you closer to him, you won't find him trapped in those pages: he's a bit bigger than that.

And, be aware, if you ever reach a moment where you think: 'you know, I think I've God thing down pat' you've reached your moment of maximum hubris. Your faith is the search for God, we are all still looking and the answer is at the end.

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