

Theme: Vinegar Bible at St. John's

Exodus 20.1-4,7-9,12-20, Phil 3:4-14, Matt 21:33-46

Today's parable about the Vineyard reminds me of St. John's very famous Bible and how it came to be known as the 'Vinegar Bible'.

The story goes like this: Back in 1716-1717, the bible's printer, a Cambridge man by the name of John Baskett, held the very prestigious and coveted position: 'Printer to the King'.

These were the early days of printing. Every single letter had to be hand set in lead. To put this in perspective, in the King James Version of the Bible, there are some 783,137 words. These words are made up of 3,116,480 individual letters. After reading this statistic, we might have a greater appreciation for how relatively easy it might be to make a mistake or two, in the type setting.

The most famous mistake in this Bible is found in the 20th Chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, where Jesus tells a parable concerning workers being sent into the Lord's vineyard. John

Baskett, however, sends the workers not into the 'vineyard' but into the 'vinegar'.

Twelve Bibles were printed when someone noticed the vinegar mistake and stopped the press. Just as a stamp or coin with a mistake becomes more valuable, due its rarity, the 12 Vinegar Bibles have become world famous.

Now, to be Printer to the King was a coveted post. Many were jealous of the position and wanted Baskett gone. His detractors called his bible "*a Baskett-full of errors.*" The rest as they say, is history.

Our Vinegar Bible came to St. John's in 1761 when it was brought here by the Rev. Robert Vincent who received it from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. It is a 'Lectern Bible' because the large print was for use in Church to Proclaim the Word of God.

Rev. Vincent worked with Rev. Jean Baptiste Moreau as the second missionary of St. John's. He also served as the town's school master. Rev. Vincent was in Lunenburg from 1761 - 1765, when he died quite suddenly from what at the time was called 'a chill'.

There were no clergy pensions in those days, so financial difficulties led his widow to sell the Bible in July 1766 for a handsome sum to the Honourable Michael Francklin (1732-82), Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia (1766-1772). Francklin earlier served as the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Lunenburg County from 1759 to 1760, where he became well acquainted with St. John's Church.

Governor Francklin took the bible to the Legislature in Halifax where it was read to start each session of the Legislature. Over time, he wrote in end pages in the bible in his own hand writing, about his life in NS, the history of his family and its genealogy.

It is a rich and fascinating glimpse into life in Lunenburg and Nova Scotia in the mid 1700's.

With Francklin's death in 1782, the bible becomes lost to history, that is, until St. John's fire of 2001. A series of circumstances led our Vinegar Bible to be housed at the Historic Pepys Library of Magdalene College, at Cambridge University in England, under the eye of the Chief Librarian, Dr. Richard Luckett.

Dr. Luckett, told me how a burst pipe caused water damage to several rare books. One that was restored and returned to the Library was a rare 'Vinegar Bible'. When Luckett heard of the fire at St. John's, he recalled reading in the Vinegar bible, several years earlier, about Governor Francklin and Lunenburg.

He explored further and made the discovery that the bible had been sent out from England to St. John's Church in Lunenburg back in 1761. At that point he said, it became his desire to have the bible returned to St. John's.

Dr. Lockett told me: *“I am delighted that this bible will be repatriated to historic St. John’s Church in Lunenburg, NS, from where we have its first beginnings.”*

Several people made the return of the Bible possible including the late Dr. Marie Elwood, retired Chief Curator of History of the Nova Scotia Museum, the Honourable Mayann Francis, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, The Rt. Rev’d Bishop Susan Moxley and of course our own MLA, the Honourable Michael Baker, who secured funding in the amount of \$5,000.

The Vinegar Bible was repatriated to St. John’s in time for our 255th Anniversary Celebrations on June 8, 2008, after having been absent from our Church for nearly two and a half centuries.

An interesting side note is that Roger Baskett, a direct descendent of the Bible’s Printer, John Baskett, happened to be sailing around Lunenburg at the time and hearing about the repatriation of the bible, joined us for the celebration that

day.

At the time, George Munroe, Chair of St. John’s Heritage Committee said: *“the Lunenburg Vinegar Bible is as significant to the historic fishing village of Lunenburg as the Gutenberg Bibles are to the world of publishing. This is extremely valuable for us to have this returned. It is the frosting on the cake.”*

Bound in dark green leather with the embossed arms of George III, the Bible bears the exquisite illustrated engravings of John Thornhill, who painted the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London – and several chapels at Oxford.

The Vinegar Bible is indeed a very valuable bible in terms of its beauty and rarity – of the original 12 bibles, there are only a few copies left, one on display at the British Museum in London and another in North America, housed in an Episcopal (Anglican) Church also with the name of ‘St. John’s Church’ located in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Our Vinegar Bible is housed in a very beautiful wooden case, itself a work of art – handmade by our own Peter Allen, St. John’s long-time Chimer and a master carpenter. Peter was commissioned to build the bible case by renowned ceramicist, Dr. Walter Ostrom, in memory of his daughter’s fiancée, the late Ezra Morrell. Ezra was a carpenter who had worked for a time on the restoration of the church and was killed in a tragic accident before the church was reopened.

Friends, our Vinegar Bible is a wonderful treasure which we hope will be a part of St. John’s for many generations to come to proclaim the Word of God.

Archdeacon Michael H. Mitchell

References

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