

# The Oldest Book



## with the Newest Message.

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### AN ADDRESS:

*Delivered by the Right Honourable the  
Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. R. G.  
Menzies, K.C., M.P., at the Town Hall,  
Melbourne, on the occasion of the Centenary  
Thanksgiving Meeting of the British and  
Foreign Bible Society, Victoria, on the  
15th July, 1940.*



RT. HON. R. G. MENZIES,  
K.C., M.P.

I just want to occupy your time very, very briefly in telling you, in my own fashion two or three reasons why I regard it as a great privilege to be here on this Centenary occasion, why I regard it as a great privilege to be associated with your celebration of the work of the Society which, in the last 100 odd years, has done work for the world of the most distinctive and indeed unique character. And all my reasons, of course like yours, must go back not so much to the day we celebrate as to the Book we celebrate. I believe that I can say to you and that I can say it for you and for many hundreds of thousands of people that the minds of men have gone back to this great Book more in these last few months than they have for many years past.

I am able to stand here tonight and say this is no mere formality that I should come here, but it is the genuine expression of a genuine sharing with you of thankfulness and enthusiasm for this occasion.

There are good reasons that one might give for one's interest in this Book. I just want to mention, very briefly, three of them and I do not want to mention them in their order of importance.

The first of these reasons is that I believe that this English Bible of ours, properly read, properly understood, is the greatest fountain of enthusiasm that one could discover. I never read it without feeling stirred by it, and I never read it without feeling that my imagination has been stirred by it. There is, I believe, no book printed which has such an amazing sweep, which can take you back so rapidly in such an illuminating way over centuries, over generations of mankind, over almost the entire history of mankind. It is a great thing, you know, to be able to extract from the printed word just that kind of enthusiasm. I remember, and I thought of it tonight when His Grace made some reference to Cambridge, the last time I visited Cambridge I went into a place he knows very well, the Fitzwilliam, and there, wandering around this great museum of treasures, I found under a little cover in a glass frame the manuscript of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," the manuscript written in a fair hand on a sheet of notepaper. And, as I looked at it and saw that immortal couplet of his;

"hath  
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."

and saw a little alteration in it in Keats's own handwriting, I, who had read all the poetry of Keats, felt, for the first time, that I had come near to him as a man, I had seen his very handwriting—just the same sort of stirring in your mind and heart that you get if you go as I have been privileged to go, and see hanging in a frame on one of the walls of "Chequers," the residence of the Prime Ministers of England, that letter from Oliver Cromwell in which he said, you remember, "The Lord made them as chaff before our swords." And I get just that kind of quickening of the imagination when I look back over those pages of history which are the pages of the Bible that we are discussing tonight.

My second reason for being glad to be here tonight is that this great Book has given to us, more than any other book and more than any man, the language that we speak. True it is that Tindale and Coverdale, and the writers, the editors, the translators of the authorised version know none of these fancy Latin words we use today. They had never heard of "de-contamination;" they had certainly never heard of "re-decontamination;" they had never heard of a thing being "finalised;" they had never heard any of these abominations that we make in these days of ours. They spoke and they understood just that sturdy Anglo-Saxon speech that Shakespeare understood and spoke. And yet, with all the simplicity of their language, they had a capacity to stir the pulse in a few sentences that no other writers have ever had since. This is the great repository of our tongue, and, if this world by some melancholy mischance, became a world of black and gloomy atheists tomorrow, they would still need to read the Bible if they wanted to understand the speech of the English people.

My third reason, and my greatest reason, is that, with all the influence that this Book has had upon the imagination of our race, upon the speech of our race, its supreme influence has been upon the character of our race. It must

indeed have been very seldom in the history of man that a speech should of itself have been the instrument for moulding character, but, just as the Bible taught the English their own English so it wove into the fabric of the English character that profound realisation of the existence of God, that profound belief in the value of the moral judgment that has made our race the greatest race in the world, and that alone can keep our race a great race. I am not going to say — nor would you believe me if I said it — that we are without blemish in our history, that we have never as a nation done mean things or dishonest things. Of course we have; many times have we fallen short of a standard, but we have always set the standard for ourselves and we have always made that standard high. We may occasionally have disappointed those to whom we had given our word. We have never, I believe, wilfully broken our word. To us the international contract, the promise given, have their ultimate sanction in the moral depths of our nature. Our international obligations have never been mere obligations of law; they have been obligations binding upon the conscience. We have on all occasions endeavoured to act as decent and straight and honourable people should act. Our judgment has been a judgment founded upon an appreciation of the moral nature of man, and not merely a judgment of expediency founded upon the strength or the weakness of our opponents. That is a big thing to say: I say it without any form of boasting: I hope rather to understate it as I say it. But I believe that if there is one thing that has informed and coloured the policy of the British people throughout the centuries it has been that beating in upon their consciences, upon their hearts, that has been wrought by the Great Book, the centenary of whose publication in this State we are celebrating tonight.

I think that it was Matthew Arnold who, in discussing the difference between the Greeks and the Hebrews, pointed out what is indeed true, that to the Greeks knowledge was the thing, clearness of thought was the thing. They loved dialectics for their own sake. They loved the crystal quality of a clear mind. But to the Hebrews the quality of thought was never so important as the quality of action, the quality of conduct. And we British people, standing today at a time of great trial in our history may, I believe, say with all humility that confused as we may have been, muddled as we may have been, we have always attached supreme importance to the quality of a man's conduct rather than the mere quality of a man's mind. If that is true, then we did not derive it simply from some strange atmosphere that existed over the British Isles; I believe we derived it from a Book which, crystal clear as it is except to those who seek to confuse it by straw-splitting, has at the same time elevated to a supreme place in life the test of what a man does rather than the test of what he says or how he thinks, the test of conduct, and, by that test at this hour, we shall stand or fall.

None of us has any doubt that in this war the character of the world is at issue, and that issue will be determined by the character of us. I cannot put somebody else's character into the scale today and so let that weigh down the scale for virtue. I must put my own, and you must put your own, into the scale, and unless the sum of our character today justifies us in saying that the character of the world is at issue in this war then we do not deserve to win the war. But, if the sum does justify that claim, then I have no doubt that we shall win the war because, in that event, God will be on our side.

Now, I just want to conclude by saying this to you. I said something just now about reading the Book. The other night I was reading it, and reading it, as you may very well imagine, with more than half a mind on the troubles of these days which are perhaps in a special sense troubles of mine because I have great responsibilities, and in reading it I came across a passage which contained, I suppose, the oldest story of the boyhood of any of us, the story of David and Goliath — so well known that we hardly bother to go back and read it. But I went back and read it, and, for the rest of this war, it is my text. As I think of almost all Europe armed at this moment to attack the little green country of Great Britain, and when I think of all that is at stake in it, I think you will agree with me that this old story will bear repetition. I wonder if I might just read a few words of it? I shall not read it all, although I have always loved the description of the Philistine with his lance like a weaver's beam. But will read this:

“And he took his staff in his hand, and chose him five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in the shepherd's bag which he had, even in his scrip; and his sling was in his hand: and he drew near to the Philistine. And the Philistine came on and drew near unto David; and the man that bare the shield went before him. And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him: for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and withal of a fair countenance. And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods.

And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field.

Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou has defied. This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. ”

It is a great privilege, ladies and gentlemen, for a Prime Minister of a Christian country engaged in what, strangely enough, it is bound to believe a Christian war, to come along on an occasion like this and say a few words to himself and to you about the oldest Book with the newest message in it for the sons of men.

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