

A Bible-Reading Marathon

It was 9am on a cloudy Wednesday morning at St Mary's, Barnham. Father Simon said a prayer to encourage me on my way and, to the sound of clicking shutters and the glare of flashbulbs, my attempt to read the King James Bible for 114 hours (including 20-minute breaks) was under way.

1pm the same day saw me through Genesis, 5.20pm through Exodus, and the evening was devoted to Numbers. My witness (our Parish News editor) and I had a chuckle at the extraordinary chapter 7 and its bizarre repetitiveness. Darkness fell and, used to my frequent overnight travel, I sailed through the first night, ploughing on through Deuteronomy and into Joshua and Judges. Into Thursday morning, and my first variation on the tight schedule necessitated by an urgent "comfort break" half-way through Judges, just after Samson & Delilah, but then it was business as usual, the rest of the day devoted to the books of Samuel and Kings, the wonderful stories of Saul, David and "Zadok the Priest" when I wanted to sing! Night fell again, now getting tantalisingly near my beloved Psalms, but tiredness was now marching on me as I tackled Nehemiah and Job, and by the time I started the Psalms the Red Bull, the caffeine-rich coffee, the bananas and the chocky flapjacks weren't working so well. Mini-blackouts foreshadowed worse to come. But I rallied and ploughed through Psalms and Proverbs during Friday daylight hours, gladly received some Strepsils for my much-abused throat, and moved on through Song of Songs to reach Isaiah. "Have you not heard the everlasting Lord never grows tired or weary?" But I am only human, and despite proudly announcing at 9pm or thereabouts that the task was half done, tiredness was now a real issue.

Jeremiah was my nemesis. Working through him with gusto, my awareness of what was going on around me began to fade and by the early hours of Saturday, I had lost my grip on reality, ceasing now to understand what I was doing, why I was doing it, and what I actually had to do to complete the task. I may have been reading bits of the King James Bible but in no logical order and with no coherence at all. Concern for my welfare grew, but I was out of it, well out. Paramedics were summoned and confirmed the diagnosis – exhaustion. Witnesses who had come to see me stride majestically forward were left to nurse me and do whatever they could to help me out of my state. Finally I was propelled into slumber on the vestry floor, the record attempt, like me, in bits.

Sunday morning I awoke and was instantly refreshed. My seven hours' sleep had done the trick. I bathed and enjoyed, like the condemned man, a hearty breakfast; I worked out where my solemn declamation had disintegrated into semi-gobbledegook and carried on. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel occupied me for the morning and an army of minor prophets that afternoon, before a supper break, easy-to-swallow shepherd's pie a godsend for my raging throat, then it was into the New Testament and the familiar words of the Gospels. By ten fifteen when I stopped for a sleep I was well into St Luke's, and a 5am start on the Monday, which I knew was necessary to complete the task, saw me complete the Gospels and go on to Acts. The rest of the day was devoted to the Epistles until at 5.30 I arrived at Revelation and with a church filled with supporters and helpers I marched with increasing strength to those great words in chapter 21 – "there shall be no more sorrow or crying, neither shall there be any more pain." A few moments later the task was done and Father Tony was offering prayers of thanksgiving.

It had been a rollercoaster 6 days. I'd been to heaven and hell and back, and experienced so much love and kindness from so many people, too numerous to mention, but I must say a massive thank you to Bradley and Steven, the church wardens, for their fantastic support, and my darling wife Susan and daughter Jennifer for all they did to keep me going. I may not get into Guinness World Records (although 60 hours may well be a world record for Bible reading) but I've raised £2 755 for charity and church funds, and done what I had set out to do – read the whole King James Bible!

David Bathurst

1 Oct 2011

