



1 March 2009
The First Sunday in Lent
Choral Evensong
Exodus 3 vv. 1–6
Revelation 19 vv. 11–16

Reading the Bible in... Translation: One Word or Many?

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A pistol-packing priest, at one time hauled before the Star Chamber accused of “confederacies, combinacons, exacons, riotts, unlawfull assemblies, lying in ambushes”, may not seem an obvious choice for inspiration as we come to the last of our sermon series on Reading the Bible. However, William Morgan, Bishop of Llandaff and St Asaph, and one of the more colourful old boys of our college, was the first man to translate the entire Scriptures into Welsh and his 1588 Bible resting on the altar tonight is a real landmark piece of history.

Nowadays Christian scholars like Morgan or Sts Cyril and Methodius who invented the Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets to record their translation of the Scriptures into the Slavic languages of the Balkan peoples in the 9th century tend to be fêted more for their linguistic and cultural contribution than for their theological insight. It may well be right to credit Morgan with the creation of Welsh as a unified literary language and yet he was also following in a rich Christian tradition of Biblical interpretation, a long line of Christians who wished to make words of God available to others as a means of their engaging with the Word of God. Although sometimes hidden by the dominance of Latin as the political and ecclesiastical *lingua franca* of Europe for so long, Christianity and translation went hand in hand from the earliest days.

It was not just that the Gospels were so rapidly translated into Latin and Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian and the language of every country to which Christian missionaries travelled. Our patron St John – and here I am assuming, perhaps not uncontroversially, that the author of the *Book of Revelation* is the same person as the originator behind (through probably not the writer of) the *Gospel according to St John* – wrote his *Book of Revelation* in his second language. The Greek is quite frankly appalling – he certainly wouldn't have been admitted to read Classics here with any of our Choir-men. It is idiosyncratic to say the least and laced with Aramaic idioms that have baffled more classically trained Graecists for centuries. But it says something vital about St John's faith that he would rather write badly in his second language for a wide readership, than beautifully in his first language for a narrow one. His goal is to share the experience and encounter with God which so overwhelmed him with as many others as possible. Not so that it might be definitive but rather that it might be a means of encounter.

By choosing to translate the truth so freely, Christians said and still say something profound about the God we worship and the nature of revelation. The Word of God is not so much text as person. God's *Davar*, his *Logos*, is what was with him in the beginning, it was with God and it was God (*Jn.* 1.1-3). The *Letter to the Hebrews* tells us, “The word of God is living and active...able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (*Heb.* 4.12-13). Now of course that translation “before him” could be rendered “before it”, Greek nouns are gendered and *Logos* is masculine. For those of you who can think back to your school-day French and all that effort to remember genders “*la table*” not “*le*”, it's a little like deliberately calling a table “her” when translating it back to English. But what we find throughout both the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures is more person, than property. The Word of God is the rider on a white horse from our second lesson – “*He* is clothed in a robe dipped in blood and his name is called the Word of God” (*Rev.* 19.13). He is the Second Person of the Trinity and therefore Scripture is not the whole of it. Scripture, the writing down of this Word is a secondary thing – the medium of our encounter and not the thing in itself.

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This is not true in all religions. In Islam, there is a clear distinction made between the *Qu'ran* as it truly exists in Arabic and the translations which are at best just an aid to understanding. To truly read the *Qu'ran* people must and do learn Arabic. In Judaism, the situation is complicated somewhat by issues of cultural identity but nonetheless there is an importance to reciting the *Torah*, *Neviim* and *Ketuvim* in Hebrew. Not so, the Bible. We are so used to it that it's unremarkable, but very few churches have active programmes of New Testament Greek study, far less Hebrew reading groups. However, this choice of many voices over one is a profound theological statement. Firstly, it acknowledges that the truth of God's Word is first and foremost the person of Jesus Christ, "the image of the invisible God" (*Col.* 1.15), "the radiance of his glory" (*Heb.* 1.3), both in his historical earthly incarnation and in his ongoing spiritual presence to the Church; and secondly, it shows an acceptance of the fact that God's Word, his revelation, is always accommodated to us. We never know the fullness of God, only as much as we are capable of grasping and this involves God reducing himself – translating himself over and over again – in order that he may be known. As St Augustine said, "If you can comprehend it, it is not God" (*Sermo* 117.3.5).

When we read the Bible, we are invited into an encounter, a relationship with God's Word. The many words in the many languages are not the one Word but point us to him. For we worship not just a God who has spoken but a God who still speaks.

One of the most profound ways of reading the Bible is the Benedictine practice called *Lectio Divina*. Here the boundary between prayer and reading, between past and present revelation is explicitly blurred. The reader takes only a very short passage of Scripture, perhaps a verse or two and, before even looking at it, prays for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. One then reads the passage through slowly, again and again, allowing God's present voice to speak anew through his historical one. New connections are made. The inspired activity of the reader is as essential to the creation of the meaning of the text as the inspired activity of the writer. You could draw superficial parallels with modern reader-response theories, which tend to downplay authorial intention and focus on the creation of multiple authentic readings through interaction. However, for theologians there is a crucial distinction, in that the disjunction is bridged by the activity of the Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit is believed to have been active in inspiring the writers of the Bible, so to he is active in those reading the Bible. Meaning is grounded in neither author, nor reader, nor even their interaction but rather in the inner relationships of the three persons of the Trinity, into which both Bible authors and Bible readers are drawn.

Many Trinitarian models, such as Gregory of Nazianzus' reflections on *Psalms* 36.9 "In your light we shall see light" or Dorothy Sayers' movement from idea to creative expression to response, portray precisely this movement as constructed in both God's inner relationships and our experience of him.

The act of translation shows that the medium is not the message. The earliest Christians actually preferred to read the Old Testament in translation. Even many of those who could read Hebrew, like Origen, felt that the Greek translation, the *Septuagint*, – supposedly reached independently, yet simultaneously, by 70 scholars at the orders of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the third century BC – was somehow better than the original because it was through this that God spoke to them. Similarly many people, even now, prefer the particular English translation which shaped their faith, often the King James Version – not because it is more accurate but because it is the place where they have encountered God.

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To steal a phrase from Origen, we can talk of the Bible as the Word of God “inscripturated”. Just as the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, so too the Word has become text in the pages of the Bible. The words are like the flesh, the body of Christ, they are important and the visible, tangible means of our engagement, but they are not the whole of it. To know Christ only according to their flesh was barely to truly know him at all. To read the Bible merely according to the letter is barely to read it at all.

This is not to say the detail doesn't matter. The more we grasp the otherness of the Bible, its strangeness, the better – to be shocked as perhaps you were by the unintelligibility of the readings tonight. The more we grapple with the unfamiliar symbolism of apocalyptic in the *Book of Revelation* or the complex puns and etymological parallels in *Genesis*, the idioms of Jesus' Aramaic story-telling or the lexical range of words like *agape* (which love never quite does justice to), the more we engage with the letter, the richer the movements into prayer and the encounter with the Word beyond the words. A smooth translation can hide the otherness, make the Word too familiar. We can fall foul of Kierkegaard's rule that the Gospel message should never become something you could tell him whilst shaving. We must remember that revelation itself is an act of translation, from the divine to the human.

In our first reading, the Welsh speakers among you will have heard how Moses encountered God in the burning bush. The bush was not God but the visible, tangible reality which Moses' senses needed in order to be stopped short by the presence of the Living One. There is significance in the details, the bush, the fire, the taking off of shoes. There is revelation in the history and the historical encounter. There is revelation in the story-telling and the literary encounter. There is revelation in the reading and the prayer encounter. All of it bringing men and women, then and now, closer to the God who declares himself as “I am who I am” or possibly, given the trickiness of translation, “I will be who I will be” (*Ex. 3.14*).

The Scriptures are in no sense dispensable. They are the bedrock of faith. We cannot make subjective emotion our canon of truth. If you are not a biblical Christian, you are not a Christian at all and yet this language has been hijacked by a small group. Where churches describe themselves as biblically-based or indeed advertise for priests who are Bible-based, it has become a sort of catchphrase for a certain understanding of the Scriptures – a certain way of reading the Bible that falls short in two ways. It denies the difficulty, the strangeness, the cultural imbeddedness of the text – its curious literalism so inattentive to the letter ignores the nature of translation; however it also imprisons the Word of God, reduces it from something alive and active to a mere specimen, a butterfly gassed and pinned in the collection of some Victorian lepidopterist. It may help to see the surface detail but the life has gone out of it. There is no encounter with the dead specimens of museum collections and we understand them far less than when we walk amidst their fluttering wings or watch them emerge stickily from within a torn chrysalis.

To be truly biblical, a Christian must know both the strangeness of the Scriptures and the closeness which comes when the Word of God speaks to them individually through the text, through their lives. They must know both the many words and the one. Our pistol-packing priest with his beautiful Welsh translation drew people deeper into an encounter with God by helping him come nearer them and for that today, on St David's Day, we honour him. For to read Scripture is to be drawn into the inner life of God. If we let it, we become part of the Trinitarian movement of relationships, as the Spirit enlivens us through words ancient or modern to see the living Word which is the visible image of the invisible God.

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