

The Chaplain writes...*about things lost in translation*

The film *Lost in translation* was very successful when it appeared back in 2003, and won a number of highly-sought awards. Its central story of an elderly American actor doing a commercial for a Japanese 'whisky' illustrates just how difficult it is to convey information from one different culture and language to another.

But the down side of the film was that it upset the Japanese – because in trying to portray the difficulty of cross-cultural and cross-language communication, they succeeded in making Japanese people feel stupid about themselves.

This has much to say to us when it comes to ways in which we communicate the Christian faith today in a society which largely is religiously uninclined and largely ignorant about what we believe.

And it is a very important matter indeed for us to consider and address, for the good news of Christ's Gospel is not good news at all if it is not *available to all*. What we *are* as part of the Church, Christ's Risen Body, and what we *say* and *do* has to be understandable by those who have not yet found their way to faith. And this must happen without making those who do not speak the language of faith feel inadequate or stupid.

So, and whilst I totally understand the love of the cadences of Cranmerian English (which I share) it really doesn't help if the first time someone wanders into our church building whilst there is a service taking place and finds it in a form of English which they are most unlikely to have ever heard anywhere else! Worse still, if they then hear readings from the Bible which are grammatically suspect and, in the case of the letters of S. Paul, composed of a single and very long sentence!

Now I value *both* the Authorised Version of the Bible *and* the Book of Common Prayer and I recognise that they have both been played an enormous part in shaping the English language as we know it today.

But we must be careful. During Lent, I drew attention to the fact that the Book of Common Prayer expresses a theological perspective which came from the experiences of life and culture of the late middle ages. A time when life could be expected to be short, hard and violent. The cross was central, the resurrection scarcely mentioned.

We no longer inhabit – thank God – such a world, even though some of our sisters and brothers in other parts of the globe continue to experience lives of considerable suffering. Moreover, some of the old controversies which helped to shape the Eucharistic liturgy of the Prayer Book are long past and now seen to be, in many ways, things lost in translation too.

And speaking of *translation*, the Hebrew and Greek texts which were available to the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible were very restricted. Scholars now have access to much more material enabling us – in the modern translations of the Bible – to come closer to the *true meaning* of what is expressed in Hebrew, Greek and (occasionally) in Latin. Not to mention being able to express this meaning in contemporary and accessible language.

I do understand the love that some of us have for the ‘old’ texts and language. Personally I would be very happy to worship entirely in Latin! But as the Reformers rightly pointed out, that is *not* the language of the people. Nor is an archaic English language form – however beautiful it may sound.

Yet there is, and should be, room for beauty and resonance too. One of the problems that people frequently express about modern language translations of biblical and liturgical texts is that they fail to be *memorable*. That is important too, and goes hand-in-hand with beauty and resonance.

At Holy Trinity, we continue to use a mixture of old and new. Which is fine – just as long as we remember that not only much is easily lost in translation (old or new), but also we may finish up making some people feel very foolish.

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