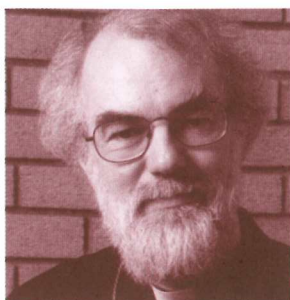


SHARING THE GIFT OF THE WORD

THE MOST REVD AND RT HON DR ROWAN WILLIAMS



An abridged version of the sermon given by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the service to celebrate the bicentenary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, St Paul's Cathedral, 8 March 2004.

OF ALL THE GREAT WORLD RELIGIONS, IT IS CHRISTIANITY THAT HAS THE MOST OBVIOUS AND PERVASIVE INVESTMENT IN TRANSLATION. We do not have a sacred language; from the very first, Christians have been convinced that every human language can become the bearer of scriptural revelation. The words in which revelation is first expressed are not solid, impenetrable containers of the mystery; they are living realities which spark recognition across even the deepest of gulfs between cultures, and generate new words native to diverse cultures which will in turn become alive and prompt fresh surprise and recognition. Biblical translation represents an enormous act of faith – the faith that what is given by God in one context is capable of being equally transfiguring and authoritative in all other human environments. Jesus speaks Greek and Aramaic; but the whole narrative of his words and work, his ministry and death and resurrection, is such that he can speak to call, to judge, to forgive and to bless in every human language that has been or will be.

Translating the Bible is thus a deeply theological action. It witnesses to what Christians believe about the humanity of Jesus as a human identity that can be recognised by every human person as speaking to them – and speaking for them. If he can be heard and understood in every human environment, all human beings can recognise that – stranger though he is – he shares their distinctive world, their history and experience. We all know how hard it is fully to trust anyone who does not speak our language, in the sense of speaking out of a world we recognise as ours. As St Augustine put it, Jesus is able to “play the part” of every created person, to speak from the depth of their humanity in all its darkness and confusion and turn their words Godwards. If Scripture can be “re-created” in different languages, the humanity of the saviour who speaks in Scripture must be an extraordinary humanity, a unique humanity.

What is more, the act of translating tells us something about humanity itself and its speech. Every language and culture has in it a sort of “homing instinct” for God – deeply buried by the sin and corruption that affects all cultures, yet still there, a sleeping beauty to be revived by the word of Christ. Hence, the recurrent pattern in the history of mission and biblical translation whereby cultures and languages seem to reach a new level of energy and individuality as the biblical story is uncovered in their own words. The West African theologian Lamin Sanneh, probably the most significant theologian of mission in the English-speaking world

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today, has noted that there are important differences between Christianised African societies in which native names for God have been retained and those in which it was thought necessary to import an alien word. The former show greater levels of Christian stability and of social vigour and engagement within the churches. But we could point equally to all those societies in the past in which the translation of Scripture prompted unprecedented levels of sophistication in the study and analysis of a language, and helped to create utterly new possibilities for literature and thought. From the first translations into Georgian and Armenian in the early Christian era to the great labours of Tyndale and Bishop Morgan in the sixteenth century (Bishop Morgan whose Bible it was that Mary Jones set out to acquire for herself, helping to prompt the foundation of the Society), the re-creation of the Bible in a language has opened the wellsprings of creativity. And how many native American, Polynesian, African languages owe their grammars and lexicons to the labours of translators?

Just as the kingdoms of this world, we are told, will become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, so the languages of this world will become dialects of heaven; the tongues of this world will become tongues of flame. When a language speaks of God in Christ it is a language of the Spirit, since it is the Spirit who witnesses to Christ's Lordship. We are celebrating not just a history of human skill today but an outpouring of the Spirit – in the apparently routine work of poring over dictionaries, seeking apt phrases, wrestling with the perennial challenge of making what is strange familiar – and what is familiar strange; always the task of the translator.

In recent years, though, the Bible Society has increasingly been asking not just about translation in the ordinary sense but about the larger question of how to bridge the gulf between two or more cultures sharing one and the same language. We may be familiar with the rhythms and shapes of the Bible in our tongue, we may know (or think we know) something of God's revelation. But however potent and weighted with meaning the Bible is to us as believers, its language as we have received it is not instantly recognisable to so many others who at one level speak the same language. How do we translate into the manifold cultures of Britain and other Western countries today? And what is being done with such imagination and energy by the Society is to go out to meet our culture in its own terms, through drama and art, through bold advertisement, by

all sorts of means designed to find the sleeping beauty in our environment, the hidden pull towards Christ that we believe to be at work even where the style and words of a culture seem least in touch with God.

In this way, the history we celebrate today gives us grounds for hope. For two millennia we have been translating; for two centuries this Society has organised the work, sponsored the labours of translation and overseen the distribution of the results. Again and again in Christian history, the Bible has proved itself a living, transforming partner for the world's cultures. We feel ourselves now to be in the middle of a deeply unreceptive society, for whom the Bible's categories and assumptions and expectations are alien as never before; but what our history and our theology alike tell us is that no human style or speech is finally impermeable to Scripture, because the Word of God in his incarnation has made all human languages his own, has identified with the heart of all human experience and taken it upon him to speak for us to the Father, sharing our condition. We do well to approach our world, however forbidding, however apparently unreceptive, with confidence. But with challenge also.

The Society counted William Wilberforce among its founders, a reminder that the Word transfigures as well as affirming. Looking back again to the flowering of cultures that has so often accompanied the translation of Scripture, we must say to our own environment, “You will not find the fullness and depth of your human nature in all its ruin and all its glory without this life-giving partnership with the biblical revelation.” We have a gift to share that will enlarge any and every culture – because without the scriptural vision of covenant and justice, mercy and fidelity and generosity, in personal relations and political structures alike, we shall find our cultures becoming less and less human, less and less simply sustainable, less liveable. This is the full implication of where we began, the vision of a gospel that always seeks to be at home in the human world, yet reshapes that world more radically than we could have imagined.

And so we give thanks not only for the Society and its history of faithful, creative ministry; not only even for Scripture itself as the vehicle of God's great promise to creation and its fulfilment in Jesus, but for that fulfilment itself, for the Word made flesh. May all tribes and tongues and nations learn to praise him in the pentecostal symphony stirred up by the Spirit from age to age. ■