Translating the Lectionary: Some Considerations

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The furore surrounding the introduction by the anglophone Roman Catholic Churches in 2011 of a new translation of the Sacramentary brought the issue of liturgical language to a prominence in several churches that had not been seen for decades. In its immediate aftermath there were those in the Roman Catholic Church who looked forward to – or feared – the arrival of other ‘revised’ translations in the proximate future, most significantly a new translation of the Lectionary. While this proposal seems, for the moment, to have been shelved, the ensuing debate was interesting in showing that few on either side had given the matter much thought apart from two questions: firstly, the use, or not, of gender inclusive language – as if this question could be solved in isolation; and secondly, the assumption that it was a matter of choosing between versions (e.g. ‘NRSV’ versus ‘Jerusalem’ versus some other translation of the scriptures). There were also some fairly amorphous comments by those in favour of a revision that it

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would have to agree with ‘the Vulgate’, but there was no clear understanding which of the many Latin texts that claim ‘Vulgate’ in the title should be the base.

In the light of this debate, and given that a translation of the Lectionary is something that affects all western churches that use a lectionary, it seems opportune to raise the matter in an introductory way and suggest that the issues are more complex than ‘picking a version’ or – as the recent Roman Catholic debates demonstrate – telling others which is ‘my favourite translation’. Liturgists acknowledge, in one way or another, that Christian worship reveals something that might be called ‘truth’. We all claim that our worship contains, or generates, ‘meaning’ for those who worship. We are often very unclear, however, about what form that ‘meaning’ takes or what kind of ‘truth’ is inherent in worship. We are even less clear, I would suggest, about the process or mechanism by which that meaning is perceived or constructed or negotiated by the worshipper within the act of worship.

_Picking a Version_

The first point to notice is that the very idea that it is a matter of ‘deciding on a version’ is itself a decision that is not intrinsically either liturgical or biblical: it is simply a reflex from the world of printing during the Renaissance when both Roman Catholics and Protestants printed out lections in full (see Missale Romanum 1570 or the Book of Common Prayer). The essence of a lectionary is not a large book of snippets, but a list of biblical texts arranged according to a plan. Bible translations can come and go, but a lectionary can be used with any of them. The lectionary is both the list and its rationale; it is only by derivation a book of printed readings. This might seem obvious, but it is noticeable in debates about picking translations that many who have strong feelings about versions
(as in the U.S. car bumper sticker: ‘If it ain’t King James, it ain’t Bible’) have little understanding or appreciation of the lectionary’s architecture. For example, Roman Catholics, while being most concerned about correct verbal formulae, nonchalantly drop the first reading on Sundays.

So, what should be our starting point? A lectionary is a means of bringing ancient texts that have been valued in liturgical gatherings before us in such a manner that they are an element in our liturgy today. This ordering is based on our contemporary liturgical needs: hence the plan of any lectionary is built upon the structures of the liturgy – most especially the liturgical year and the other needs being celebrated such as a wedding or a funeral, and not upon any supposed ‘plan of the Bible.’ As such, the lectionary’s use of biblical texts is a ‘normative canon’ rather than what is found on a Bible’s contents page – a ‘prescriptive canon.’ Again, this seems so obvious as not to require being stated, but its immediate corollary is often not noticed: a lectionary is not a ‘guided reading of the Bible’ nor is it a ‘Bible study plan’ or a catechetical programme. Though a lectionary can become such a part of a community’s life that it supplies these, it is well to recognise that a lectionary is about having recollections (Justin Martyr’s apomnemononmata) for celebrations, answering our liturgical needs here and now, rather than focusing on the texts as texts or as part of a larger anthology, ‘The Bible,’ which may be valued for its own sake outside of liturgy.

This liturgical use of sacred texts has meant that in every situation in Christian liturgy there has been a need to engage in language translation rendering Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into Greek, Syriac, Latin and any number of other languages both ancient and modern. Again, this might appear obvious, but note its corollary: one can imagine a liturgical text composed in Latin, such as the Missale Romanum, which is
celebrated either in Latin or in translation. Likewise a liturgy may be composed in English and then celebrated in that language (as in Common Worship), but one cannot use a lectionary without translation being involved (pace the hypothetical situation of a Greek celebration which used only texts composed in Greek). The matter of a version, then, is not accidental to our use of the scriptures in worship, but must be looked upon as a basic issue for resolution before and when we celebrate.

But is this really a difficulty? After all, we need Bibles in Christian life more generally, and lectionaries for centuries have simply used, for the most part, whatever is the most common version in that church’s culture: so Roman Catholics used a text they referred to as ‘the Vulgate’ (let us pass over the question of whether this is an accurate description or not); German Lutherans used the Luther Bible, and Anglicans used, by and large, the Authorised Version. Can we not just update the version used?

If that is the case, then the only issue seems to be between translation strategies of a ‘formal equivalence’ and a ‘dynamic equivalence’. The debate can now spiral off into ‘conservative’ versus ‘liberal’. The champions of ‘formal equivalence’ tend towards the position of verbal inerrancy with regard to the biblical text and, indeed, would be hard pressed to appreciate the suggestion that liturgy makes use of the church’s texts rather than liturgy being itself a function of ‘The Bible.’ Similarly, in Roman Catholic circles there is a marked tendency among conservatives to view the Latin liturgy as verbally inerrant and the sanctioned Latin version of the scriptures as having a quasi-inerrant status. Equally, since the churches have long used formal equivalence versions, many who prefer older forms for aesthetic reasons (be that the Book of Common Prayer or the Tridentine rite in Latin) tend to defend such translations
on the assumption that religion should preserve the archaic as part of its inner rationale, so that their ‘today’ will be like the golden past of their imagination.

By contrast, the defenders of dynamic equivalence appeal to such notions as the existential needs of the community and the need for comprehension, while being conscious of the cultural specificity of texts in terms of both their origins and contemporary uses. Aesthetically, this group see the archaic not as a golden age but as reeking of stale air and cobwebs and declare their affection for the bright lights not only of today but of tomorrow.

A moment’s reflection should reveal that this choice – whatever might be claimed canonically for one strategy in a document such as the Roman Catholic pronouncement ‘Liturgiam authenticam’ – is illusory. Any text that is going to be valued (as distinct from casually reading a novel translated from another language) must be translated in both ways. If one uses a formal equivalence translation then one must – at least silently to oneself – further translate it into one’s own language and diction: even those fluent in reading the originals find themselves doing this as they seek to understand the text. Indeed, it is this very fact of each user making a dynamic equivalence translation of her/his own, however inaccurate, that is the more serious justification for the other strategy. It is only by apparently departing from the original forms that one does not end up with an endless sequence of private, idiosyncratic translations. Likewise, anyone valuing a text which has been read in a dynamic translation finds themselves producing a formal translation of words and phrases when once they need to comment on the detail of the meaning. No individual or group who values a text produced in another cultural setting can ever be satisfied with just one translation or approach to translation: they will need both approaches and yet
others besides. As to the aesthetic reasons given for particular translation styles, we shall return to this matter further on.

*Translating the Scriptures for Liturgy*

If no single translation should ever prove sufficient in the matter of 'choosing a bible,' are there any specific issues that need to be addressed when we come to consider the use of the scriptures in the liturgy? Three issues must be uppermost in any discussion of producing biblical texts for use in a lectionary.

First and foremost, the texts must be capable of oral reproduction in an aural environment. While this should be obvious there is a problem in many communities where the public reading is almost ignored through the presence of individual texts and the assumption that this reading is, in reality, just announcing the text on which the preaching will be based. Listening together and reflecting together is, however, one of the basic liturgical activities: shared memories are recalled, shared beliefs are reaffirmed, and the common listening to a common treasury of texts becomes a statement of identity. We appreciate shared listening when we attend a poetry reading, engage with common stories, or listen anew to common texts such as Laurence Binyon's poem 'We will remember them' and joining in the refrain at a remembrance service. It is all too easy to slip out of this liturgical vision of sharing memories into a 'biblical studies mode' and imagine that 'Bible reading' at the Liturgy is an end in itself to which are tagged on other ceremonies such as a eucharist or Holy Communion service. This practice has a long history, but that does not equate with it being appropriate to Christian worship where the whole event takes place in the presence of the Christ becoming a Spirit-filled encounter with the Father. If we are sharing memories in common listening, then the form of the
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translation must be one that has been developed both for oral presentation (this demands that it reflect the structures of speech rather than writing for reading) and one that is intended to be absorbed aurally (this demands that it be possible to follow an often complex text – as in listening to Paul – or a detailed story without the assistance of a printed text before one).

By contrast, despite decades of research on the environment of ancient orality that, on the whole, ancient writings were written to be heard or – as in the case of the Gospels – as a support to memory, most translations are produced with reading in mind. Moreover, that reading is done by an individual, almost certainly in silence, and very probably at a desk. While, again, scripture scholars often note that ancient writers did not work at a desk or in a library, there is a constant tug on any biblical translator, be that an individual or a committee, to produce a text that has biblical studies in mind. This ensures that whichever Bible one takes up and no matter which translation ‘philosophy’ has been employed, the result is a book for reading. This is as it should be, but the liturgical setting is not that of the classroom or the study. This is sometimes recognised, as when ‘The Grail Psalter’ (designed for speech) was chosen for the Roman Catholic liturgy in the 1970s. This happened almost by accident and more often it is ignored, as when the NRSV psalter was selected for the Common Worship printed lectionary.

The second demand relates to the fact that these texts are heard in a variety of celebrations. The same piece of a biblical book can be read on a Sunday or a weekday, at a eucharist or in a word-based celebration. It might be heard as a part of a key moment in the liturgical year where that feast establishes the vantage point for all the texts, or at a celebration particular to a
community or individual be that a baptism, a funeral, or some other event.

Moreover, the community celebrating may be a highly homogenous one—a religious community or those who are attracted to choral evensong in a cathedral—or it may be highly diverse. It may include children and adults, those who are deeply committed to Christian liturgy, those who are occasional celebrants and those who are virtually un-churched—and it may include those who regularly read the Bible, and perhaps even a theologian or two! The notion that any single version can answer this variety of needs is illusory, while any appeal to the fact that in the past single versions were used is based on the equally illusory notion that communities in the past were homogeneous. The countering fact is that in virtually every Christian parish (or its structural equivalent) there is a variety of worship styles available over an average weekend: an 8 a.m. ‘Mass’ or ‘Holy Communion’ will have a very different dynamic to a ‘Family Eucharist’ at 10.30 a.m. or ‘Music Ministry’ at 8 p.m. This demonstrates that one needs to adapt one’s biblical texts to the context of the celebration. This has long been recognised in lectionaries for use in school-based liturgies or for celebrations of the eucharist with children. However, not only do we need a child-friendly lectionary, but we need to extend that principle across the range of celebrations.

It is worth noting, however, despite the fact that most lectionary-using churches have produced some ‘lectionaries for children’s liturgy’ these tend to be private initiatives, and to be used by those ministers who are liturgically aware. So far no denomination has ‘got behind’ such a project, yet the basic problem that is highlighted in the case of liturgies for children affects every celebration at which biblical texts are read.
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Thirdly, while modern lectionaries can justly pride themselves on their architecture by which they bring well-thought-out selections into liturgical use over a three-year cycle – and we have only to remind ourselves of the 2011 ‘Reims Statement’ for a review of the many benefits that have issued from recent lectionary developments – it is also the case that lections are heard as gobbets: the community that hears this lection today may not remember that which they heard last week, while very often the regularity of being present will not match the regularity of the lectionary plan.

As such, each lection, or the lections of a particular celebration, has to stand on its own, being both comprehensible and potentially of value to that specific assembly. This means that not only do we need different versions for different situations, but the style in which a miracle story is narrated needs to be different from that of a collection of sayings, that of part of a letter has to be different from a piece of oracular speech, a piece of poetry has to be different in tone and style from a piece of historical narrative. This means that even if one is regularly celebrating with a fairly homogeneous group – for instance in a religious community – one might need to translate one passage formally, another dynamically, and some other passage in some other way appropriate to that piece of text. Alas, most Bible translations adopt a fairly uniform style across the whole of the anthology – hence the ability of many to imitate ‘Bible language’ – or, as in the case of some dynamic equivalent versions, over whole books or categories of books. At the Liturgy, however, we do not read a whole book, but just a snippet – and it is the style of that snippet that counts.

Two other considerations need to be recalled. The Liturgy takes place coram Deo and as such must express the welcome and inclusion that is part of the kerugma of the Christ event. Anything that alienates someone so that they experience a sense
of exclusion from the liturgy has no place there: otherwise we are abrogating to ourselves a right of judgement that belongs to God alone. It is this basic principle of Christian liturgy that must govern the use of inclusive language. This is not simply a matter of adding ‘and sisters’ when the Greek text has but adelphe – as the NRSV has done – but of making sure that there are no texts used which are so rooted in a patriarchal culture that many contemporary women sense exclusion.

The rationale that one must bear witness to ‘the original’ is not a countervailing argument here, for while the text originated in a culture and should be studied in the context of that culture (this is a matter of historical interpretation), theologically we believe that God is as available to every moment as he is to a particular moment in the past: we, therefore, do not canonise any moment in creation’s history as the ‘golden age’ which must be forever remembered. The Liturgy is in the divine presence now, and nothing read in this now must serve to subvert the divine will that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. The question of inclusive language is not merely a matter of gender inclusive language, but of removing any language which would exclude anyone. So homophobic language, racist language, or language that pillories the handicapped, or sanctions any form of enslavement (as more of our texts do than we care often to admit) simply have no place if the Liturgy is a celebration of the kerugma today.

The second issue is that the Ministry or Liturgy of the Word is not simply a matter of speech, but includes song – again from the Liturgy’s inherent nature that it mingles with the Liturgy in the heavenly court. Therefore, any text that is going to be set to music may have to be specially translated with the needs of its musical use as a key criterion. Again, this should be obvious, but alas, recent Roman Catholic experience
of taking poorly translated texts and slavishly seeking to put them to music should be a warning to all.

*How Many Versions do We Need?*

While this will be read as a ‘counsel of perfection’ we need translations that are:

- sensitive to actual liturgical use
- sensitive to the celebration
- sensitive to the make-up of community celebrating
- sensitive to the nature of the text being read as a snippet
- sensitive to the dangers of excluding members of God’s People
- sensitive, where appropriate, to being used in singing

In effect we need to think of all translations as a quarry – it sounds better than a ‘thesaurus’ – from which we might find texts to help us in the production of particular lections for actual occasions. In practice, however, this means that we should be aiming at producing three specific printed lectionaries that can be in regular use.

First, we need lections that are suitable to be used in small situations where a highly formal translation does not facilitate reflection. Listening in a small, perhaps informally arranged group is very different from listening in a large gathering where liturgy may be serving other functions for the group quite apart from its own intrinsic nature as an assembly of the baptised praising God.

Second, we need specific lectionaries not only for children’s liturgy, but for those ‘rites of passage’ where we may have in our gathering many for whom hearing the scriptures is an alien event.

And thirdly, we need a more rhetorically aware translation that is suitable for larger and more formal worship. On such occasions there will be a need to respect the anthropological insight once identified by Anton Baumstark that on big
occasions we like to be conservative and so the aesthetic of a Bible-sounding translation may be appropriate. That said, one easily can produce a translation with suitable 'biblical' cadences which will be far more comprehensible than using AV, Douay-Rheims, RV, RSV, or NRSV so that the aesthetes will be satisfied, but at the same time one has not denatured the worship of God by making it merely a celebration of the inheritance of a particular culture. In short, just as any public speaker knows that one must adapt one's style to the tutorial setting, the classroom, and the raked theatre – or indeed the television studio – so one must have different translations for these settings.

Language does not stand still and the culture of liturgy is in constant evolution. The relatively unusual period of enforced stability and uniformity that lasted from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries has left many with the illusion that one can find a new translation for today – and, with luck, it might carry us forward for a century or two! But this is not only a cultural illusion, but one which can negate the very basis of recalling the Word of God in the liturgy: we will need many versions of the lectionary – and few of them will be identical to versions of the Bible.