A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 25 October by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.

Voice of the Word

Nehemiah 8. 1-4a, 5-6, 8-12; Matthew 24. 30-35

In secondary school, I was very often caught out by false friends. Now you might start feeling bad for me and wonder what horrible, bullying things my so-called friends might have done to me at school. However, before this gets lost in translation any further, let me be a little clearer. During secondary school, when studying Latin, French, and Spanish, I often mistranslated words that deceptively sound very close to English words. I was often caught out by linguistic false friends, a term coming Maxime Koessler and Jules Derocquingy's 1928 book *Les Faux Amis.*

Reading, or rather badly attempting to read, other languages, you might optimistically think you've found a cognate when it's actually a lurking false friend. In Spanish, you might mistake *embarazada* for embarrassed when it actually means pregnant. An embarrassing mistake to make. You might mistranslate *sensible* as sensible when it is actually sensitive. You might think *bigote* is surely bigot despite it actually being moustache. In French, *pain* is not pain but bread; *caleçon* sounds like it could be calculation but is actually underwear. Be careful not to translate *gift* in German as gift, as *gift* is, less pleasantly, poison.

Language continues to get even more complicated. Most days, I claim to be able to speak English. Yet, sometimes, I cannot understand a thick Geordie accent, or a fast-paced Scottish patter, or am left completely baffled by the fricative shifts of the Scouse. There are many poor Americans who are forced to try and understand me. Who, understandably, have no idea that when I say 'not too bad' I actually mean rather good. Or entire phrases – 'spend a penny', 'Bob's your uncle', 'full of beans' – that bounce back off of perplexed faces.

Even when we supposedly speak the same language, we might not necessarily understand one another. Language is a wonderfully peculiar and evolutionary thing. It changes according to where we live, when we live, and the people with

whom we live. And yet, on this Bible Sunday, we gather to celebrate something which, according to Our Lord Jesus Christ, will never change. '*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*'.

The words of Christ have and will endure beyond the very world in which they were first spoken. But that raises an interesting question. If God's Word is eternal and unchanging, then why do we spend so much time translating it, interpreting it, explaining it, and arguing about what it means? Surely, if God's Word is perfect, ought we simply to read it and leave it alone? Well, our first reading from the Old Testament suggests a rather different approach.

In Ezra-Nehemiah, we hear of the gathering of the great congregation who come together to hear the law of God. With the Levites, numerous returned exiles, and Nehemiah the governor with him, the high priest, Ezra, stands before the assembly and reads aloud. We hear, '*Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading*'. Another way we might translate the Hebrew Word פָּרַשׁ ('with understanding') is as 'clearly' or 'to make distinct'.

Not simply reading the words aloud. Not merely repeating them and expecting everyone to understand. Rather, interpreting them, explaining them, giving them meaning and sense, making them clear and distinct to the people who had gathered.

We might argue whether it is best to formally or dynamically translate the Holy Scriptures into English. Yet we still need to realise that the Scriptures are more than words in a strictly human sense. The Word of God was not simply to be heard. It was to be understood. Understanding requires interpretation, and indeed re-interpretation.

My fear, however, is that often Christians have become rather suspicious of the word interpretation. As though it is a sinister concept about interfering with the sacred. As though the moment we begin interpreting the Scriptures, we risk corrupting them. I'm rather minded to think that the Word of God is a little more powerful than that and not so easily susceptible to human pollution. I'm minded also to think that the minds our God has blessed us with have some role in the revelation of His glory. Interpretation can be misrepresented as a diluting weakness rather than an expounding strength.

Yet interpretation is not some modern invention, dreamt up in stuffy institutions by liberal theologians. As we hear this morning, interpretation is right there in the Bible itself. Indeed, if we use those minds we have been given, we can see how the Scriptures we read today are already the product of centuries of interpretation. However much we might wish it was the case, God did not directly dictate the King James Bible.

The Word of God is eternal but the voice which gives it sense is constantly evolving to effectively communicate the Good News to different languages, cultures, and circumstances. This is not a weakness or a problem; it is surely part of the extraordinary richness of the Scriptures.

We could all read the same poem or sing the same hymn, but it is very possible that we would come away with different associations. Rudyard Kipling might make you nostalgic for your days in school or it might serve as a cultural reminder of colonisation. The words remain the same but the meaning they carry for you personally might be enormously different.

Likewise, a phrase might have once made little sense to you in the past but has become wonderfully clear after some unexpected experience. The words have not changed, but you have. Perhaps that is something of what happens when we encounter the Scriptures.

We do not read the Bible as people living two thousand years ago. We read it as people living today, with our own experiences, questions, knowledge, and concerns. We bring ourselves to the Word and we allow the Word to take voice and speak to us.

Interpretation is not an excuse to twist the Bible into agreeing with all of our prejudices and preferences. Faithful interpretation requires humility. It requires us to listen carefully, to consider the historical context, to learn from the wisdom of tradition, and sometimes to accept that our previous understanding may have been mistaken.

Not being willing to accept that we are sometimes mistaken is particularly frightening. The danger is not that we interpret the Scriptures; the danger is when we forget that we are interpreting. When we begin to confuse our own understanding of God's Word with the Word of God itself. When we imagine our particular reading, shaped by our culture and circumstances, must be the only possible faithful interpretation.

Throughout Christian history, people have appealed to the Scriptures to defend positions which later generations have come to question profoundly. The Bible has been used to justify war, slavery, the silencing of women, and to remove the inherent dignity of other human beings.

Yet we should be careful also before we too quickly congratulate ourselves on our superior understanding. For future generations may well look back upon some of our own certainties with equal bewilderment. Because we too have our accents and assumptions that build the voice we hear.

Jesus Christ promises that His words will endure. This is an enormously liberating thought, because it means that the eternal Word of God is not dependent upon the perfection of our understanding. God's truth is greater than our ability to comprehend it. We are free to ask questions. We are free to learn. We are free to change our minds. We are free to discover new understandings.

Never because God's Word has become less true, but because we are still discovering something of its fullness.

In Ezra-Nehemiah, the people respond to the Scriptures by weeping. However, they do not remain in their sorrow; instead, they are commanded to rejoice, to celebrate, and to share their food with those who have nothing. Understanding God's Word leads not simply to greater knowledge, but to transformed lives.

The language of our Bible will change. The accents that read it will change. Our understandings will deepen, and sometimes we shall discover that we have been wrong. But the Word remains. The Words that Christ opened to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus while breaking bread will continue to be heard. The Word we hear every time we gather together in Communion will continue to be heard. For heaven and earth shall pass away, but Christ's words shall not pass away.

The Word of God remains eternal, but the fuller voice with interpretation is what we have to receive within our souls.

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