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A New Lectionary: is it a matter of picking a version?

By Thomas O'Loughlin

Introduction

The *Tablet* recently reported that the Australian bishops are now – like so many other English-language episcopal conferences – thinking about a new translation of the scriptures for use in the liturgy. This is a process that is commonly, but inaccurately, referred to as having ‘a new lectionary.’

In this debate there will be shouts from many sides in this form: ‘I am for Jerusalem Bible!’ ‘I am for English Standard Version!’ ‘I am for formal equivalence!’ or ‘I am for inclusive language!’ It is all reminiscent of Corinth in the mid-first century CE and disputes about the baptism of Paul and that of Apollos.

But is there a more basic question to answer?

The debate about ‘which version’ – for all its validity – distracts everyone (bishops included) from recognising many other real problems that reading the scriptures in a lectionary poses. With all the focus on ‘which translation,’ we are missing the bigger issue. Do we need more than one translation?

Picking a version

First, 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 Catholics and Protestants printed out lections in full. 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 have little appreciation of the lectionary’s architecture.

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 that they are an element in our liturgy. This ordering is based on our liturgical needs today: 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 (e.g. a wedding), 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' nor is it a catechetical programme. Though a lectionary can supply these within a community's life that is, a lectionary is actually about having recollections (Justin Martyr's *apomnemonemata*) for celebrations, answering our liturgical needs, rather than focussing on the texts as texts or as part of a larger anthology: 'The Bible'. This liturgical use has meant that in every situation in Christian liturgy there has been a need to engage in translation into Greek, Syriac, Latin, and any number of ancient and modern languages. Again, this might appear obvious, but note its corollary: one can imagine a liturgical text composed in Latin (e.g. the *Missale Romanum*) which is then celebrated in either Latin or translation, likewise a liturgy may be composed in English and then celebrated in that language (e.g. *Common Worship*), but one cannot use a lectionary without translation being involved. So the matter of a version 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 just used, for the most part, whatever is the most common version in that church's culture. Can we not just up-date the version used? If that is the case, then the only issue seems to be between a 'formal equivalence' and a 'dynamic equivalence' translation strategy. In Catholic circles there is a marked tendency among conservatives to view the Latin liturgy as verbally inerrant (e.g. the transcriptional errors embedded in Eucharistic Prayer 1 were translated verbatim) and to imagine 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 tend to defend such translations on the assumption that religion should preserve, as part of its inner rationale, the archaic 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, the need for comprehension, while being conscious of the cultural-specificity of texts both in terms of 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 tomorrow.

A moment's reflection should reveal that this choice – whatever might be claimed in a document such as *Liturgiam authenticam* – is illusory. Any text, biblical or otherwise, 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 any formal equivalence translation then one must – at least silently to oneself – further translate it into one's own language and diction: and 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 on 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 have to return to this.

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. 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. However, listening together and reflecting together is one of the basic liturgical activities: share 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 engage with common stories. 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 activities. But if we are sharing memories in common listening, then the form of the 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 alone, 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, nor 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 the classroom in mind. This means 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 setting of the liturgy is not that the study.

The second demand relates to the fact that these texts are heard in a variety of celebrations. The same biblical passage can be read many different pastoral settings. And, the community may be homogenous one, or highly diverse. It may include children and adults, some deeply committed to liturgy, the occasional celebrants, and those who are virtually un-churched. The notion that one version fits all is illusory. This need to produce specific versions for specific contexts has long been recognised in one case: lectionaries for use in celebrations with children. However, we need not only a

child-friendly lectionary, but to extend that principle across the range of celebrations.

Thirdly, while modern lectionaries can justly pride themselves on their architecture by which they bring well thought out selections into use over a three-year cycle, it is also the case that lections are heard as gobbits: the community that hears this lection today, may not remember what 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 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. So even if one is regularly celebrating with a fairly homogeneous group one might need to translate one passage formally, another dynamically, and another in some other way appropriate to that piece of text. Alas, most Bible translations adopt a fairly uniform style across the whole anthology or, as in the case of some dynamic equivalent versions, over whole books or categories of books. But at the liturgy 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 such that they experience a sense of exclusion from the liturgy has no place there or we are arrogating to ourselves a right of judgement that belongs to God alone. It is this basic principle of Christ—ian 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 *adelphoi* – 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 women today 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’. 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 often to admit) simply has no place if the liturgy is a celebration of the kerugma today.

The second issue is that the 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; alas, recent experience of taking poorly translated texts and slavishly seeking to put them to music should be a warning to us.

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
- the celebration
- the make-up of celebrating assembly,
- the nature of the text being read as a snippet,
- the dangers excluding member of God's People,
- being used in singing.

In effect we need to think of all translations as a quarry – it sounds better as a 'thesaurus' – from which might help us in the production of particular lections for actual occasions. However, in practice it 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 informal 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 from children's liturgy, but 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.

In short, just as any public speaker knows that one must adapt one's style to the setting, so the idea of a single translation is one taken without attention to the situations in which it will be heard. We have forgotten our liturgical basics, we have missed an opportunity.