

A Sermon preached by Robert Cotton
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Oscar Wilde was known to be a bad student. He never attended lectures, he never studied, he was never known to go to the Library. So when the final exams at Oxford came around this was the chance for the tutors to put him in his place. For at that time every student was required to translate a passage in the New Testament from Greek into English. Clearly they gave scientists easy passages that they could learn by rote and just recite; theologians were set something a bit more challenging; but special students were always given Chapters 27 and 28 of Acts of the Apostles, since that is very hard Greek: the hardest Greek in the New Testament, both for vocabulary but also for grammar.

‘Sit down, Mr Wilde. Please translate for us beginning Chapter 27 verse 1’. And so he did, fluently and faultlessly, because Oscar Wilde was a very clever man. He had a deep understanding of language. There was, as you imagine, a great gnashing of Tutors’ teeth, ‘Stop! Stop, Mr Wilde! We’ve heard enough. We know you can do it’. ‘No,’ he says, ‘please let me continue. I want to see how it’s going to finish’. I have to say to you today, as I preach on *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, ‘please let me continue, I want to know how it is going to finish’ because I only have another 400 pages to go before completing this book. Even without having got near the end of the novel, I am going to preach on the book today partly because I enjoyed it, but chiefly because there is so much worth thinking about between the covers of this excellent book.

I actually found it very hard to get into this book, partly because I was reading it at the beginning of September while I was dealing with all the turmoil of our planning application. But there was also something about the structure of the book that I found hard to get on with. The story is essentially about six Southern Baptist missionaries going from America to the Congo in the early 1960s, and the structure of the book is that each chapter is presented from one particular character’s view point. I felt that six characters were too many balls to keep up in the air. So I identified one character intending to skim-read her chapters.

The one I alighted on was Ada, who is the youngest of the daughters. It seemed easy to dismiss her. Ada is the youngest. She was disabled from birth. She hardly talks, she is very slow. I thought that she would be one who will not really contribute to the story. How wrong I was! This is what Ada says: “Silence has many advantages. When you do not speak, others presume you to be deaf or feeble minded and promptly make a show of their own limitations.” Or this: “It’s true I don’t speak as well as I can think but that’s true of most people. Speaking, as I have said, along with the rest of life’s acrobatics, can be seen in a certain light as a distraction.” But the quotation I love best: “When I have finished reading a book from front to back, I read it from back to front. It is a different book back to front and you can learn new things from it.” Ada loves palindromes, those

phrases that read exactly the same backwards and forwards. "*Evil all its sin is still alive.*" Just read those letters the other way! But then of course St Paul did that as well. Sometimes he was so sure of what our ending would be that he would read back and find what must be true now because he knew where we were going. There is a famous passage in Romans Chapter 8 when Paul says 'we will be glorified', of that he was sure. But he goes on: 'if we're going to be glorified then it means that in the here and now God must be making us ready for glory. We will be made holy, sanctified. But if we are being made holy then God must already have called, chosen and destined us.' There you have it - a lovely way to see new truths, moving from front to back. Just think about your calendar for the next week and play it backwards and maybe new truths will emerge. But take care: it is an exciting but dangerous business. The unpalatable doctrine of predestination (that some are predestined for glory, and others predestined for destruction) is a possible consequence of this Pauline passage and has caused great difficulty and pain throughout the ages.

Not only Ada reads stories backwards, St Paul does it, and so does one of my favourite authors: Douglas Adams (of Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy fame). I've quoted this passage to you some years ago. Do you remember, according to Douglas Adams, what is God's final message to creation? The hero of the book, Arthur Dent, can travel through time and so arrives at the end of time. There in shining lights, up in the heavens, is God's final message to creation. He sees it and then, as he goes back to his own time and home, he takes with him a deep sense of peace, having understood the end of everything. God's final message is 'We apologise for the inconvenience'! If only we believed that about God! If only we believed that we would realise that a lot of the trouble that comes our way now is not willed by God; rather somehow God has created an open textured universe that will contain pain and tragedy, but also God is preparing us for glory.

Douglas Adams and St Paul may indeed share a different vision for the world and humanity, but they both have the ability to juggle perspective, to take the same ingredients but see them in a different order. Different contexts can shed, and need, different lights. That is a very valuable ability and it is exactly what Nathan Price, the father in this story, does not have. He is a fierce believer, brought up in the Southern Baptist tradition. He knows for sure what is true. He knows for sure about God's justice. He knows for sure that everyone ought to be baptised with total immersion. He knows about repentance and salvation. It's just that when he goes to Africa those things which are sure need to be seen in a different light so that they find new ways of being true. This is his wife speaking about him: "Nathan burned. There is no other way to say it. I held him in my arms at night and saw parts of his soul turn to ash, and then I saw him reborn with a stone in place of a heart. Nathan thought it had been a mistake to bend his will to Africa". And so the tragedy of the story unfolds: Nathan tries to bend Africa to his will. I wonder what happens next.

The word that kept on coming to me as I read this book was the word 'translation': the essential task of taking truths from one culture and one language, and finding not only the right words but the whole context and way of presenting truths in another language so that they vibrate with the same meaning and power. It has been part of the task of the

Christian church for 2000 years. The first Council of Jerusalem was held in about 45 AD. The first followers of Jesus were all Jews, following completely the Law of Moses, but, in addition, now seeing Jesus as their Saviour. Trouble arose within ten years of Jesus' death when Romans, so attracted by Jesus' life and death, wanted to become followers too. The question was: should they become Jews first and then become Christians? The Council of Jerusalem, a very tricky time, realised that to translate what Jesus meant into another culture implied that new converts did not have to be circumcised and follow all the Jewish laws first, but they could follow Jesus directly themselves.

The "Council of Lambeth" which has been happening just last week has been about translation. Some primates came saying 'the rejection of homosexuality is an essential part of the Christian gospel'. Others replied 'is that really true?' Some of the former group of primates tolerate polygamy as a possible Christian lifestyle since this is so rooted in their culture that it does not seem reasonable to say to Christians 'you must stop being polygamous'. Translation is not an easy business!

One of the most exciting sessions at our recent Clergy Conference was led by Dr Mona Siddiqui (who may be known to you as an Islamic teacher of national repute who speaks fairly frequently on the Today programme) and Rabbi Rachel Montague. Both spoke about the common ground that Jews, Christians and Muslims share. But I was interested to hear also about the fundamental differences of our spiritual traditions. You will know, no doubt, that Muslims do not believe that the Koran ought to be translated. It belongs in its own language. That is, they say, how God gave the Koran. Yet there is a way in which, if it belongs in its own language, then it also belongs in its own culture. Islam is not a religion essentially of conversion and translation but rather it is a religion of enforcement. Part of the tragedy that is going on in the world at the moment is not a conflict between West and East but a conflict within Islam over whether they should begin to translate their religion to other contexts. Listening to the Rabbi I realised what a tragedy it was that, because of the Holocaust, the traditional culture of European Jewry was largely lost. For European Jewry knew what it was to engage with the society in which they lived: to express their spiritual hopes and ideals within a framework that was historically "foreign" brought benefit both to the host culture and to the Jews. Sadly for the world the main energy within the Jewish faith is now Zionist, nationalist and separatist, leaving the translation ethic far less emphasised within Jewish thought nowadays.

But what about us? The final book I am going to refer you to is by Peter Ackroyd called *Albion, the origins of the English imagination*. I think one of our chief challenges at the moment is to translate the gospel into English! That may sound odd, but Jesus did not speak English. It is very easy in a world where Microsoft has such influence to think English is the default language for everyone. Switch on a new computer and it assumes you can speak English! But reality is not like that. The Gospel needs to be translated into English. That is why I read this book: to try and learn what it is to be English, so that I can then read this book, the Bible, and hear what Jesus may be saying today.

I don't know answers to many of the questions I have been raising. That's phrased inappropriately, because it's not about questions and answers: it is about an exploration, the exploration and journey of translation, of finding how God is speaking to us today, which we must do for the sake of our health and for the sake of the salvation of the world.

Amen.