

Everyday Language

Roman 6. 19-23

Translations can help, or they can hinder. Bishop John Howe tells the story of when he was working at Lambeth, and a visiting Russian Patriarch presented the Archbishop with an ikon, on which there were some Cyrillic letters. No one at the time thought to ask what it said. So when another Russian came to call, he was taken to translate. "Ah, yes", he said "It says: Come workers, join my group and you will have a good time." And at first they didn't realise that here was an excellent, if unusual translation of the last but one verse of the New Testament reading today - Come to me, all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.... or Come, workers, join my group, and you will have a good time. When I was in Surrey, one of our congregation was a consultant toxicologist. On a business trip to Japan, he had his visiting card translated, and everywhere he went, he met with strange looks. They had translated 'consultant toxicologist' as 'expert poisoner'. Translations can indeed help or hinder.

I would be delighted if anyone could say with honesty and confidence that they had the faintest idea what today's New Testament reading was about if they read it in the Authorised Version.

Fortunately, all we need do is read it in a modern translation, and the problems virtually disappear - because this is one of the many examples of why we really were crazy to go on using the Prayer Book for our readings, unless what we were after really was just the *sound* of the words and not their meaning. So listen to the Good News translation:

"I use everyday language, says Paul because of the weakness of your natural selves. At one time you surrendered yourself entirely as slaves to impurity and wickedness for wicked purposes. In the same way you must now surrender yourselves entirely as slaves of righteousness for holy purposes."

Well, it may not be the language of the tabloids, but it is an awful lot easier than the Authorised Version. Thank God for the scholars who have brought us the modern translations. And yet - here we come against a perennial problem - right at the end of that reading is one of those phrases from the old translations which has stuck so firmly in the language that it refuses to budge - "the wages of sin is death". And that somehow is on a different plane from the Good News Bible's "For sin pays its wages - death", or the Jerusalem Bible's "For the wage paid by sin is death", or even the New English Bible's carefully balanced phrase "For sin pays a wage, and the wage is death." What a dilemma - it is good to have some inkling of what the rest is about, but sad to lose the resonance of a phrase that has become familiar. It is not that the other versions are wrong - far from it. But they are not what is familiar. It is only a problem for those of us who *are* familiar with it of course. We need to remember that. For the thousands of Christians in church today who have found faith in recent years, it may well be that they have never heard that old translation, and so they do not miss it. But those who do miss it can't wipe our memories clean.

So what does it mean anyway? Familiarity and resonance are pretty worthless unless they carry with them some element of understanding. Well, here again the scholars can help us. "Wages" has a certain ring in English, which mustn't get in the way. Our class-ridden society has divided people into those who earn wages, those who are salaried, and those exalted people like clergy who don't even get that - but a stipend! Wages is a word from the shop floor, in our usage of it. You don't ask a barrister what his wages are, any more than you ask a miner about his salary. And to some extent that is true to the original - because the word here is a word from the vocabulary of the army. The Roman soldier worked hard, marched hard, and earned every denarius of his wage by the sweat of his brow. What we entirely miss in English is that the word "gift" as in "but the gift of God is eternal life" is just as much a word from the vocabulary of the army - and is also to do with income. It was the custom occasionally for the Emperor to celebrate a victory, or the anniversary of his accession, by handing out a free gift of money. It was rather like a Christmas bonus paid at any time of the year. But unlike Christmas bonuses these days, it could not be presumed to happen as a matter of course. It was an entirely spontaneous gift, which had not been merited, but was just given freely. So here Paul says that the contrast between the reward of death for sin and the reward of life by God's love is exactly the difference between the rightly-deserved and earned money for hard work, and the free hand-out which was without any cause whatsoever. Death is earned, life is given freely. The Greek word for the free gift is charisma - and the Latin word translation is "donativum" - very similar to our word donation. Sin pays out death, but God makes a donation of life. Always there is the contrast between owing, and not owing. We deserve death, we don't deserve life - but by the love of God, that is what we have, through Christ.

But think for a moment what happens if you get these mixed up. And there are people who do. Then death becomes an entirely undeserved hand-out, and life is something we have earned. I am sure that you have heard people talk in those terms, as I have. Looking at someone who is suffering, and dying, people will often say "I can't think what he has done to deserve all this." They express anger at God for allowing their loved ones to die. It is the vindictive act of a spiteful God. It isn't fair. That is diametrically opposed to Paul's beliefs expressed here. He has no doubt that the connection between sin and death is entirely fair. And what is more, sin is common to us all. We all fall short of the glory of God - we were slaves to sin, he has been saying in the previous verses. It is a simple equation - Sin = Death. And since all have sinned, all deserve to die. There are no exceptions. Those who reverse this and virtually say Death = Sin - someone dying is a failure, a sin on God's part, just haven't grasped the reality of Paul's theology. And equally we find people who reverse the other part of the phrase, and say that eternal life is something which we can deserve. Again you hear it when someone has died - "he deserves his reward" - "he's owed a rest". It is said to be the great British heresy - that more than any other nation we have consistently produced people who say in one form or another that we can earn our ticket, and have some token at least to show St Peter at the Pearly Gate, to get us in. Again, it is precisely the opposite of what Paul is driving at. It is hard to know why this is so common - if we think about the service of Holy Communion, we are constantly told that we are not worthy - we start off by asking for God's help, otherwise we can't worship him worthily. We pray for his grace - his freely given riches - to assist us. We repent in abject terms. The

Comfortable Words remind us again that we are sinners. We say that we do not presume to come to the altar trusting in ourselves. We say we are not worthy through our manifold sins to offer any sacrifice, and end by appealing yet again for God's mercy. This service tells us we are no good. And although these words have been embedded in our culture, no less than expression "wages of sin" - yet somehow the truth they enshrine (and in some senses over-do!) nonetheless has escaped the majority of people who continue to try and make at least some effort to justify themselves. To them, Paul continues to say - you have it wrong - the ticket you have earned requires you to take the lift going down - but here is a free seat on the lift going up. Take it, and be thankful, that is all you have to do. The Gospel story underlines that the generosity of God has no limits - we can eat our fill, and there is still bread left over. We can be overflowing with God's riches, and we are not denying others their share. But what we need to know is that we can't pay for it. The love of God is freely given, and must be freely received. Let's hold on to that when we come to receive the riches of God in Communion. As has been often said in Communion Services - "Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof - but only say the word, and I shall be healed". We all need to stop trying to be Christians, and let God make us what we are. As someone said so succinctly - "Let go, and let God". Any other way, and we have got it wrong.