

Wednesday March 20, 2013

The merits of modern translations

By Jim Taylor

A young woman, the granddaughter of a friend of a colleague of a – oh, never mind who she is – plans a very traditional wedding. She has instructed her minister that Bible readings must come from the 1611 King James Version. If he objects, she says, she'll "spit in his eye!"

It's hardly the language revered by devotees of the King James Bible.

She and her fiancé will probably also repeat the traditional words, "and thereto I plight thee my troth."

Say, what?

No one, today, says "thereto" for anything. Asked what "plight" means, most people might think of the plight of the poor or the disabled. And "troth" is, umm, well....

So why would this woman want her wedding ceremony to be conducted in language that she herself never uses?

I can understand quoting Shakespeare in the language he wrote, even if it's unfamiliar to today's speakers. I also understand that the poetic metaphors of Blake or Hopkins, T.S. Eliot or Dylan Thomas, mustn't be meddled with.

But the Bible was not written in English. The Old Testament writers used Hebrew; Jesus apparently spoke Aramaic, the lingua franca of his area; Paul wrote in everyday Greek.

So everything we read in the Bible is a translation.

(Another acquaintance recalls his mother insisting that the King James translation was the only true Bible, because "that's the way God wrote it.")

Some facts about translations

All translations are approximations of the original. Because every language reflects its own culture. Translators do their best, but the idioms and images of one culture rarely translate well into a different one.

To complicate matters further, a translation must also take into account the context in which it will be read. Translating for children is vastly different from translating for university professors.

The King James Bible was translated for liturgical use. It was intended to be read aloud to an assembled congregation.

When I wrote paraphrases of the biblical psalms, in 1994, I similarly expected these psalms to be read, probably responsively, by a congregation. So I deliberately did not use terms that might offend their sensibilities. I did not use any of those infamous four-letter words. I did not ask an assembly of worshippers to say "pissed off." Or "screwed up."

Let alone "spit in his eye."

But that's precisely the kind of language that Jesus and Paul probably used.

Jesus didn't orate in lofty cathedrals. He told stories on the street and in the market. He used the words of daily speech.

And Paul wrote personal letters. To people he had lived and worked with. He was quite upset with some of them. He didn't pull his punches.

Putting the writers of the Bible on a pedestal – along with the Bible itself – does them an injustice. It may reveal a reverence for matters of faith. But it also sets faith issues in a comfortably distant world.

The more colloquial modern translations may seem to take liberties with the rich and rolling texts many of us grew up with. But they do a much better job of reproducing the flavor of what the original speakers intended to say.

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YOUR TURN

I got two kinds of letters about last week's Soft Edges mailing – letters related to Food Banks, and letters about contemporary composers of religious music. First, the Food Bank letters.

Fran Ota had much the same experience as I did: “In my first parish, when we began a Good Food Box program, we heard the same thing. It was a rural area, where several farms which had finally been abandoned as untenable by the owners. In order to make a few bucks, they rented the old farm houses out to welfare families. Some of those families moved to the country thinking it would be better for their children and easier on the pocket. Yet most of the homes were heated by oil, and the winters were costly. As the Food Box program got started, members of the church were stunned to find they had been living amidst a whole group of families who were not exactly homeless, but struggling to feed their families.”

Beth Burgess agreed that we see only what we expect to see: “I call this selective sight. Many are familiar with the term selective hearing. We see and hear only what we want or what is comfortable for us. It's time for people to get out of their comfort zones and see and hear what is real.”

Isabel Gibson also had some thoughts about selective sight: “In addition to not seeing what we don't expect to see, any photographer can speak to the frustration of trying to capture a vivid image, only to find it all cluttered up with what's actually there. We pay attention to only a small part of what's around us -- necessary for getting through the day without sensory/processing overload, I'm sure, but a problem nonetheless. I've heard about the Buddhist concept of 'mindfulness', one technique being to pick something to be aware of each day -- like the colour 'red'. I wonder if we could apply it in other areas of our perception -- watching for the poor, the distressed, the fearful, the anxious... Not that we can or should always rush to do something directly, but just to be aware of 'what's actually there'. Because you're right -- if we don't 'see' it, we won't do anything about it.”

Charles Hill commented about seeing only what we expect to see: “That applies to eyewitness of traffic accidents or other crimes. I wonder if it applies to the eyewitnesses of what Jesus did.”

Alex McGilvery took a more trenchant stance: “It is nice that people are raising money for a new food bank, but the truth is that we should be marching in the streets to demand an end to poverty. The first food bank was started as a protest again government policy. Unfortunately as a protest it was a dismal failure. Poverty is a leading cause of health problems that cost society a lot of money. It is directly linked to crime rates, again that cost everyone. School is much more effective if the children are fed, again poverty. Homelessness is expensive. The truth is that we can't really afford poverty. Then no one would have to be invisible.”

My story about the motorcycle/car accident brought a reminiscence from Jack Driedger: “I motorcycled for 30 years. I retired from that sport at age 70 after more than 250,000 km riding and no collision. The main way of preventing a collision is to ride defensively, realizing what you just pointed out: = automobile drivers do not watch for motorcycles. One has to be especially wary of little old ladies on their way for their afternoon tea. If they suddenly realize that they took the wrong turn to get to Mabel's: LOOK OUT!”

Jack added, “Don't get me wrong, at my age I like little old ladies.”

And then there were the letters from people supplementing my brief list of music writers and composers.

Jean Hamilton corrected my spelling of Carolyn McDade. She added the names of Ruth Duck, Miriam Winter, Emily Kierstead, Jacques Berthier, Sylvia Dunstan, Linnea Good, and John Bell.

Helen McKinnon (from Melbourne, Australia) also recommended John Bell: "The hymnbook widely used in Australia, Together in Song, has a number of wonderful hymns from John Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland."

David Gilchrist thought of a former United Church moderator, Walter Farquharson. Also of Jim Strathdee.

And Dennis Languay suggested David Haas, Michael Joncas, John Michael Talbot, and Michael Card. I forgot to mention John Oldham, Marty Haugen, and Julian Pattison. And Brian Wren. And.... and ...

PSALM PARAPHRASES

This Sunday's psalm varies, depending on whether you choose to celebrate Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. I decided to go with the Passion Sunday reading, Psalm 31:9-16. It felt more appropriate for the end of a month that gave most of us more bad weather than we needed.

9 Be kind to me, God. I'm really in trouble this time.
I'm blinded by misery; I've got the shakes all over.
10 I spend my days hating myself, my nights despising others.
I have turned into a spineless blob, with bones made of jelly.
11 No one talks to me or visits me;
I huddle in my gloom like the dustballs under my dresser.
12 No one even thinks of me any more;
I am shoved aside like yesterday's newspaper.
14 I have no one to turn to but you.
You are my only friend, the only one I can count on.
16 Do not turn away from me too.
Wrap me in the warmth of your arms, and comfort me now.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemlikeGod" page, www.seemlikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
