

## Lecture Two

# *Words and Word*

Last time I suggested that reading the Scriptures in translation was already a very poor way of apprehending them. I'd like to unpack this idea a little today, and see how we can go some way towards remedying this by the way we study. If we are to preach what the Scriptures really say, then we must make our reading of them as accurate as possible.

Words are such a familiar presence in our lives that we sometimes take them for granted and fail to grasp the wonder of them. To have many words is to know the concept of many things, places, actions, qualities, and people; But words are not merely utilitarian handles. In *Genesis* God says of his creatures: *Each one is to bear the name the Man will give it.* Ministers of the Church must lead people to a deeper sensitivity to words, in order to pave the way for the receiving of the Word. When we love what a word expresses, we respond powerfully. Using these magical sounds we can evoke what they refer to with amazing effect<sup>1</sup>. Our very knowledge of words reflects our grasp of the world, and our efforts to understand what it is and what it means.

*It would be a great help if we turned our minds to reading and appreciating English poetry, so that we can meditate on the power of words in our mother-tongue, without all the complexities of entering another culture.*

There are people who, in times of adversity, especially when they do not know whom they can trust, develop a private language. In some sense this is true of the Catholic Church, especially in countries with a religious history like ours. But this can be disastrous to our rôle as missionaries for Christ, who became flesh in order to communicate in our human language. We must do the hard work of continuing to make the Word of God flesh, and to address the world as he did. Words aren't private possessions. Their power depends on community. To use words at their full power requires that they be shared, and this sharing of language springs from shared lives.

The power to preach properly, therefore, depends as much on our closeness to those we are addressing, as on our command of the language we share.

There's power in foreign words too, but it is a different power. Consider the people who look back to the days of the Latin Mass, wanting it to return. What are they really asking? Not, certainly, for the simple need to *understand* what is being said to God in their name; for this, they will need the vernacular. Are they asking *not* to understand? I doubt it; this brings no benefit that I can see. They are asking, certainly, *to experience something they experienced long ago* - because the Mass went into English forty years ago. Some want to relive their specifically Catholic identity: they don't like the fact that an Anglican Holy Communion can be practically indistinguishable from a Catholic Mass, and this is held to be a great pity. They are perhaps asking to experience what they experienced in their youth, what had become familiar to them within their families, when the world was a different place from the

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<sup>1</sup> If you want to think about this simply, you might like to remember the name of your wife or your child, and ask yourself what that word meant to you before you met these people; and assess the power their names have over you now.

(unpleasant) one we now live in<sup>2</sup>. Like Pugin, who thought Gothic was Catholic and pure, and Classical was pagan and immoral, some people think that English is banal and reductive, and Latin is holy and filled with the mystery of God. They would prefer to call God *sanctus* rather than *holy*. *Sanctus* is a piece of music as well as a Latin adjective, and therefore the word feels more familiar than most other Latin ones<sup>3</sup>. There are a lot of clever people who choose the longest words they can find so as to impress other people with their learning; this too is “speaking in a foreign language”. But they just succeed in making people feel excluded, and this leads to disinterest, or worse, resentment. We should try not to commit this error. It contradicts the Incarnation.

Latin gave the liturgy a sort of distance from the mundane lives we lead, in that we knew the words made sense to someone, if not to us; and vaguely we felt that Someone was august and of a higher value than our rattling world. People used to point out it was the language of Augustine, and other Fathers of the Church; it was assumed that the great doings of the Vatican were transacted in Latin, so that the Pope would probably ask for his breakfast in Latin. It was the Language of the Church, and that meant it was the proper language for the liturgy. Maybe those who suggested that God would not listen to prayers not expressed in the Language of the Church were not so far out: the Catholic Liturgy expressed a devotion to God which did not depend on our understanding of its meaning. So it was not *our* liturgy, but God’s: even though the word liturgy implies *the work of the people*. By the way, this seems to me to devalue our own language, and thereby us as well. The liturgy belonged to those who could express themselves *lingua Latina*: allegedly the clergy, though in fact not even the clergy understood everything they had to say. This is what is meant when people say the pre-conciliar liturgy was a clerical liturgy. If you were a layperson, you needed a crib - in the shape of your bi-lingual missal - and were disabled, being drawn along in the guard’s van. Despite this, many who possessed and used a Daily Missal thought of themselves as being a cut above those who responded to the situation by rattling Rosary beads throughout the Mass instead.

The mention of the hand-held Loeb Missal brings me to the question of translation.

## *Scripture and Translation*

If *language* demands community to be what it is, then, even more, *literature* relates specifically to the community in which it is conceived. Of no literature is this more true than of the Scriptures. To be treated as literature, what’s written has to be valued by its community. There is an important point to be made here: much religious argument is actually argument about *translated* Scripture, without much reference to, or help from, its original setting. The fundamentalist’s shibboleth is some phrase like *the plain truth of the Gospel*. But where do we find this virgin text, this gin-clear atmosphere in which the truth shines unambiguous? How, for instance, do we discover what Jesus actually said? The Gospels are Greek documents, and we have no indication that Jesus could or did speak Greek. This means that, from the beginning, we have a tiny collection of actual words Jesus used (*Amen, talitha cum, ephphatha, Abba, Eloi*, etc); the rest is therefore already, and irreducibly, *in translated form* by the time it enters the written Gospels. It is clear from this that we are not, as is

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<sup>2</sup> Many aging Catholics blame the Second Vatican Council for the ills both of the Church and of the modern world; it felt wrong when it was happening, and it still feels wrong today.

<sup>3</sup> One imagines that Jesus would have found Latin entirely irreligious, as the official language of the Roman Empire; as if wartime Poles had decided to pray in German for the duration of the Nazi occupation. What a morass of ironies the Church can sometimes be!

sometimes alleged, a religion of the Book. Our Founder never wrote a book, nor did he command anyone else to generate Scripture. He comes down to us in reported speech, in a very full sense of that term. The Church was entering its third generation before *the Gospel According To John* was composed, and the contents of the Gospel - that is, the *kerygma* or message - had already been transmitted without benefit of Scripture over those sixty years. To put it bluntly, Paul evangelised the Empire without using the Four Gospels. So we are a religion, not of the Book, but of the Word.

Where there is *translation*, there is self-evidently *interpretation*; the translator understands in the original, connecting the foreign words with whatever makes sense in his own mind; then he makes his choice of words in his own language to convey what he has understood. As I mentioned last time, there is no way literature can be “exactly translated” into another tongue. The words in the new language have a different history, different resonance, and therefore a slightly different meaning, from the words originally spoken or written. Instead, scholars have to understand what is written with the greatest care, and then try to deliver the same contents - often with notes, apologising for the incapacity of one language to contain and deliver all that is present in another. It is clear that the hand of the Church is massively present in the transmission of the Gospels from the beginning - not least in the choice of the documents it regards as canonically Scriptural (Mt, Mk, Lk & Jn, but not Peter or Thomas). In sum, there is no “plain truth of the Gospel” except that over which the Church has already raised its hand.

If this is true, then we have a certain license for our own reading of the Gospel story in the light of our times, since our own interpretation is only contributing to layers of understanding laid down by the generations before us. Nevertheless, all interpretations are not equally well-founded. It is important that what we come to say about the Gospel in our praying and preaching be properly founded on what the Gospel originally says. For this we need study and (in your case and mine) help. Help is at hand.

**The Reader’s Cast Of Mind** First, with all respect, and asking forgiveness in advance: try to admit, and then to extirpate, the thought that the Gospels are only going to say familiar things you’ve long ago thought through and thoroughly understand. One of the reasons why we are such poor Christians is certainly this boredom with the Word of God, induced by the near-contempt which flows from familiarity. We are *not* actually familiar with the Word of God, but with an uncritical and dismissive understanding into which we have forced it. This Course hopes to renew the impact of the Word and turn it once more into good news. For this to happen, a spiritual readiness to change our minds and be startled by the import of what God is saying to us here and now is a prime and irreplaceable requirement.

**The Foreign Language** Secondly, in practical terms: be reconciled to the task of getting used to some **Greek words**. Every word you can learn in Greek is going to help you read the Gospels. Don’t be dismayed if some Hebrew comes your way too. These new possessions will be awkward at first, but you will keep coming across them, and their Greek meanings will enhance your awareness of the meaning of the text. If you can acquire a grammar and use someone’s help to learn how to read Greek letters, this will help with the reading of some commentaries, which assume koinē Greek in their readers. (We would not *require* this of anyone, but if you can do it without too much hardship, it will certainly help you to read the Gospel more fruitfully). It would also enable you to use an **Interlinear Greek New Testament**, which will tell you what an important word is in Greek, and enable you to look it up in a **Biblical Dictionary**.

**Books - Buying And Reading** Now we are talking about books; books are an investment if you buy them, and equally an investment - of your time and your attention - if you borrow and read them. So it matters that you should only invest in what is best. One of the books I like using is a biblical dictionary. The great reference work to Biblical language is the nine-

volume German *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* by Gerhard Kittel, published between 1933 and 1973. An English abridgement called *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* was published ten years later by Paternoster Press; it came out in 1985 and is of great use. I found several copies on sale on the internet; I use this book frequently. It gives you an analysis of every occurrence of the word in the New Testament, with background to its usage throughout the classical period of Greek literature, and in the Greek (Septuagint) text of the Old Testament as well.

Simpler to use is an English **Concordance**, which is a listing of every use of a particular word in the Bible (or the New Testament alone). Its weakness is that it tends to be a Concordance to a translation, and commonly to the Authorised Version of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, rather than to the Greek original; such concordances are thus governed by sixteenth-century custom. If you consult it, you must be able to look up the word you want to study in the translation favoured by your Concordance. For instance, Alexander Cruden's *Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments* is easy to buy cheaply in second-hand bookshops; but how familiar are you with the Authorised Version? Fortunately, for the New Testament a good concordance exists to the Jerusalem Bible translation (the one we use at present in the Mass) which differentiates between various Greek words which have yielded the same English word in translation, enabling us to see where the Greek text differs from the translator. This is a book of great value, out of print but easy to buy on the Internet.

There are vast numbers of good **commentaries** which help you with particular texts, and which will often comment extensively on the words used by the Greek writers. If you have chosen well, they will teach you a great deal about what the human Scriptural author had to say. These works usually treat one particular book out of the Bible, and their conclusions should be read in tandem with the writing of others, since there is no absolute consensus about what the Bible is saying. In the writings of commentators like RE Brown or Davies and Allison you have the help of regular surveys across the scholarly spectrum on difficult passages, along with a magisterial judgment offered by the author. Particularly in order to help you understand the original languages, I would urge you to note down anything impressive that you learn about individual words and concepts, when reading a particular commentary. You will be able to build up a personal concordance, and this will always give you something to say when unfolding a particular reading for other people.

Amongst commentaries on the whole Bible, the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* is still very useful - more than just a trouser-press (it weighs ten pounds). Henry Wansbrough OSB recently edited a new introduction on much less focussed lines (the NJBC offers comment on almost every Biblical verse, plus a host of topical articles). There are many general commentaries and introductions, but it is vital that these be not chosen from unscholarly sources; some of them are reductive and fundamentalist Protestant works with very narrow notions. Some are excessively personal responses void of professional scholarship; the Internet is a great repository of such writing, and much of it is drivel. It is essential to acquire a nose for what is stimulating and informative when choosing books to invest in.

*I suggest that it is worth keeping a little loose-leaf notebook in which you take note of things you read - articles, chapters of books, extracts from the Breviary and so forth, which have impressed you - so that you can refer to them later. You could keep a page on Mark's Gospel, another on the theology of the Eucharist, another on St Paul, on Anselm, on the Crusades...it is maddening to remember something which was illuminating, and to be unable to locate it just when you need it. The jotting-down of a short summary will often fix a piece of reading in your mind instead of letting it sink into oblivion. It might be worth making the notes in the same place, of the more significant Greek words you come across too.*

# *C K Barrett's list of Gospel vocabulary*

This list forms part of Barrett's Commentary on John. An example of useful study involving statistics as well as overall impressions. Some of the contrasts are highly significant.

<i>Greek word</i>	<i>anglice</i>	<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Luke</i>	<i>John</i>
agape/agapan	love	9	6	14	44
aletheia/alethes	truth	2	4	4	46
ginouskein	to know	20	13	28	57
graphe	scripture	0	1	1	11
eimi	I am	14	4	16	54
ergozesthai	to work	10	3	3	35
zoe	life	7	4	5	35
Ioudaioi	the Jews	5	6	5	67
kosmos	world	8	2	3	78
krinein	to judge	6	0	6	19
marturein	to witness	4	6	5	47
menein	to remain	3	2	7	40
paroimia	metaphor	0	0	0	4
Pater (of God)	Father	45	4	17	118
pempein	to send	4	1	10	32
terein	to keep	6	1	0	18
tithenai phuxein	lay down life	0	0	0	8
phaneroun	make visible	0	1	0	9
philein	love	5	1	2	13
phos	light	7	1	7	23
archomai	to begin	13	26	31	2
baptisma	baptism	2	4	4	0
basilea	reign	57	20	46	5
daimonion	demon	11	11	23	6
dikaios ( <i>men</i> )	worthy	17	2	10	0
dunamis	power	13	10	15	0
eleein/splanch...*	mercy	16	7	13	0
evangelizesthai	to preach	5	7	10	0
katharizein	to cleanse	7	4	7	0
kalein	to call	26	4	43	2
kerussein	to proclaim	9	12	9	0
laos	people	14	3	47	3
metanoiein	to repent	7	3	14	0
parabole	parable	17	13	18	0
proseuchesthai	to pray	19	13	22	0
telunes	taxman	9	3	10	0

\* splanchnizomai - to take pity, have mercy

*The occurrences counted include nouns derived from verbs, etc; eg "prayer" is numbered with "to pray" where the etymology is identical.*

In order to give you a head start, I've prepared a copy of Barrett's list of important words from the Gospels, chosen to show how the vocabulary of John differs markedly from that of the Synoptic authors. This is not just of passing interest. You will hear it said that the great evangelical summons is *Repent! For the reign of Heaven is at hand!* but now you know that John never uses the word "repent", and uses "reign" only 5 times, where Matthew uses it 57 times. We can easily wander through these interesting words, drawing out the background to their usage; maybe you will find it difficult to take in all their resonances at this early stage. But I would like to think you could preserve the list, and learn the Greek words involved, because they are the true vocabulary of the evangelists, and their aim in life was to transmit in Greek words the Word of God. Already, by learning a little about these words, you are drawing closer to the mystery of Scripture than you were when Greek was unknown to you.

## ***Barrett's List***

Let us take a look at the words on our list. The second strophe refers to the Synoptic words: *begin* is one of Mark's idiomatic insertions, followed through by the other two evangelists. Baptism as a noun never occurs in John, as though the concept had escaped his notice. You will recall that Jesus' baptism is not described by John. *Basilea*, the Kingdom of God or of heaven, better translated as the Reign of God, so massively present in the parables and the Sermon on the Mount, is scarcely present in John (the same can be said of the parables themselves - or of the word *parable*). The casting out of demons is a signature occurrence in the Synoptics, but all the occurrences of the word in Jn relate to the accusation that Jesus is possessed by a demon. It is very significant that the concept of mercy is not represented in the Fourth Gospel, and that the verb *to preach the good news* is entirely absent. *Cleansing* - a theme so central to Rabbinic, especially Pharisaic, Judaism is unrepresented in John. The common verb *to call* which gives us the opening of relationship with Jesus in the Synoptics is little used in John, and the concept of *kerygma* - the message - surprisingly absent. John calls no-one to repentance, and has neither prayer nor taxmen in their synoptic form.

On the positive side, turning to the top half of the list, we find the Johannine keywords. It will help to reflect on something you probably don't yet know: that the Gospel of John is presented as a court-case, with the Son of God standing before the human race to be judged. The *Scripture* is adduced again and again, so that it can give *witness* to the one we call the incarnate Word. Unredeemed mankind, which John calls *the world* must come to *know* the one *the Father* has *sent* into the world. His rôle is to *bear witness to the truth*; he *makes the truth visible* principally in the greatest possible act of witness, the *laying down of his life*, than which no one can have greater *love*. His sacrifice will be preceded by many *works*, which the Father will give him to perform; these will shine in the sight of men, and the *light* so shed will bring them to judgment. Those who are faithful will *remain* in his love, *keep* his commands, and so take part in the shining of the truth in the world, even at the cost of their own sacrifice, the laying-down of life. One of the most ticklish aspects of the Fourth Gospel is the massive onslaught of Jesus on his own people, *the Jews*. By the end he is almost speaking of them as a foreign race; and what we know of subsequent history, the anti-Semitism which reached such an awful harvest in the Shoah, gives this element of Johannine writing a very sour taste.

Our understanding of the actual words will grow as we come across them again and again. The derivatives are just as important as the forms in this list; for instance *ginouskein*, the verb to know, gives us *gnosis*, knowledge: in the second century there was a sect of Christians who believed that the faith could only be fully apprehended by those gifted with a special mystic knowledge, granted individually to selected souls. This arcane wisdom gave the sect its name, *Gnosticism*, and it is alive and well today wherever people become superstitious about their faith. *Krinein*, the verb to judge, gives us the noun *krisis*, judgment; the day of the Lord is a day of crisis, judgment, for all of us. Equally, we use the word *criticism* of the

scholarly study of sacred literature, because it is the process which enables the Word of God to judge the lives of its hearers. Forty times John's Jesus commands us to *remain* in him; the power of this pleading can only be explained by the reading of the Letters of John, where we find described the terrible schism which split his Church. Sadly he writes: *If they had truly belonged to Christ, they would have stayed with us.* The power to *remain faithful* is the gift of God the Holy Spirit, and characteristic of the true Christian. The chapter where Jesus speaks of himself as the Vine is dotted with the use of this verb. This brings us to the important fact that the parable - such a characteristic form in our Lord's bequest to us - comes only in the Synoptics. The place of the parable in the Fourth Gospel is taken up by the so-called *ego eimi* sayings, which begin *I am....*; the Bread of Life, the Vine, the Gate of the Sheepfold, the True Shepherd, the Resurrection, the Way, the Truth, the Life. These images take the place of the gardener, the fisherman, the merchant looking for pearls, the yeast, the seed, the dragnet, and so forth. It can be seen at once that Jesus in these tracts is proclaiming *himself* as the true focus of religion, in a way that would have been intolerable in any Rabbi. The effect on his hearers is electric; he is blasphemous, he is deranged, who is he claiming to be? By comparison the Synoptic parables seem relatively tame, veiled, and vague; though even they can sometimes be recognised as directed with deadly aim.

You can see from all of this that the task of a Minister of the Gospel is quite a complex one. We have to understand ancient, distant realities; we have to find ways of conveying what we've found there to all sorts and conditions of people - often all at the same time; and we have to make it a rule not to offend or put off any of our hearers. In a way we need to be fairly learned, but we must wear this learning lightly, and take care that we are remaining relevant to our audience's real concerns. For the learning, we need books and lectures. For the rest, we need prayer, personal humility, and a kind of simplicity which makes our speech comprehensible. Much of this is not to be learned from books. It is spiritual truth, and human sympathy. If you think about it, these things will best be learned from the simplest and humblest people you know.