

Title: The Power in Translation

Date: 5/7/2023 (Easter 5, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Acts 7:55-60](#); [1 Peter 2:2-10](#); [John 14:1-14](#); [Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/PbqM1M69jeI?t=1416>

Into your hands I commend my spirit,  
for you have redeemed me,  
O Lord, O God of truth (Ps 31:5).  
Amen.

Being a priest is my third career. It took me quite a while to figure out what I wanted to be when I grow up, but I got here... eventually. I describe my spiritual journey as a long and winding road. You might say that I took the scenic route. So, when someone asks me, "How did you find the Episcopal church?" or "How did you know you wanted to be a priest?" I always have to pause and figure out how to best condense the story for that moment.

In my second career, I was a translator and editor. I worked for Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation. It's an international charity foundation based in Taiwan with chapters across the world. The first time I ever came to Texas was to help train English-speaking volunteers at their offices in Dallas and Houston.

The organization was founded by a Buddhist nun, and her focus was not so much on getting people to chant and study and sit in meditation, though her followers did that too. Her focus was more on getting them to apply Buddhist teachings outside the monastery, through serving others and in all aspects of their everyday living, treating other people with gratitude and respect and caring for the earth by carrying around reusable chopsticks and cups and bowls. To this day, I still have my chopsticks in my backpack.

There is this saying, which is **not** a Buddhist saying, "No plan survives contact with the enemy."<sup>1</sup> Along the same lines, it's easier to be "spiritual," however you define it, when you're by yourself or among the beauty of nature. It takes practice to develop a spirituality, a faith, that survives contact, especially prolonged contact, with other people and the changes and chance of life.

For most people, the challenges to our faith don't have to do with choosing whether to go to war or to torture someone for information or to run over one person with a trolley to save four. The things that challenge our faith look more like

-how we react to a homeless man being held in a chokehold on the Subway, as Jordan Neely was on Wednesday,<sup>2</sup>

-how we react to a stranger knocking on our door or sitting in the entryway of our apartment building,

-how we react to a person we know and love saying or doing something that doesn't sit right with us,

-how we react to someone making fun of us for doing what we feel is the right thing.

Dharma Master Cheng Yen believed the way to get lots of practice was to engage with the world and with other people, not to go apart from them. She would give a teaching to the nuns and the volunteers every morning. She'd walk them through the verses of the sutras, the Buddhist Scriptures, by explaining their context and then connecting those verses to something happening in the present day and to the lives and the work of the volunteers. My job was to translate and then edit these daily teachings.

With the benefit of hindsight, this was great preparation for becoming a priest. I didn't study Greek and Hebrew and philosophy the way some of my colleagues did, but I spent six years immersed in the task of translation, focused on translating words into other words and, given the focus of Dharma Master Cheng Yen, on translating words into action and lived experience.

After all those years of translating and editing and creating systems and rules that help other people learn to translate these teachings, it was still hard to hit "send," to submit the translation for publication. There is no perfect one-to-one match in terms of words and phrases, yet you have to make choices and commit to them.

For example, the Chinese character for heart and mind is the same character (心), and when you translate it, you have to lock in the meaning as one or the other. That spectrum of meaning gives the translator great freedom and also great responsibility, especially when you're translating the truths of one of the world's great religions.

In the opening to the gospel according to John, we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1)

"Word" is a translation of *logos*. In Greek, *logos* can mean "word, thought, principle or speech."<sup>3</sup> It's used in reference to human reason and to a universal divine reason. When we talk about being created in the image of God, it's not so much that we resemble God in the flesh as we do in our *logos*, our capacity for reason. All of that, and more, is encapsulated in the Greek *logos* and its English translation "the Word."

But is that what comes to mind when you hear passage proclaimed on Christmas Day?

Since my work as a translator happened at the same time as my journey to become an Episcopalian, one year, out of curiosity, I decided to look up the this verse in Mandarin. The character for "word" (字) in Mandarin just doesn't have the same oomph as "the Word." Ever since then, whenever I read John 1 in English, I also hear it in Mandarin.

"In the beginning was the dao, and the dao was with God, and the dao was God."

The word "dao" means "the way" or "the path" or "the method." It also points to an entire school of Chinese philosophy, as in Daoism. Thinking of "dao" next to "the Word" is like hearing in surround sound. Having these words side by side narrows the meaning

of *logos* and expands it. Holding both these words at the same time makes the meaning more precise and opens it up to interpretation.

I'm in the middle of a novel by RF Kuang. It's called *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*. It's a fantasy novel set in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the system of magic used in the book makes use of the fact that words and phrases are untranslatable in that they lack precise equivalents. So, you take a bar of silver and write the same word in two different languages. The power lies in the difference between them, in the way their meaning is narrowed and expanded in the act of translation.

Here's an example from the book: On one side: garden; on the other, the character 齋, which can mean landscape garden but more generally evoked a place for private withdrawal, to retreat from the world, with connotations of ritual purification, cleansing, and Daoists acts of repentance.<sup>4</sup> Hold the bar, speak these two words, and a garden in London is suddenly nicer and quieter than the busy city surrounding it.

Again, the power comes from narrowing the meaning to garden **and** expanding it to give it this sense of withdrawal and retreat, from making it more precise **and** opening it up to interpretation.

In today's gospel, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." When this verse is used to narrow without expanding, to make more precise without opening up, it loses power; it loses credibility.

Jesus is not a fixed destination; he is our way. He is our way toward becoming, or as Peter puts it in today's lesson, toward growing into salvation. When we feel rejected by other mortals, he reminds that we are chosen and precious in God's sight. This doesn't put us in a place to reject others; it is a reminder that God's definition of chosen and precious is more expansive than any human definition.

What does it look like to grow into salvation? According to Peter, we are called to allow ourselves to be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. The language of spiritual house brings to mind these images in today's Psalm, "a castle to keep [us] safe, my stronghold, my tower of strength."

We have this personal relationship with God, and that relationship brings us into this communal relationship with God. We aren't just a stone, we're part of a house, a stronghold, a tower of strength. This helps our spirituality, our faith, survive contact with the challenges that come with being a human being, with being a human being that lives among other human beings.

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This sounds exclusionary, and it is, but maybe not in the way you've heard it used.

Given the epistle we read, this might exclude claims about God and a way of following Jesus that tells us that certain people aren't chosen and less precious in God's sight because of their gender or sexuality or race. It's taken 550 years for the Pope to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery, which gave European kingdoms permission to claim lands not already inhabited by Christians because indigenous people didn't count as people.<sup>5</sup>

Given the first part of today's gospel, this might exclude claims about God and a way of following Jesus that focuses on condemning people of other faiths or no religious faith to hell rather than on the **many** dwelling places that Jesus is preparing. At the end of the gospel according to John, Jesus tells Simon Peter what's going to happen to him, and when Simon Peter asks what's going to happen to the disciple whom Jesus loved, Jesus basically says, "What is that to you?" or in other words "Mind your own business."

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." When we commit to following Jesus, we commit to living into the fullness of the way and the truth that he embodied throughout his life and in his relationships. We commit to making plans and leaving room for the Holy Spirit to speak to us, to guide us, to work through us as we walk the way and seek the truth.

The way, the truth, the life. None of them is fixed. All of them is about movement, transformation, and change. They narrow and expand, make more precise and open up possibilities we didn't even know existed. May we know and see God in this kind of life, in this kind of work. May we **know** the way and **walk** the way.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2021/05/04/no-plan/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/03/nyregion/nyc-subway-chokehold-death.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/theogloss/logos-body.html#:~:text=Logos%20%2D%20Longer%20definition%3A%20The%20Greek,among%20both%20philosophers%20and%20theologians.>

<sup>4</sup> Kuang, RF. Babel, or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution. p195

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.governing.com/context/what-the-repudiation-of-the-doctrine-of-discovery-means-for-indian-country#:~:text=On%20March%2030%2C%202023%2C%20Pope,discovered%20on%20behalf%20of%20Christendom.>