

St Nicholas', Beverley 23rd May 2021 Holy Communion
Acts 2:1-21 and John 15: 26-27 & 16:4b – 15)

Many years ago, I accompanied a group of students on a visit to France. One day we visited an “agricultural school” whose students were all planning to work in agriculture. The school had its own farm and all the learning was built around agriculture. As we were shown around, two of us shared the job of interpreting what was said into English. My stint of interpreting coincided with a visit to a room with charts on the walls giving data on each of the farm’s cows. Imagine how pleased I was when our guide explained that these charts logged in detail the reproductive cycle of every cow on the farm. Interpreting is sometimes a difficult, and delicate, task!

In international organisations like the United Nations interpreters play an essential role, of course. Speeches are made in one of six official languages: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic or Chinese. Interpreters in booths overlooking the proceedings provide simultaneous translations into other languages. They listen to the speeches and deliver an instant rendition of the speaker’s words via delegates’ headphones in a language their listeners can understand. They carry out a vital task on which much depends.

Nuances in language, shades of meaning, differences in the way expressions and individual words are used in different languages could all lead to diplomatic disasters. Fortunately, they are highly qualified and highly skilled.

I was reminded of interpreters by today's readings.

In the Gospel reading Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to his followers. Like interpreters the Holy Spirit, we are told, will not speak "on his own" but will speak "whatever he hears". And the words the Spirit will translate come from Jesus and his Father.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit descended on his followers as Jesus had promised. Jerusalem was packed with foreign visitors: Parthians and Medes, Libyans and Arabs and all the others, each with their own mother tongues. Yet they all heard those Galilean disciples uttering words they could understand, as the Spirit enabled the followers of Jesus to speak in other languages. The locals, not understanding the sounds, assumed the disciples were drunk which, of course, they weren't.

Up until then, even God had experienced some language problems. Countless times in the Old Testament the Lord spoke to the human race, making promises, telling them how much their Creator loved them, and calling them back to him. If only they would keep the commandments, love God in return and love their neighbours! But people weren't speaking God's language; they weren't getting the message. To the sinful human race, word of love was losing something in the translation. So, God sent Jesus, the Word made flesh, who had been in the beginning with God, who *was* God. Even that didn't work.

Jesus came into the world, but the world would not receive him. We couldn't understand the language. The translation failure was

crucial..

The Word of God, the word of love, the Word made flesh, was interpreted as a threat and Jesus was put to death.

But the cross wasn't the end. It was the beginning of a sequence of events we've been celebrating over the last few weeks: the mighty resurrection of Jesus, his glorious ascension, and now Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, our interpreter. At Pentecost, the Spirit overcame all language barriers, not only between different race but between human beings and God. And that same Holy Spirit is in our hearts, busily translating the word of God for us, but we need to put on our headphones and listen: make space in our lives to be quiet before God, and let the interpreter, the Holy Spirit, reminding us of all that Jesus taught the first disciples, guide us into truth.

Like any good translator, however, the Holy Spirit translates not just the word but the meaning, helping us to see things in context, and to recognise that what was meaningful two or three thousand years ago doesn't always translate easily into the very different world of today. Often the Spirit of prophecy has less to do with foretelling the future than speaking to the present, whether the present of first-century Palestine or of our world today. Through prayer and reading the Bible, the Spirit makes the living Word, Jesus, real in our hearts. Old Testament stories condoning the slaughter of foreign women and children, or New Testament rules against women speaking in church, may have made some sense in their original context, in the original situations, in the original social structures but now they read

like bad translations of the Gospel message.

The task of interpreters at the UN, is to help people understand one another, so that they can communicate. And the role of the Spirit is to help us understand and communicate, with God and with one another.

Regardless of whether we can speak other people's languages, listening to the Spirit will help us avoid the prejudice that spoils our relationship with people we don't otherwise understand. The real meaning of God's love for us, and for them, will come over loud and clear.

Then we might indeed become a world of united nations.

Revd Brian Lees