

The Word of God in our World today by Clare Amos

Background: *This is the text of an address given by Clare Amos at a conference organised by 'Christians Aware', an international and ecumenical movement aiming to develop multi-cultural understanding, raising awareness of the gifts and needs of God's people everywhere. It has been lightly edited to enable it to be read as an article but its origins were for verbal delivery.*

Introduction

There was a fascinating episode of 'Beyond Belief' on BBC Radio 4 recently which focused on *Translating Sacred Texts*. Obviously chosen to set the scene for this year's commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the King James Version, the programme compared the attitude to the translation of sacred scripture within Christianity to that within two other religions – Islam and Sikhism. I found both the Muslim and the Sikh contributor thoughtful and they helped give me insight both into their scriptures, and through that into my own.

One of the points that was made by the excellent Christian contributor Maggi Dawn, almost in passing, was that from the very beginning of the faith Christians have always read scriptures in translation. For if we go back to the first two centuries of the church's existence, before the canon of the New Testament was formed, what Christians referred to as 'scripture' was what we call the Old Testament. But they didn't read it in its original Hebrew. Christians in the Roman Empire would have used the Greek translation, the Septuagint, made in Alexandria in the couple of centuries before Christ.

If anything could be described as the 'official' version of the first Christian scripture it would have been this. The Septuagint was treated with great respect by both Christians and Jews. Philo, a Jewish scholar who worked in Alexandria in the first half of the first century AD noted with what respect it was treated – the authors of the Septuagint were not regarded merely as 'translators' but, as Philo put it, as 'prophets and priests of the mysteries', and the translation itself was to be regarded as the 'sister' of the Hebrew original. It is likely that Christians who lived in the East, in Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia, outside the bounds of the Roman Empire may also have used a translation of the Old Testament, in their case an Aramaic or Syriac version rather than a Greek one. And though the Syriac translation did not acquire quite the status of the Septuagint, the same point applies: it was this 'translation' that the Christians of the East honoured as Scripture, and there was no sense that the fact that it was a translation made it any less authoritative. Indeed in the beginning of the 5th century when St Jerome translated the Bible, by then Old and New Testament, into Latin into what became known as the Vulgate, using the Hebrew rather than the Septuagint text as the basis for his translation of the Old Testament he was criticised by no less than St Augustine. When Jerome's new translation of Jonah which used the word 'ivy' rather than the traditional 'gourd' was read in a church it almost caused a riot. The bishop of the church concerned then insisted on seeking to correct Jerome's translation, because, according to St Augustine, 'he did not want this crisis to leave him without a congregation.' Augustine himself was worried that Jerome's translation would put the Latin speaking churches out of step with the Greek speaking ones, and he also believed that the differences between the Hebrew and the Septuagint which Jerome's translation now highlighted, would lead to people distrusting the biblical text and not having confidence in 'quotations or proofs from it.' It is clear that for Augustine the well being and stability of the church was of more importance than biblical textual accuracy. It is a good illustration of the tension between the authority of the Church and that of

the Bible which has flowed through Christian history. It is also a reminder that there are no ideologically neutral translations.

Given our context of the 400th anniversary of the King James Version it is worth noting that one of the reasons for the production of the King James Version was to challenge the most popular English language Bible of that era – the Geneva Bible – an English translation produced by a group of radical Puritans based in Geneva, whose Bible translation and particularly the extensive notes which accompanied it made clear their opposition to earthly monarchs and traditional rulers. A modern commentator on the King James version has noted that, 'the Authorised Version was not, as it is sometimes argued, simply the product of the English language at a peculiarly rich stage of its evolution, but a deliberate piece of social and linguistic engineering.' It is, says another writer, the most successful example of 'establishment prose' in history. Indeed it became profoundly identified with the British imperial expansion of the coming three centuries. In 1845 it was proudly described as the only bible translation in existence on which the sun never set.

Another very different example of an intriguing link between bible translation and the British Empire is in the Swahili translation of the 1930s. The translation was deliberately done in a standardised form of Swahili which was not the exact dialect spoken by any one group in modern day Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. However, it was felt that to produce a common Swahili version would help to bind together the whole of British East Africa.

I was asked in my briefing for this talk to look at our approach(es) to the scriptures today. I have begun with this look at translation because in my view translation, both literal and metaphorical, is at the very heart of any approach to the scripture. It is intimately linked to the very heart of Christian theology and the Christian understanding of scripture. Certainly modern introductions to interpreting the Bible, such as Paula Gooder's recent *Searching for Meaning* normally include a section on translation theory alongside other methods of biblical scholarship.

Since we have begun with translation let us take a few minutes to look at a biblical passage which implicitly has the topic of translation at its heart or at least as one of its results. It provides a useful entry point for discussion of a number of modern approaches to biblical study. It is the account of the building of the Tower of Babel, as described in Genesis 11 which needs to be read alongside the call to Abraham which follows it at the beginning of Genesis 12.

You will know the basic outline of the story – how a group of people gathered together in Shinar 'in the east' and determine to build a city and tower reaching up into the heavens. They do so in order to ensure that they are not scattered across the earth. God however looks down and determines to frustrate their plans, knocks down their tower and confuses their language so that they can no longer understand each other's language.

It is a story told as a deliberate contrast to the call of Abraham which portrays a polar opposite of how human beings can relate to God – and to each other. The people of Babel begin their flawed initiative by proclaiming, 'Let us build for ourselves a city', seeking to claim for themselves God's own creative 'Let us' which had been used at the moment of humanity's own creation. They go on to say, 'Let us make a name for ourselves'. The contrast with the promise to Abraham is unmistakable, for God's pledge to him includes the very same expression, 'I will bless you and make your name great'. God offers freely to Abraham what the builders of Babel had tried illicitly and unsuccessfully to grab

for themselves. Thus is always the biblical pattern. It is a story of God's free offering, set against humanity's on-going attempts to insist on relying on their own strength. It is a message that is deeply and profoundly embedded in this particular biblical text. For appropriately - given the link between the story of Babel and human language - these chapters almost dance with wordplays to reinforce their message. In Hebrew the word for 'name' is 'Shem' - which is of course the name given to Noah's oldest son. Shem's very name then, means 'name'. Shem is the first person listed in the genealogy which links together the tale of Babel and the story of Abraham. The writer of Genesis is trying to hint to us that in being promised a great name by God Abraham, descendant of Shem, will fulfil the destiny to which Shem's very name points.

But the wordplays do not stop *there* - quite literally. For one of the words which dominates the building of the tower of Babel is the actual word 'there'. You can see it for yourself from the text in front of you. It appears five times. And in Hebrew the word for there is 'Sham' - so very close to the word for 'Name' Shem. So Genesis draws the word 'there' into this glorious verbal punning. A name, the text suggests, is not made by doing something 'there', in that one place, in that city. Rather the 'name' will be given to Abraham, descendant of Shem, when and only when he does not stay 'there' but he sets off into the unknown on a journey in obedience to God's command.

What is it about Babel's 'thereness' that is so hostile to God's purposes for human beings? I think it is something like this. What marked out a city in the ancient world was its walls, walls built for defence and protection, walls built to exclude those who we are afraid of because they are not like us. In turn these walls begin to frame our mind-set, so that we find it difficult to allow space for difference even within the boundaries they provide. Throughout human history there has often been a connection between a desire for security and the ordering of society along totalitarian models. The picture of Babel painted by a Japanese Christian artist captures this powerfully in visual form. But, and this is an insight that perhaps we Christians need to hear from Jewish commentators such as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, God's reaction to the Tower of Babel tells us that 'God insists that people make space for difference, for God may at times be found in the human other the one not like us.'

The Christian reading of the story of the Tower of Babel has tended to view the scattering of humanity and the confusion of tongues at the end of the tale as a punishment - and one which in some way will eventually be reversed by the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. But a careful and nuanced look at the biblical text of Genesis 11 makes it clear that that is not exactly the situation. For it is possible to read the scattering of humanity at the conclusion of the story not as a punishment but rather as the implementation of God's initial will for humankind. God's first instruction to humanity after their creation and repeated after the flood had been to 'fill' the earth and that is precisely what these builders have forgotten. In their quest for unity and homogeneity focused on one small space of earth they have tried to obliterate God's creative vision of duality and diversity. But it is no avail - God's purposes will not be thwarted. And God makes it clear that his purposes are not linked to that place there - Sham - but instead to Abram the wanderer, descendant of Shem - whose name will be great precisely because he obeys God's command to journey into the unknown.

So Christians need to look carefully too at the story of Pentecost. In spite of the fact that retellings of this story of the birthday of the Church often seem to emphasise the unity brought by the Spirit - it is important to observe that the gift of the Spirit there does not make people identical - but facilitates their mutual understanding, while still preserving their differences. As Acts 2.11 puts it "All of us hear them telling in our own tongues the great things God has done." Our

globalised world has tended – certainly until very recently – to foster an artificial unity and one which – intriguingly in view of our subject – is closely related to the privileged position held by the English language.

As our churches have wrestled with the fact of globalization and its significance, positively or negatively, for their mission, they have increasingly come to realize that their task may be to provide an alternative model which encourages inculturation and values difference. And that of course may require us to return to Babel and see the conclusion of the story in a more positive light. There are intriguing perspectives on this story offered by biblical scholars from Latin America, Asia and Africa. To give just one example: Jose Miguez-Bonino from Peru begins a study of this biblical text by commenting on how in the 16th century the Spanish conquistadors engaged in a blitzkrieg conquest decimating the inhabitants and replacing traditional languages with an enforced use of Spanish. The use of this language became a method of control – nothing could be transacted without it. From Bonino's perspective the destruction of the tower then becomes the signal event in the end of Empire, leading to the restoration of a desirable diversity and a positive return to the use of indigenous tongues. It becomes as Bonino puts it 'an act of deliverance'.

What has this brief look at a biblical passage then suggested to us about current approaches to biblical studies? My answer – as someone who fairly recently wrote a commentary on Genesis is as follows. First that the preoccupation of previous generations with the question of sources in the biblical books is less of a focus these days. So for example there is far less of a focus on J E D and P the four source documents that formed the basis of the classic theory of the origin of the Pentateuch. And there isn't much of the concern there used to be in previous generations to go on an archaeological quest – perhaps even to find the actual tower somewhere in Iraq that got knocked down. There is however a commitment to the close reading of biblical text – what we have tried to do briefly in our discussion of the word plays – though there is much more that could be said. There is an interest in seeing how individual passages fits in to a larger whole – whether one thinks of this whole as the book of Genesis or even the whole of Scripture. There is a willingness to be suspicious on occasion of the intention of the writers – or at least how the text has been widely interpreted, with the question being asked what interests on the part of the writer or interpreter have biased the text or interpretation.

Above all perhaps there is an acknowledgement that any exploration of the Bible cannot be context free and that no context offers a neutral perspective. So the contexts of those who study the Bible in Africa, Asia or Latin America are as legitimate contexts from which to explore the biblical texts as are European or North American ones. I may say that this last point would have horrified many of my lecturers when I did my undergraduate studies in Cambridge – who would have regarded it as a form of unscholarly eisegesis – a reading in to the text from our own situation. Our aim in our biblical studies then could have been described as being the neutral referee in a conversation that went on between the text and the world that lay behind it. It is the shift away from this position which has above all characterised biblical study over the last 30 years or so. In describing this new thinking the expression 'reader response criticism' is sometimes used. It is a phrase which I am not too comfortable with partly because it does tend to get employed in a diffuse variety of ways.

Yet the basic idea of taking seriously the context and stance of the reader is one that I find very congenial and theologically appropriate. I think it is deeply true to our doctrine of Christ and our understanding of the theology of mission. I have called this talk 'Translating Christ: the Word of God in our World today' because I

am drawing on some insights offered by the great Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls. Walls talks about the 'translation principle' in Christian history. Beginning from the premise that for Christians Christ is the Eternal Word of God, but that he is also the Word translated, he argues that the Bible through which this Word is shared may and should be constantly translated. As he puts it 'Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity was a receptor language'. And this initial 'translation' is followed by others as 'Christ, God's translated speech is re-translated from the Palestinian Jewish original... The very universality of the Gospel, the fact that it is for everyone, leads to a variety of perceptions and applications of it.'⁵ According to Walls the Gospel is infinitely 'translatable', and as it crosses new boundaries of language or culture this increases and expands the Lordship of Christ. Quoting again from Walls, 'Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ's completion... comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the life-ways of all the world's cultures and subcultures through history.'

In these articles Walls is using the word translation in a double sense – first literally, as in the mechanics of linguistic translation from say Greek into English or Hindi or Swahili. He notes for example that biblical translation has always been an essential facet of Christian missionary activity, and that in this respect Christians in their perception of the Bible fundamentally differ from the Muslim understanding of the Qur'an which ultimately can be described as untranslatable with the Arabic text always having priority over other languages. But Walls is also using the word 'translation' in what we might call a metaphorical sense – though I think he might resist that description – in which the biblical story needs to address and be addressed by the different cultural contexts with which it engages. In the first Christian centuries that meant 'translation' into a world influenced by Greek philosophy and Roman jurisprudence, and perhaps even back into the world of semitic Syrian and Mesopotamian poetry. In our day it may and perhaps should mean translation into a world of many faiths, of insights from Africa and Asia and much as from Europe, as well as a world in which the voices of those who have traditionally been minorities or disempowered increasingly clamour to be heard.

For me the paradigm that I think best describes the way we need to approach the Bible today is one suggested by a group of creative scholars who encourage us look at Scripture from a three-fold perspective: the world of the text, the world behind the text and the world in front of the text. Our task in biblical interpretation is to facilitate a conversation and interplay between these three worlds. It is if you like almost an exercise in translation, which allows each of these worlds in turn to address the others. All three worlds are important and we need to allow the voices of each to be heard. By the world behind the text I mean the factors that have led to the text as we now have it – the history and cultural context of the background out of which the text arose, the sources, both written and oral that have contributed to the development of the text, perhaps even the particular interests and settings of the editors and the editorial process. By the world of the text I mean first of all the basic issue of establishing what the original text actually was – not always as straightforward as it might sound. It then includes exploring how the text functions as a piece of literature and the rhetorical devices that give it its power. The world of the text also includes the study of how an individual biblical passage functions within the larger context of a biblical book or the biblical canon as a whole. To give examples of such canonical questions: Why does the Pentateuch, or Torah, the heart of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, conclude before the people enter the Promise Land? Why is the Gospel of Matthew the first book in the New Testament? Why is Psalm One the first psalm?

The study of what is called 'intertextuality' a sort of deliberate cross-referencing between one biblical passage or book and another might also be located in the 'world', although I suppose it also has elements of the 'behind the text world' as well. Intertextuality in fact has become a significant focus of modern biblical approaches and it is something I myself find really fascinating. Let me give you a couple of brief examples. Take the Book of Ruth for example. In Ruth 1.14 we are told that Ruth 'clung' to Naomi and refused to leave when Naomi suggested she went back to her own people. The Hebrew verb used is *dbq* which is also used in Genesis 2 to describe how a man will leave his father and mother and cling to his wife. Are we to assume that the writer of Ruth was creating a deliberate resonance with Genesis – which emphasises the sacrifice Ruth is making and her closeness to Naomi. Or further on in the book of Ruth Boaz speaks of how he has heard how 'Ruth left her father and mother and the land of her birth' to travel to Bethlehem with Naomi. The words that Boaz uses have resonances with the call of Abraham as described in Genesis 12. So are we being told that this Moabite woman has become a fore-mother of Israel, just as Abraham was its revered fore-father? Or take the Book of Job. In Job 7.17 among the critiques Job throws at God is 'What is man, that you make so much of him?' The question is almost identical to the well-known reflection of Psalm 8 – but it is now employed in a very different spirit. In Psalm 8 it is marvelling at the honour given to humanity in creation – but now in Job it reads as a complaint against an oppressive God who will not let man hide from him. And of course if we assume – as I do – that the author of Job knew Psalm 8, his re-use of these words then becomes a powerful example of biting sarcasm.

The third world is the world in front of the text. This is the space where the biblical text has a conversation with the reader and the contexts of his or her world. And this is the space that has so vividly opened up in the last quarter of a century. It is an exciting and fast-moving place to find oneself. One of the earliest of the 'worlds' that has been overtly explored is that relating to women, for feminist criticism could be described as the grandmother of this way of approaching the Bible. Since then there has been an explosion of other issues that have come to the fore as a 'world' from which to explore the Bible – the perspectives of liberation, post-colonialism, black, Asian, womanist, queer and recently ecology have all provided a mirror to set in front of the text through which to reflect on it. Of course these concerns cannot be totally separated out from each other so one may well be seeking to engage with a particular text from both a feminist and a post-colonial viewpoint for example. What most of these perspectives have in common however is a willingness and an enthusiasm to see the Bible as a tool for transformation, even if this may first involve a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. They would view it as an incendiary device – and understand the comment made about it in the book 'The Handmaid's Tale.'

I don't know how many of you have read this book by Margaret Atwood which is the story of a repressive future society, which keeps the Bible locked away. It is only accessible to the commander of the household (male) and even so, is heavily censored. The handmaid of the story, who is called Offred, observes that the Bible is kept locked up... 'to keep the servants from stealing it... The Bible is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we could get our hands on it.'

Of course this has not always been the perspective of those who have used the Bible. Another story linked to a different handmaid which is told by a famous African-American minister Howard Thurman who tells the following story about his grandmother who was a former slave.

"My regular chore was to do all the reading for my grandmother -she could neither read nor write... With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. 'During the days of slavery', she said, 'the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves... Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: " Slaves be obedient to your masters... As unto Christ." Then he would go on to show how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."

It is of course fascinating to see how the Bible can and has been used and understood in such contrasting ways – as a tool of liberation or a tool of oppression. How can we choose between them? What criteria can we use to say that one is right and the other wrong? I suspect that most of us here this morning would instinctively be opting for the first of these possibilities – to see the Bible as a tool of liberation. Yet what is the justification for our doing so? Realistically we do need to select a hermeneutical starting point from which to begin our process of biblical interpretation. I would suggest that the essential premise which I see running through the entire Bible that God is a God of life rather than death is a reasonable starting point. Speaking as an Anglican it is interesting to note that it is this principle that Richard Hooker – often quoted as the Reformation divine with the greatest influence on the development of Anglican theology also adopts. Hooker comments:

'The main drift of the whole New Testament is that which St John setteth down as the purpose of his own history. 'These things are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in his name.'

Hooker's dictum leads us on to another premise that would be adopted by many or most Christian readers – namely that we should read the Bible in the light of Christ. Indeed that is a principle of very long standing. For if we go back to the writings of St Ignatius of Antioch at the close of the 1st century AD – before the New Testament was even gathered together and certainly before it was canonised – so when for Christians the term 'scripture' meant what we now call the Old Testament we find that Ignatius when challenged over whether something appeared in the ancient scriptures, retorted that yes it did, but that, as Ignatius puts it, the real sacrosanct records are Jesus Christ, his cross and death and resurrection and the faith that comes through him.'

Ignatius' comment leads us in turn to reflect on another issue – that Christians have had to do biblical interpretation since the very beginning of our history, precisely because we have two parts of scripture and how you hold these together and understand one in the light of the other is a question that Christians have been wrestling with since New Testament times. The foundation principles of Christian biblical interpretation emerged from the need to hold together the two testaments both with each other, and with Christian practice. The question can Christians eat pig, and if so why has been around a very long time.

But we have somehow diverted from looking at that threefold pattern, the world behind the text, the world of the text and the world in front of the text. I want to return briefly to it and to reinforce the fact that all three worlds are important and need to be held in a creative tension. The hermeneutic that I am propounding is not about saying anything goes. When I worked in the early 1990s for the Anglican Diocese of Southwark, a model of biblical study called 'experiential bible

study' was very popular in some circles there, and particularly among some of my colleagues. Its basic premise was a good one – that people should read the bible taking account of their experience – if you like their 'world in front of the text'. But apart from in practice being very individualistic, in my view some of its practitioners paid insufficient attention to the other 'worlds' that we have looked at this morning. The example that I often quote is the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Apparently, and perhaps not surprisingly it is the Bible story best known by many people who would loosely identify themselves as Christians. But, and this is significant, generally they know the first two thirds of the story – up to the point when the Prodigal returns home. The final third – in which the elder brother features – is not on most people's radar. And I still remember the reaction I got when I enquired of a colleague as to whether it was important to make sure that people were also aware – and took account of – that final section of the story. From the premise of that person's understanding of experiential Bible study – it was a resounding 'No'. In the years since I have reflected on that response – and have gradually gained the confidence to be quite sure that it was wrong. There is an excellent recent book by the writer Eugene Peterson about bible reading called 'Eat this Book'. It is part of Peterson's Spiritual Trilogy. Peterson comments at one point that some people read the bible from the perspective of what he calls a replacement Trinity – by Holy Wants, my Holy Needs and my Holy Feelings. That, in my view, was exactly what was being propounded by the more extreme advocates of experiential Bible study. I do want to stress however that there were a range of views held among those who practiced experiential bible study – and not all by any means would have been so extreme.

But isn't it interesting however to reflect that the three worlds do in some sense model the Trinity. One could link I think the importance of the 'world behind the text' with the Father, the Creator, the world 'of' the text with Christ, Son, Word of God, and the world in front of the text with the Spirit. In our reading of scripture are we seeking to enter into the interplay and relationship of the Trinity? This is potentially a fruitful line of exploration.

I want to pull this talk together by concluding with a brief exploration of a further biblical story – significantly one that is cherished by many Christians in Asia and Africa. It is the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well of Samaria. Indeed when a few years ago there was a major international project on 'intercultural reading of the Bible' it was precisely this story that was chosen as the main case study for the project and explored by a wide range of groups in all continents. It is in my view a story that illustrates the importance of all three 'worlds' speaking to each other – and through their discourse enriching the meaning and power of this encounter.

The world behind the text needs to be explored. We need to learn something of the historical background – of the antagonism between Jews and Samaritans, of their bitter quarrel over which was the appropriate place to worship God – on this mountain – or in Jerusalem – as the woman enquires of Jesus, otherwise we won't understand its tension and the dynamics. We need to understand the cultural presuppositions of the New Testament era as they relate to the restricted relationships between men and women. Perhaps we also need to be aware that in the early church there was probably a significant group of Christians of Samaritan background – and that the writer of John's Gospel was aware of this. We need to understand the very basic linguistic pun – on which the story rests – that in Hebrew and semitic languages the normal expression for fresh running spring water, as opposed to still and possibly polluted well water – was – and is – mayim haim – literally translated into English as 'living water'.

The world of the text is there immediately in the textual question with which the story opens – for it is not sure whether Sychar or Sychem is the place of this encounter – and if Sychem should we see a relationship to Biblical Shechem? But more profoundly we also need to explore the text of this story and see interplay both with other parts of John's Gospel and with the wider Bible. For example, we cannot really understand the power of this tale unless we remember that in the Old Testament there is a well-known literary type scene – a hero journeys to a foreign land, meets a woman at a well, one draws water for the other, and the hero eventually makes her his bride. So Jesus has travelled to the alien territory of Samaria, has met this woman at the well, and there the story goes wrong. For this is not the young and beautiful virgin of the traditional tales – but a woman used and abused in a system in which men set the rules for nice women. And Jesus the bridegroom makes her his bride not with an act of sexual intercourse (though there is certainly an aspect of sexual tension in the tale) but by making her his emissary to her people and giving her an honoured role in her community. Similarly the intertextuality between this story and John's account of Jesus' passion is important. Jesus is thirsty here at noon, as he will be later on the cross at the same time. Through this link we are being told that the living water Jesus offers the woman flows ultimately from his own body.

And the world in front of the text – well where to begin. It is a story that understandably feminist critics of scripture – among which I include myself – cherish. We bring our concerns to the story and feel it engaging with them. It is also a story that is cherished by impoverished Christians or Christian minorities particularly in Asia. The scandalous sharing of a drinking vessel between the Jewish Jesus and the Samaritan woman prohibited by Jewish and Samaritan religious practice is in itself part of the message of liberation for Christians in the Indian sub-continent who are prohibited by the caste system from sharing water with caste Hindus. To be willing to receive water from another in such a culture is to show respect to the giver – to break down the barriers between the clean and unclean. It is not surprising therefore that this is one of the most illustrated of gospel stories among Asian and African Christians. I am showing a few examples on the screen.

But there is something else about this story that has rarely been noticed but for me is its most marvellous message of all and brings my talk this morning to a very appropriate conclusion. I was part of the international team that in 2008 was privileged to be invited to put together the Bible studies for the Lambeth Conference. We took John's Gospel as our text, and within John we focused on the 'I am' sayings, offering we hoped some fresh insights into them. As I expect many of you are aware when Jesus in John's Gospel refers to himself as 'I am' he seems to be making a connection to the great Old Testament passages in the Book of Exodus where God reveals his name to Moses as 'Yahweh', 'I am who I am'. He is in effect claiming identity with the one whom his people worshipped as God. But though most people are familiar with the great declarations of Jesus such as 'I am the Bread of Life', 'I am the Light of the World', 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' – what I call the 'I am sayings with a predicate'; not everybody realises that there are a considerable number of other 'I am' sayings in the Gospel – which are sometimes half hidden by the English translation, but where in Greek Jesus is also using the same words 'ego eimi', the emphatic 'I am', to speak about himself.

When I talk with people about John's I am sayings I enjoy asking people to think about which is the first 'I am' saying in John's Gospel. Some people have mentioned 'I am the Light of the World', others 'I am the Bread of Life'. I have to confess that it is with great glee that I chortle at these responses and tell people

that they are wrong. It is certainly true that 'I am the Bread of Life' in chapter 6 is the first 'I am with a predicate' in the Gospel, but in fact there are two earlier 'I am' sayings, which, although they are picked up in the marginal footnotes of many modern translations, are not immediately obvious to the English reader.

In fact the very first 'I am' of John's Gospel occurs in John 4.26 – Towards the conclusion of their conversation between Jesus and the woman. In the NRSV translation it is presented as 'I am he, the one speaking with you' – but actually in Greek it is simply 'I am the one speaking with you'.

'I am, the one who is speaking with you'. This is the first time that Jesus says 'I am' in the Gospel of John. I find it an exhilarating and powerful discovery to realise that the first time that Jesus discloses this divine identity it should be to a person who is a woman, a Samaritan, who was not a member of his own religious community, and someone who was apparently ostracised among her own people. What is this telling us about the nature of God? The disclosure comes at the end of a quite lengthy talk between Jesus and the woman, in which they have discussed theology almost as equals. In the course of their meeting, each have ministered to the other, new life has been offered, barriers have been broken and the vision of a new and deeper relationship between God and human beings, and between human beings themselves has been opened up. And then Jesus says 'I am'.

And what exactly might this mean? One of the reasons I enjoy talking to groups of people about the Bible is that often I discover fresh insights from those I am meeting with. A while back when I was reflecting on John 4 with a group in Hereford. I had made the comment that I have also made today – about the difference in John's Gospel between the 'I am' sayings with a predicate such as 'I am the bread of life' – and these other - what I call the hidden 'I am' sayings. Then somebody pointed out that one way of translating John 4.26 could suggest that it too includes a predicate 'I am the one talking with you'. And they are quite right. So just as Jesus is elsewhere describing God as the bread of life or the light of the world and identifying himself with those realities, so here he is describing God as 'the one talking with you' – and identifying himself with that expression of divinity. It is a powerful insight, which seems to suggest to me that the Gospel is saying that at the very heart of what it means to be God, as Jesus reveals it to us, is God's communication with humanity. It is of the very nature of God to be a God who communicates with his human creation. And this, I remind you, is the very first 'I am' of John's Gospel, so John is saying that this is the fundamental nature of God – upon which all the other things John wants to tell us about God in his Gospel will be based. It does of course link with the way that this Gospel opens with that profound meditation on the Word, the Logos. It is I think an insight crucial for our understanding of the nature of mission, to suggest that God's very identity is so profoundly linked to his on-going communication with his human creation. It is an insight that is surely difficult to grasp in its totality – but perhaps that is typical of the unpinnable-downness of the 'I am who I am'.

As we explore together our understanding of the Bible and what it means to 'translate Christ' in our world today 'I am the one talking to you' says to me that it is only through a real conversation with humanity that the God of the Bible, the God we encounter in Jesus, is able to reveal himself, and allow the living water to flow for the healing, cleansing, sustaining and delight of humanity.

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