



2) Chapters 20 & 21

A reminder ..

.. of last session's introduction – how to translate *pisteuō* and the meaning of different Greek verb tenses. This session's example is chapter 20, verse 8: “He saw and **believed**”. It's an ‘aorist’ tense (“he came to faith there and then”), whereas the various texts are equally divided about verse 29 – “so that you may **come to believe**”: some use a present tense (“so that your [existing] belief may be confirmed”), whereas some use an aorist, as in the NRSV translation given here.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene

Look at how they address each other:

Jesus said to her, ‘**Mary**’. She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘**Rabbouni**’ (which means ‘Teacher’).
[20.16]

But in fact he didn't call her Mary! It's the Gospel-writer who calls her ‘Mary’ (*Maria*) in verses 1 & 11, whereas here in verse 16 Jesus calls her *Mariam* – the less formal, Aramaic, version of her name. In response she speaks to him also in Aramaic, *Rabbouni* (not in Hebrew, which would be ‘*Rabbi*’) .. and it doesn't in fact mean ‘Teacher’ (*Didaskalē*), which is what the other disciples used to call him; she uses her own pet name for him, found nowhere else in John's Gospel, “dear Master”.

Their affection for each other is also in danger of being lost in translation in the next verse:

Jesus said to her, “**Do not hold on to me**” [20.17]

The NRSV is quite good on this, but the more traditional translations miss the point entirely, with their “Do not touch me”. That would have been an aorist imperative, and this one's in the present tense (remember our discussion of the meaning of Greek tenses in our introduction this week and last?). So he actually said “Stop clinging to me!” – which is rather different! (And it's not just the tense ... when Thomas is invited to touch Jesus later in the chapter, not only the tense but also the verbs are different, *phere* and *bale* as opposed to *haptou* – the difference between an exploratory prod and a loving hug.)

Real peace, and inspiration

Three times in the Upper Room, Jesus begins with the same phrase:

Jesus said “**Peace be with you**” [20.19,21,26]

If you read the phrase in some of the old ‘King James’ Bibles in some of our churches, you'll find “Peace *be* with you” – where the italics aren't for emphasis, but to show that a word has been added in English which isn't there in the original language. So the Greek *Eirēnē hymin* has no verb ... and that makes a great deal of difference. What in other circumstances would be a conventional greeting (in Hebrew, *šālōm 'ālēkem*) becomes a declaration, “Peace is with you”.

Jesus continues with an odd-seeming action and instruction:

He breathed on them, and said to them “Receive the Holy Spirit!” [20.22]

Although the words (*enephyssen* and *pneuma*) are slightly different here, the verse clearly echoes God's creative work at the beginning of the Bible story, when God breathed (*enephyssen*) the breath of life (*pnoē*) into Adam. Greek uses definite articles for proper names, especially for God (*ho Theos* – literally ‘the God’) .. but here for (the) Holy Spirit there is no article – it's more like “Receive holy breath”! Quite literally “receive a holy spirit”, “be (holy) inspired!” or, remembering God and Adam, “receive new life!”

Other verses

Before we look, overleaf, at chapter twenty-one, do you have any other translation questions to raise from this chapter?

A therapeutic conversation

Much of the beauty, and subtlety, of this lovely last chapter of the Gospel comes across well in the usual translations. Peter had denied Jesus three times, and so Jesus takes him back to the start of his discipleship (even calling him by his original name, 'Simon', rather than by his later Christian name, 'Peter'), and gives him the opportunity to make a fresh, three-fold, declaration of loving commitment. Jesus also gives him three instructions, increasing Simon Peter's level of responsibility with each one – "Feed my lambs ... tend my sheep ... feed my sheep"

But almost all translations miss entirely the subtle interplay between Jesus and Peter in the dialogue:

"Simon, son of John, **do you love me** more than these?" ... "Yes, Lord, you know that **I love you.**"

"Simon, son of John, **do you love me?**" ... "Yes, Lord, you know that **I love you.**"

"Simon, son of John, **do you love me?**" ... "You know that **I love you.**" [21.15-17]

New Testament Greek has many words for love, and of them the strongest is *agapaō* (to love someone self-sacrificially) and the weakest is perhaps *phileō* (to be someone's friend). Now let's look at the conversation again:

"Simon, son of John, **do you love me self-sacrificially**, more than these others do?" ... "Yes, Lord, you know that **I am your friend.**"

"Simon, son of John, **do you love me self-sacrificially?**" ... "Yes, Lord, you know that **I am your friend.**"

The questions are getting easier, as Jesus helps Peter articulate a humbler, more realistic, commitment to him. And the third time, when Jesus asks him ...

"Simon, son of John, **are you my friend?**"

... it's perhaps not surprising that Peter "felt hurt", because Jesus felt the need to ask him if he was even his friend; and he replies:

"Lord, you know everything; you know that **I am your friend.**"

In fact there's a further subtlety lost in translation in that last reply: "Lord, **you know** everything; **you know** that I am your friend." The two Greek words for "you know" in that sentence are quite different from each other – *oidas*, to have an intellectual understanding, and *ginōskeis*, to perceive. Peter is, I think, in tears by now; and he says to Jesus "Come on, you know everything, surely you can see that I'm your friend?"

So the greatest responsibility, that of "feeding God's sheep" (and in the years that followed Peter became, to use a later title, the first Pope), was given to him not because he loved Jesus more than other Christians did (*agapais me pleon toutōn*); nor because he necessarily loved him deeply at all (*agapais me*); but simply because he recognised his weaknesses and his failures but could still say 'yes' to the third question (*phileis me*) – he was a friend of Jesus.

In conclusion

Do you have any other translation questions to raise from chapter twenty-one?