

Views from the Pews:

First Sunday after Epiphany : A multilingual church

The Māori language Affirmation of Faith and the English version are not direct translation equivalents of each other. Rather, they are blocks of text which fulfil the same liturgical function, as a statement of our faith. They also serve to remind us that while St Peter's is part of Tikanga Pākehā, the 'English' strand of our church, and English is the predominant language in its worship and life, our church as a whole is multilingual and multicultural. As were Christ's mysterious visitors whom we celebrate at Epiphany.

The value of these texts, or rather the value of having them in different languages, has to do with what languages are for. They are not simply different ways of 'saying the same thing', though they can do this. Languages are also the vehicle for the stories, metaphors, values, points of view and so on of the communities which speak them. In a matter such as trying to find words to state our faith, something which is a mystery and elusive, it can be helpful to be aware of how other cultures and languages go about this task.

In the Māori language Affirmation of Faith, the section on the Holy Spirit says:

Ko koe taku rākau, ko koe taku tokotoko, ko koe taku oranga ngākau.

Literally, you are my rod, you are my walking stick, you are the well-being of my heart. In English, we would I think find this odd and awkward as a way of characterising what we believe about the Holy Spirit, but in Māori this way of talking is quite usual and meaningful. Rākau is a tree, a rod, a weapon, and in this context describes the Holy Spirit as our protector. Tokotoko is a walking stick, but also, as such, the mark of an orator and person of standing, so we are acknowledging that the Holy Spirit is not only our support but also one who gives us standing and (as Jesus promises) will aid our bearing witness to Him.

Together, the triplet, rākau, tokotoko, oranga ngākau is a strong resonance of Psalm 23, surely in any language among the most intimate and comforting texts in Scripture. There, they stand for the English 'rod', 'staff' and 'comfort' in that very familiar text. So next time we sing this Affirmation, just let this description of the Holy Spirit and His meaning for us dwell in your minds, as an equal though different expression of faith.

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