

Views from the Pews - Translation of Liturgy into Maori

Words may mean what they mean but they don't always mean what we mean, or think we mean, or even think they mean. See what I mean?

In this brave new multicultural era we know that not every Anglican speaks English, and that most English speakers do not even speak the same version of the English language, so how do we talk about the most mysterious subject of all? God. Our recent extraordinary trinity of female priests offered Tongan inflected English, a strong US accent, and a genuine New Zealand dialect. Just listen to our male triumvirate of Dean and two Wardens, or the regular Bible readers. Do accents matter for meaning? Of course they do. They indicate membership of a group which has a similar background and common experience, including the way they see the world and understand the elements of our mutual culture. Often dialects make for communication difficulty, because the vowel shapes are different and rhythms and emphases unrecognisable.

Each English accent brings a different world view to discussion and communication, but those difficulties are nothing compared to mutually unintelligible languages like Maori and English. Acknowledging our imposing Cathedral presence on an historic hill, Pukerangiora, and the presence of tangata whenua who lived here before Europeans arrived, and still do, our pew sheet has become, at least in part, bilingual. OK. Those of you who are already not just nodding (which may be good) but nodding off (which may be better,) just note that mana, aroha, and wairua are concepts which do not exist in a culture based on English. They are simply not translatable.

In part it is because there are no direct cultural referents, no activities or objects in the "English" derived culture from which the Anglican church springs, but more particularly because they label ideas which contrast almost significantly with Christianity driven European definitions like 'prestige', or 'love', or 'spirit'. Consider the words 'tohunga' and 'priest' and whether they could be interchangeable in a translation. Is Dean Julian a tohunga and a priest? If you began with the Maori translation of the Lord's Prayer, and translated it back into English, would it begin *Our Father in heaven....*? And if it doesn't, how important is it that the Lord's Prayer in Maori does not mean the same as it does in English? What a reminder that tolerance and understanding are what make us tick.

Sam Edwards