

Dear people who keep Judy and me going,

One of the very great blessings of being a Bible translator is that you get to think through the basic ideas you're trying to translate (say in my case the Gospels). And one of the very great blessings of being a disciple of Jesus (say again in my case) is that you are busy with Jesus' basic ideas. His language style was Aramaic and Hebrew, two closely related languages. Aramaic was the common language of Palestine, and Hebrew was the language of Moses and David and the others who Jesus read and used in his thinking.

Here's an important basic idea of Jesus to think about – “the kingdom of heaven”.

For starters, the meaning of the phrase is “kingdom of God”, but people in Jesus' society avoided saying “God” because it was a holy word for them. They said “kingdom of heaven” rather than use the word “God”. Luke, however, came along later and was from Greek speaking society, so he has Jesus say “kingdom of God” in his Gospel, even though Jesus more likely said “kingdom of heaven” in his own Aramaic. Matthew has Jesus say “kingdom of heaven” in his Gospel. What's interesting is the way Jesus' words passed – via the minds of Luke and Matthew – from Aramaic into Greek. Luke chose what was more natural for Greek speakers. Matthew didn't break any rules of Greek grammar, but he maintained the Hebrew flavor.

But here's something even more interesting about the Hebrew flavor. “Kingdom” as Jesus uses the word does not refer to a place, like it does for us. It refers rather to a role in society. “The kingdom of God” is a way to say “God is king”, or “God rules”, or (in plain English, since we hardly know what kings were like anymore) “God is completely in charge”. Think of Pharaoh and Tiglath-Pileser and Nebuchadnezzar (not Elizabeth II). They really ruled. They made society what they wanted it to be. For Jesus, God is the one who is king.

But God is not at all like Nebuchadnezzar and the others. He has a completely different way of making His society what he wants it to be. Jesus talks about it constantly.

Consider the parables. “The kingdom of God is like...” someone who does something. I guess that means, “The way God rules is like...” someone who acts. God rules like a man who planted good seed and it grew. God rules like a woman who put yeast in the dough and the whole lump was leavened.

Or how would we say “thy kingdom come” in our way of speaking English? Think how the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem in 586 BC (a lively image in Jesus' society). It's maybe risky to tamper with a phrase as common as “thy kingdom come”, but the sense of it is pretty much, “Come and be king here”, or “Be king in our society”, or more personally, “Be completely in charge in my life, please”. It's a little unsettling to put a set and holy phrase like that one in our idiom maybe, but the Lord's prayer is more thinkable that way.

I repeat. One of the very great blessings of being both a disciple of Jesus and a translator is trying to think Jesus' basic ideas in the words and phrases I use commonly in my language. I do that on the way to finding the right way to say them in Mazatec, of course. Thank you very much for making it possible for me to do this with my life.

Terry Schram
terry_schram@sil.org, judith_schram@sil.org

* Wycliffe Bible Translators, PO Box 628200, Orlando FL 32862-8200 *
www.wycliffe.org *