

## Which language do you dream in?

**Sermon Preached by Dr A-J Bethke on 19 June 2016, the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, at the Cathedral of St. Michael and St George, Grahamstown**

Which language do you dream in? A couple of weeks ago a singer in the Rhodes University Chamber Choir was speaking to me about dreams. One of her passing statements struck me forcibly. She said, "I am Xhosa. I used to dream in Xhosa, but now I dream in English. It's so sad that my mother tongue isn't in my dream world anymore." For some to dream in a new language is an exciting way of measuring whether they have mastered it. For others it is a sad reflection of how much they have lost touch with their original mother tongue.

Language is a deep part of each of us. It helps us to express our ideas, our desires, our faith and our culture. In Genesis God even calls the world into being through language: "Let there be light". BUT language has been used throughout human history as a means of dominating other cultures. On Thursday we commemorated the young black people of 1976. For them Afrikaans was such a means of domination. As I understand it, the language itself was not problematic, it was the system it represented – a system which denied the inherent humanity of particular races.

Wherever there has been a colonial legacy, and South Africa is not the only place with such a history, there is often a vestige of cultural domination. Think of any great empire of history and, almost without exception, you will find that their language and culture swept through any place they conquered, taking with it the remnants of local norms. It is under such circumstances that the dominated usually rebel in order to salvage their beloved cultures and language, whether consciously or unconsciously. So what we are experiencing in South Africa today is not a new phenomenon.

But why is language so often the arena for domination? Each language represents a host of assumptions and markers about the culture which creates it; from the way greetings are structured, to the way deities are addressed; from how thought patterns emerge, to the way idiomatic language is crafted. Linguistic scientists suggest that our mother tongue deeply shapes our inner system of logic, as well as the way we interact with the world and possibly even our moral codes. Recent research on music is beginning to reveal that our perception of melody and rhythm is deeply entwined with how we perceive

language. Isn't that fascinating? So language, and the way we use it, probably displays the full depth of our home culture.

Some of you will be interested to know that Jesus grew up in a world and political situation which reflect some of our own experiences as a country. Israel was in the middle of a number of competing super powers: Egypt, Persia and Rome. For 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews there was a heavy vestige of Greek culture which had been brought to the Middle East some 300 years before Jesus by Alexander the Great's armies. In Jerusalem there were Greek buildings, like a gymnasium, there were Greek customs like worshipping a pantheon of gods, and there was the Greek language which was used as a *lingua franca* throughout the Middle East. But that wasn't the only foreign influence. Politically the Jews in Jesus' time were ruled by the Romans. All major judiciary actions in Palestine were heard in local Roman courts in Latin presided over by Roman magistrates. And taxes, of course, went to Rome. But that wasn't all. Some Biblical scholars believe that Jesus' mother tongue was Aramaic. Even this language was a vestige of Persian interactions with the people of the Middle East. One might ask: did the Jews have anything besides their religion that was truly theirs culturally? Perhaps that is why that defended their faith so passionately?

Besides Aramaic Jesus probably spoke or understood Hebrew and might have spoken koine Greek which was a slightly simpler version of Classical Greek for those who used it as a second language. The New Testament was written in koine Greek so that people throughout the Mediterranean region could understand it – that's how widely it was spoken. Every now and then the Gospel writers actually quote Jesus in his original Aramaic. Think, for example, of Jesus' dying words on the cross, "Eli, eli, lama sabachthani". Matthew's Gospel immediately translates the Aramaic words into Greek, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" so that those who do not understand Aramaic will know what he said.

All this history is important and is leading somewhere. What I actually want to speak about today is Jesus and particularly his encounter with a specific culture at a specific time in history.

If we acknowledge that Jesus was both fully human and fully God, then we must equally acknowledge that Jesus was fully part of the culture in which he was born. Culturally he was Jewish. He would have grown up learning Jewish customs, probably rejecting any Roman or Greek influences that were flooding

into the region with Roman politicians and soldiers. He would have learned Aramaic and later Hebrew, he would have eaten Jewish food, and worshiped God the Jewish way. He was also a respected, and to some notorious, Rabbi, so he was an expert in Jewish law and its interpretation. It is highly probable that Jesus dreamt in Aramaic about Jewish preoccupations. He would equally have known and received derogatory remarks about his Aramaic accent – Jesus was from Galilee not from Jerusalem or Caesarea (if you can, try to think of Jesus coming from a small rural town like Bedford or Fort Beaufort and going to work in city like Jo'burg – everyone would realise from his accent and turns of speech that he is from a rural place). But because Jesus was in a Roman colony he probably also had to learn some Greek or Latin so that he could function within the normal routine of colonial administration, so he may have known the resentment that comes from having to learn a foreign tongue in order to fulfil the requirements of a foreign colonial government. I am sure Jesus would have been able to identify with those young people in Soweto on 16 June 1976. And he would, no doubt, identify with those today who experience isolation or discomfort because of the imposition of someone else's language or culture.

When we watch Jesus in the Gospels we can note several things. From the snippet on the cross, it seems that Jesus spoke to God in his mother tongue. His heart language was the one he had learnt as a little boy growing up in Nazareth. While most of Jesus' sayings are conveyed to us in koine Greek, it is unlikely that he spoke this language with his disciples or the multitudes of people he addressed throughout his ministry. And in his deepest hour of pain and need he reverted to the language that came naturally to him.

Interestingly, even though Jesus was deeply embedded within Jewish culture and the local language, he was able to look beyond it and see the flaws within the society which nurtured antique Israel. He was not scared to call out misunderstandings about God or flaws in societal norms.

I could go on for a long time about Jesus, language and culture. It is something I am passionate about. But my point today is only to introduce you to this subject. Through Jesus we know that the complexities of culture and language (and the multiple layers of political meaning which they carry) are fully understood and have been deeply experienced by God. In other words, God is fully aware of the burden of culture. We also know that God, despite this, appears to be passionate about culture and language. The reading from Acts this morning reveals this. Notice that the Good News about Jesus is not limited

to Aramaic or koine Greek or even the holy language of Hebrew. Rather it is proclaimed in numerous languages, within their thought patterns, so that everybody could be aware of God's love for them, without the misunderstandings created by translation.

There is more, though. Like Jesus, we are always called to look into our own cultures and the way we use language to see if we can more fully reveal God through them. We are called to challenge society when some type of oppressive or divisive language and culture is developing.

This is why we are experimenting with language and different musical styles and cultures at the cathedral. As a community we want to show that God does not only speak English. God is the most multilingual and multicultural being there is. God seems to love diversity and calls us to revel in difference rather than reject it. I think that is what Paul meant when he said, "Now there is no longer Greek nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free. All are equal and beloved of God".

We don't serve an exclusive God. We worship a God whose expansive being created all that is good, including the multitude of cultures and languages in the world. Our calling today is to recognise that no culture is superior or inferior, and to understand that cultural diversity is a reality that can be embraced. Should we be trying to develop one overarching South African culture? Probably not. I think a better idea is for us to learn about our differences and have enough respect to acknowledge each other despite those aspects of culture which we do not, or cannot, understand. Remember the concept of the rainbow nation? I realise that it is a tired image, but while a rainbow is a unified arch, it retains its colours distinctly. In other words, the colours coexist to create the whole. Personally, I think that only God can help us to overcome our suspicion of anything different, and so I leave you with what I believe is a spiritual challenge: embrace the many cultures which you will encounter throughout your life and the difficult situations which emerge from cultures' coexistence. While you may not be able to understand all you see, or even accept certain aspects of other cultures, remember that your culture too is not flawless. By doing this, you can only become a more wise and loving human being. A person like our Saviour Jesus the Christ. Perhaps then, the language of our dreaming will not be monolingual but multilingual?

Amen.