

### 321 Words are slippery customers

Working as an editor for the past 18 years has given me a better understanding of language and communication. My aim as an editor is to help the author(s) communicate with the readers without misunderstanding – more difficult than people perhaps realise.

For me, it was technical information, but how much more important is our choice of words when we're trying to communicate how people can know God!

For example, as I've said before, 'righteous(ness)' is a very slippery customer. If we take the OED's definition of 'the quality of being morally right or justifiable', and read into Bible verses, we can cause real misunderstanding. So, recently, I looked up where Jesus used 'righteous(ness)' – well, no, I suppose he used an *Aramaic* word (or did he use the *Hebrew* sometimes?); then the Gospel writers used a *Greek* word, and then our scholars gave us an *English* word. Here's Jesus' first recorded use (+ NT Wright's translation): <sup>Mt 3:15</sup>

'It is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.'

'This is the right way for us to complete God's whole saving plan.'

Do you see the problem? To help us to understand what God wants to communicate to us, NTW has had to use other words; indeed, he rarely uses 'righteous(ness)' in his translation. Communicating across languages is very difficult; and it is across cultures, too:

To keep costs down, many publishers use colleagues in India to manage the production of books so, as English-speaking editors, we have to send emails back and forth to colleagues living and working in India. They are English-speaking, yes, but in a very different culture. Sometimes, the actual English expressions they use can sound quite rude. Thankfully, I realise that it's a (potential) cultural misunderstanding. It's a bit like Jesus saying, '*Woman, why do you involve me?*'' <sup>Jn 2:4</sup> We might think, 'That's no way to speak to your mother!'

But from the *relationships* involved, we know that neither Jesus nor my Indian colleagues were being rude.

The possible causes of miscommunication then are (1) multiple languages (Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and English), (2) the culture of a different time (2000 years ago), and (3) the culture of a different place. So if anyone is ever tempted to say, 'That's what the (English) Bible plainly says, so that's what it means, so that sorts it', then I believe they are ignoring the reality of language miscommunication. No, we need to be more humble in our translation and interpretation.

The litmus test for me is whether my 'understanding' of the Scriptures will build up people's relationships with God and with other people. And I have in mind two contentious issues: We have changed our former view that, 'the Bible clearly teaches that only men should lead churches' – well, changed to some extent! So, before we split our churches and alienate people (inside and outside the church) over gay marriage, we need to ask: How/what does God want to communicate to gay people, and about gay people, in C21?