

Proper 18, Pentecost XVI September 7, 2008

This is a special Sunday; with lots of neat stuff going on—Rally Day is going to be fun. And, for some reason or another, all of this, plus the readings we just heard, draws me to a story that Rowan Williams, our somewhat beleaguered Archbishop of Canterbury, tells on himself. Archbishop Williams was just a few blocks from the World Trade Center on September 11th; and he barely escaped. In a book reflecting on all of that he describes a conversation he had on September 12th, the day after:

{Williams writes} there was a phone call from Wales, from one of the news programmes, and I faced a familiar dilemma. The caller started speaking to me in [the] Welsh [language], which I understand without difficulty, but don't always find it easy to use in an unscripted and possibly rather complex discussion. I had to decide: if I answered in Welsh, the conversation would go on in Welsh, and I had some misgivings about coping with it. | | I am spoken to, I have some choices about how to answer.

Now, for Williams, who speaks seven languages and lectures in five of them, this business of what language to respond with is a fairly common predicament. But it is also a wonderful and deeply symbolic way into the lessons today, and into the whole business of what we are about in relationship to our faith.

Of course, for this to work we have to understand a language not just in its literal sense, but also as a metaphor for a way of being, or a way of behaving—a way of understanding the world, and of living out that understanding. Now, when we think of the Archbishop's story in this way, it becomes a way of talking about the Christian life, about the life we have chosen to embrace, to deepen, and to share with our children—a life we celebrate today. This is one of the basic movements of that life: Someone speaks to us in one language, there is a pause, a moment of silence and of choice, and then we respond—in the language we were spoken to, or in a different language that we decide to use.

Those words of Jesus we just heard, as strained and archaic as they can at first seem, are about exactly this. They present a fascinating situation where someone speaks to us, or relates to us, in one way, in one sort of language—and we are told *not* to respond using that same language, but to respond in a very different way, using a different language, with an entirely different grammar, an entirely different set of rules.

In the Gospel, Jesus says, in effect, ‘look, someone in the church sins against you—they relate to you in the language of sin. They hurt you, or betray you, or gossip about you, or worse.’ Whatever. We have been spoken to in the language of sin, of hurt. Now, in what language do we respond? Do we sin against them back? Do we hate? Do we hurt? Do we sulk, pout, moan, groan, make everyone else miserable and swear before God and anybody else around that we will have nothing to do with that no good so and so until he or she crawls up to us begging for our totally undeserved forgiveness? Is that the language in which we answer, the same language we were spoken to in the first place—the language of sin, the language of the world?

Instead of that, Jesus actually gives a sort of alternative syntax, a way of using a different language, a language of reconciliation, of community, of conversation, and, finally, of justice. It is a more complex and difficult language than the first language of sin—but it is the language the Lord wants used in his church.

So, one sort of shorthand way of saying what makes us Christians different from everybody else, what makes us distinctive and what makes us free, truly free, is that *we do not have to answer in the same language.*

Think about that, it's stunning. What Jesus is saying is that after we are sinned against or persecuted or tempted or hurt or whatever, after that, there is a moment of silence, and of choice, and what happens next is up to us—we are not bound by the language that is spoken to us. We can chose the language in which we answer. And our Lord, and our faith, will have us use a language of love, a language of reconciliation, a language of community and of conversation; a language of justice, and of sacrifice. But first and always, a language of love. We are free to do this; we are so free that the person who speaks to us first does not have the power to determine how we respond.

The point is not to excuse the behavior of the other; it's not to say that it's really all right to do these evil and destructive things to us. That's not the point at all. The point is that we are both free and called, at the very least, to consider another way, another language, with which to respond.

There are all sorts of directions to go with this. In the reading from Exodus, Moses is teaching the people of Israel—and us—a language of remembrance, and with that a language of gratitude. The Lord will do great things for you, Moses is saying, and you are to remember that, and remember that in a formal, regular way, so that the goodness of the Lord to you will not be forgotten, and will continue to grow and unfold within you.

You see, the Passover was most likely the transformation of a truly ancient feast around moving the flocks to summer pasture after the first full moon of Spring. But now Moses makes it something new. It was no longer to be about pasturing the sheep (an annual event that had, as far they knew, always had happened and always would happen); instead, it was to be about God, and it was to be about this one-time-only great event of salvation that was to forever change and define who they were.

To look at life, at history, at God, and at themselves in this dramatic new way could be transforming, exhilarating, and truly liberating.

But for that to happen, they and we needed to learn a new language, the language of gratitude and of remembrance—a language, like that of reconciliation, which is part of God’s language of love. It’s a different language, an alien tongue.

As we try to form our children in the Christian faith; as we take steps to deepen and expand our own faith and our personal ministry and the ministry of Saint Nicholas—all things that are our focus on Rally Day—as we do these things, what we are about is learning and teaching this new and different language of love and community. We are struggling for fluency in the complex, nuanced, difficult and sometimes dangerous language that our Lord has shown us in his life, and that he continues to teach us in his word.

The Gospel presents us with a way of being and behaving—a way of understanding the world and of living out that understanding—a way that is so different from what we see and hear around us that it can usefully be considered another language. And this is the language God will have us speak, this language of love and community and sacrifice. In fact, this is the only language God knows. It is the only language God will ever speak to us; and only by understanding at least a little of it, will we be able to hear, or to respond.

So I leave you this image: The world speaks to us in its language, the language of sin, the language of hurt, of acquisitiveness, of power, of division and of conquest—the language of anxiety and of fear—a language we know all too well. We are spoken to, and there is a moment of silence, and we are free to respond, in whatever language we know, in whatever language we choose.