

Topic 15: Human Words and the Word of God

The words of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, of a priestly family in Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin. The word of the LORD first came to him in the days of Josiah, son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign, and continued through the reign of Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the downfall and exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, son of Josiah, king of Judah. The word of the LORD came to me thus: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you. "Ah, Lord GOD!" I said, "I know not how to speak; I am too young." But the LORD answered me, Say not, "I am too young." To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD. Then the LORD extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, See, I place my words in your mouth! Jeremiah 1.1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it....

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. John 1.1-4, 14

What do we mean when we say that Scripture is "the Word of God"? Does this mean that God literally speaks with a voice human beings can hear, using human words? How are we to imagine God "speaking" to us?

I. From "Ordinary" Human Words to "God's Word" Human words are polyvalent and ambiguous. Their meaning depends on their context, their relationship to other words, a grammar, a culture, etc. Moreover, words change meaning over time as cultures and peoples constantly change. For this reason, no language is fully translatable; each is culturally, historically and socially particular.

The transcendent character of human words appears when "ordinary" words exercise the extraordinary function of

- Mediating an encounter with reality
- Identifying what is other, and
- Allowing people to communicate what they know to others.

Mediation: I was initiated into a world mediated by words and meaning. I learn To use words to engage, describe, explain, and control the realities I encounter.

Identification: Words bring near realities-that-remain-other by naming without Ever exhausting them. In everyday life I use words to name objects, actions, relations, differences, etc. From this ordinary power of words springs a sacramental capacity to name what cannot be named, to bring near that which remains infinitely distant.

Communication: I use words to share perspective and knowledge (communicate), to build relationships (community), to create union with the other (communion).

Human words embody and reveal "God's Word." In the Old Testament, God "speaks" to reveal; the "word" that God speaks represents at one and the same time a law or rule for life, a revelation of the meaning of things and events, and a promise or covenant. Building on this background, the New Testament presents Jesus in the first place as a prophet, the definitive teacher/revealer of God's word. Hence, the word that Jesus speaks reveals the will and the Reign of God.

The Gospel of John speaks of "the" Word that, in the beginning, was "with" God and indeed "was" God: the creative Word by whom all things were made (v. 3), the illuminating Word which brings the light (revelation) to the world (v. 4,9), the incarnate Word-made-flesh in whom all people have seen the glory and salvation of God (v. 14).

II. The Revelatory Power of Metaphors: In contradistinction to the claims from some approaches to the philosophy of science, metaphor is not a weak category and relying on the metaphorical capacity of human words involves a strong not a weak claim.

Some things cannot be expressed directly and literally that can be expressed using metaphors. Hence, metaphors do not cloud but enrich our understanding of reality.

Metaphors are not interchangeable with literal expressions. It is possible to banalize, Metaphors, thus stripping them of their tensive power. It is also possible to literalize them in which case they are capable of being used violently and oppressively. How do metaphors work? By comparing two different entities. Metaphors are unstable because they simultaneously affirm and deny the likeness involved in the comparison. They manifest a dialectical (is/is-not) structure

characteristic of all symbolic language. We use metaphors to bring the depth dimension of life to expression precisely when literal speech is incapable of doing so. The fact that humans need and use metaphors reveals something essential about the human and about reality itself.

III. Theological Depth of the Claim that Scripture is the Word of God: As metaphor, the "word of God" makes use of the dialectical structure of symbolic language. We use metaphors in order to express what otherwise cannot be expressed.

As revelation, the "word of God" (God's self-disclosure/ human acceptance) implies a dialectic of invitation and acceptance that comes to symbolic expression.

As sacrament, the "Word of God" (that which is expressed) becomes "really present." The sacrament as efficacious symbol lends stability and clarity to the community's "ontological sense" of what is beyond understanding.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the issues with modern day language?
2. How does written language and translation affect the Word of God?