

I don't know how many foreign films you've seen — subtitled in English, so that you hear the foreign language and read the dialogue at the same time. I've seen a few, and for the most part I've been impressed by how well the English subtitles seem to flow. They must have translators who are pretty good at expressing in English what is being said in another language. But sometimes the subtitles seem stilted, using a phrase in a way that's not quite right. And sometimes the way things get expressed in English can be downright funny — usually because what we read below doesn't seem to match the action in the scene. It doesn't seem like the way we would have spoken in such a situation. Something gets lost in the translation. I'm sure that it wouldn't seem funny or off if I could understand the language being spoken, but some of the time it's clear that some of the nuances get lost in the translation, and much of the meaning gets lost with them.

A funny example of this comes from the time that a U.S. car maker was introducing one of its vehicles in the South American market. The name of that model, the *Nova*, for English-speakers carried connotations of brightly burning stars, and of technological advances, “in-*nova*-tions.” But wouldn't you know it, those connotations were lost in Spanish-speaking cultures, where “no va” has a much more immediate everyday meaning: “no go.” As in, “the car doesn't run.” Not what you want in a car. The name was quickly changed for Chevrolet's Spanish-speaking markets. The giant Japanese car maker Mitsubishi decided to name its new four wheel drive vehicle the *Pajero* worldwide, until they learnt what it meant in Spanish- suffice to say it is now called the Mitsubishi Montero in Spanish speaking countries- I will leave you to find out what Pajero means in Spanish!

This phenomenon of something getting lost in the translation happens with the English translation of today's scripture passage. When the author of the Gospel of John says, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,” I'm puzzled by the rather strange comparison that's being drawn here between Jesus and, of all things, a snake. It's such an odd comparison that I think there must be a really important point being made here, for Jesus to be getting compared to a snake! I don't like snakes much — maybe you or your kids do — but I know they're not portrayed in any kind of favourable light in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. So I look closer at what's being said, and all I can find is that Jesus is to be “lifted up,” just as Moses “lifted up” the serpent in the wilderness. I don't get it. Sure, I get the allusion to the resurrection, but why compare Jesus to a snake to get that point across?

After a little more digging I discover that what's been lost in the translation is a fairly clever play on words, one that wouldn't have been lost on the Greek-speaking early Christians. It turns out that the same Greek word that means to “lift up” also means to “exalt.” With that in mind, the message can begin to sink in. Just as the serpent was “lifted up” by Moses, Jesus will have to be “lifted up,” too. What we don't associate with snakes — exaltation — we do associate with Jesus. Jesus had to be “raised,” like the snake, but more than simply being taken from a low height to a high one, Jesus' raising is also exaltation. Now I see that the point of this play on words was to emphasise the significance of Christ's resurrection, as exaltation.

Not all parts of this passage are so tricky to grasp. Perhaps the most familiar single verse in the entire Bible — “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” — this verse has the verb “gave,” which translates quite precisely into English. Different Greek words are used frequently in the New Testament to mean “sent.” This verse says that God “gave” the world God's Son, rather than that God “sent” God's Son. The emphasis is on Jesus Christ as God's gift to us, given out of God's love for us, rather than as some kind of emissary who was “sent” to tell us something, or to do something to us, like judge us. God “gave” us God's only Son, as a gift of love.

What this poking and prodding brings out, for me, from the passage is a clear emphasis on the things that God has done for us: given us Jesus Christ, as a gift, and gifts are *always* good. Not so, all the time, with emissaries. Emissaries often bring bad news. Jesus Christ was the gift of good news.

And not only was Jesus Christ given to us, God also exalted him, in his death and resurrection. Jesus the teacher and healer and baptiser became Christ the reconciler, the saviour, the one who by being exalted moved to an entirely new level of importance and significance for us.

Effusive, exciting sharing about the good news of the Christian story — that's what we have here. And the best part: God did all of this for us; God did all of this for *us*. Such clear acts demonstrating the quality and the extent of God's love for us.

This is the excitement we need to feel, so much that we can hardly sit still, when we read or hear that familiar phrase, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

We need to feel this excitement about what God has done for us, given us Jesus Christ whom God then exalted, because it is all too easy to get puffed up with pride about what we think we've done, we who declare our belief in Jesus Christ. When we lose sight of what truly unparalleled, unsurpassable acts of love God has directed our way, we can get to thinking that it's really all about what we've done, we believers, who profess our belief in Jesus Christ. It's as if we forget about the "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" part of John 3:16, and we focus in like a laser on the second half, about how "everyone who believes in him" will have eternal life. I believe! I'll live forever! It's all about me, and what I've done.

But it's not. It's all about God. Eternal life is the result not so much of an intrinsic change in human nature, but of the new beginning that comes with a recognition of the full character of God that is revealed in Jesus. It's not what we have done in believing that makes the difference. The God revealed in Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds and who asks only that one receive the gift. If one receives the gift, one receives eternal life, because one's life is reshaped and redefined by the love of God in Jesus.

It's all about God, and, of course, the acid test for us, this Lenten season of self-examination, is whether the things that we think matter so much when it comes to how we live out our faith lives are about God, or about ourselves. When we think of Lent we think of giving up something we like, like chocolate or french fries, which can seem pretty trivial from a spiritual perspective, but that's on the right track.

The idea is that during Lent we should be examining our attitudes and practices around the things we hold most dear, and asking ourselves whether those things we most adore (whether that be chocolate or certain types of worship or certain expectations we have about our church's ministries) are about God, or about ourselves. If we are really attached to something, there's a greater chance that what we like about it is what it does for us. That's why during Lent it's a good idea to separate ourselves from what we're most attached to, to give us a chance to get perspective on whatever that may be. We can adjust to life without it, of course, but what's really important in terms of spiritual growth is to try to assess whether we think something's important because it's also important to God, or more because it's important to us.

It's about the God whose love for us knows no bounds, and who has fully expressed that love in the gift and exaltation of Jesus Christ. When we keep the amazing extent to which God has gone to let us know about that love in mind, it's much easier for our lives to focus on the things that really matter. When it's about us, and what we have done to be entitled to eternal life, it's much more difficult to tell.

Fr Robert Newton