

Getting to Know our Faith and our Church

Two questions came in in quick succession about words in readings used on recent Sundays and I'm going to make an attempt at response, but please bear in mind that my understanding of the Greek language used in the New Testament is limited and my knowledge of Hebrew near negligible!

The first question comes from the Acts reading for Pentecost where the use of the word 'slave' in the NRSV translation was questioned by a congregation member:

"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." Acts 2.17,18

"καί γε ἐπὶ τοὺς δούλους μου καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς δούλας μου ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός μου καὶ προφητεύσουσιν" Acts 2.18

This passage is itself a near quotation from the prophet Joel [Joel 2.28,29] – a couple of changes are made to the text: The Hebrew could I believe fairly be translated as 'Also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days I will pour out my spirit' whilst the passage in Acts firmly uses 'μου' meaning 'my' rather than 'the' perhaps suggesting a message that they were valued rather than objectified.

KJV almost always translates the word δούλος as 'servant'. Though used in a literal sense in scripture to refer to slaves the word is also used metaphorically of those who give themselves up to another's will or those who are devoted to another to the disregard of their own interests.

Here where NRSV has used 'my slaves' we might read 'those who are devoted to me' and then hear the heavily emphasised 'both men and women' [which is the radical part of the text] rather than stumble on the word 'slave'.

The other question came in relation to the Gospel reading for Sunday 6 May which included the verse: 'You are my friends if you do what I command you.' [John 15.14] The writer noted that "That does not compute with my idea of friendship."

"You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." John 15.14,15

"μεῖς φίλοι μου ἔστε ἐὰν ποιῆτε ὅσα ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν" [John 15.14]

The linking word ἐὰν in verse 14 is most often translated as 'if', my instinct in contemporary use of English is that the word 'when' would be better suited. The issue of friendship being in some sense conditional remains to a degree, but the following verse makes it clear that the friendship being referred to includes an openness of sharing, of understanding.

Perhaps there is also a distinction to be made here, albeit a fine one at times, between friends in a personal sense as we would understand that in contemporary society and friends 'in a cause': The language of friendship here speaks most strongly to me of 'friendship in a cause', the purposes of God's Kingdom.

Thank you for this month's questions – It has got me back to checking out some real textual detail for a change!