
A new book has recently been published on Bible translation. And it's clear that Bible translators have a hard time.

There they are – faithfully translating the words of Scripture – when they come across a concept for which there's no easy equivalent.

A good example would be the Bible for the Yoruba people of West Africa.

It's part of the world that has never seen snow.

So, how should the unfortunate Bible translator express the words from Isaiah: "*though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow*" ...?

Sometimes the translator comes up with an ingenious solution.

In Polynesia, the people had never seen *sheep* ... but they did know about other kinds of livestock.

So, in their translation – where our English Bibles speak about a lamb – they read:

"Behold, the piglet of God!"

Then there's the difficulty of translating today's Gospel reading into one of the many indigenous South American languages.

In our English versions, we read:

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew [...] And he said to them, "Follow me."

When we hear those words – "follow me" – all it seems *obvious* what Jesus is talking about.

But in this South American language there are *four* different words for "follow".

So, which should the Bible translator use?

It's more than a linguistic conundrum ...

because the Bible translator must get to the heart – of what Jesus was actually *asking* of those first disciples.

And it's more than a language puzzle ...

because we read these words spoken by Jesus – we hear them as a calling – *spoken also to us*:

"Follow me!"

And how we understand them informs the way that *we* live out *our* faith.

So, what do those four possible translations imply?

First, the translator could choose a word that refers to animal tracking.

A beast – that's being hunted – has passed this way and has disappeared from view over the horizon.

Now the hunter has to track down this animal – follow the signs left by the quarry.

This involves the skills of – spotting clues – interpreting footprints – keeping alert for traces that the inexperienced might so easily miss.

So, is that the way of following Jesus?

For some of us – some of the time – that’s exactly what we do.

Jesus seems like a remote figure from an ancient middle eastern culture very different from our own.

We have the writings of the New Testament, of course.

But these words – we believe – have to be weighted up carefully – assessed – measured – analysed – so that we can answer questions like:

Did Jesus actually speak those words?

Can we be sure that Jesus really performed those miracles?

And who – precisely – was Jesus, anyway?

Biblical scholars – especially during the 20th century – loved questions like these.

They spotted clues – looked for signs in the text – kept alert for things that a casual reader might easily miss.

Who – exactly, they wondered – *was* this historical Jesus?

It was all very clever.

Except that – in the process – Jesus was reduced to little more than an interesting puzzle to be solved – a kind of religious whodunnit.

Hardly someone worth *following* at all.

So, our Bible translator might turn, instead, to a second possible translation of the words of Jesus: “Follow me.”

This particular word conveys the idea of following – kind of in the middle distance.

To get the idea, we need to imagine – the person that we’re following – walking a hundred metres or so – in front of us.

They know the way to the destination.

They’re scouting out a pathway through the rainforest or up the mountain.

Our role – as we follow – is to trust that they know the best way to go.

So, is that the way of following Jesus?

Again – for some of us – some of the time – that could well be our way of following.

Jesus is the person who knows the best way through life –
the way to be honest – contented – successful.

There are other possible guides, of course:

religious prophets and sages –

political leaders, who offer manifestos for the world’s ills –

lifestyle gurus, who give us rules for a fruitful and favourable life ...

We could choose to follow any one of them.

But we’ve come to see that it’s by following *Jesus* that we find the greatest blessings.

So, we listen carefully to Jesus’ teaching in the pages of the Bible – and seek to model our lives on his.

After all, ...

His way of love – is the most enriching.

His teaching on forgiveness – is the most liberating.

His offer of real and eternal life – is the most attractive – and holds out the greatest hope for a radically renewed future.

Isn't that exactly what Jesus' disciples found?

When people were starting to desert him, Peter announced that he would stick with Jesus.

“To whom can we go?” – he declared – “You have the words of eternal life.”

So, this translation *is* quite appealing.

Except that – if Jesus is walking a hundred metres ahead of us – there's no sense of – connection or rapport – mutuality or fellowship.

We don't *personally* know Jesus any better than we *personally* know the authors of the popular bestsellers – in the “self-help” section of *Waterstones*.

Fortunately, our Bible translator hasn't run out of options.

There's a third possible translation of Jesus' words: “Follow me.”

To get a good picture of this particular idea of following, it helps to remember the words of the carol:

Good King Wenceslas.

You'll remember the line – I'm sure.

It speaks of the young page following the philanthropic monarch through the snow:

“In his master's steps he trod ...”

In this account – we follow – by walking right behind the person in front of us.

They're literally just a pace or two ahead.

If we reached out a hand, we could easily touch them.

So, is *this* – finally – the way of following Jesus?

It's certainly a very attractive image – and probably one that describes – rather nicely – the experience of Jesus' disciples as they travelled around Galilee – and beyond.

As Jesus visited Capernaum, Bethsaida, Nain – and then journeyed south to Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives – it's easy to imagine the disciples walking along behind Jesus in his footsteps.

They'd have –

learned from him –

witnessed his miracles –

heard him debating with the leading religious thinkers.

Many of us – today – see *our* faith in a similar way.

Maybe not *literally* walking in Jesus' footsteps – but figuratively –

treading the path that Jesus trod –

living the life that Jesus lived –

going the way that Jesus went –

knowing that he will be with us in all of life's ups and downs –

trusting that he will guide us through the world's storms.

If you're a Bible translator wanting to translate the words "follow me" –

then this sense of walking right behind Jesus – in his footsteps –

is very attractive.

But just before we decide – definitely – on this particular translation, it's worth considering one final possibility.

This last sense of following describes two companions walking side by side ...

One may be the guide.

The other the follower.

But they're walking as colleagues and companions.

There's a bond of ...

fellowship and closeness –

familiarity and trust –

even *loving friendship* –

between the two.

This kind of following is about two people who *so* enjoy one another's company – that they've committed themselves to travelling together – along the same road – to the same destination.

This would be my choice of translation for Jesus' words: "Follow me."

For – to follow Jesus – deeply and truly – is about knowing him as a fellow traveller –

someone who understands the joys and sorrows of an earthly life –

someone with whom you enjoy a deep relationship of loving trust ...

It's a relationship that's deepening – thanks to faithful, regular prayer – and time spent reflecting on Jesus' life and teaching.

Of course, *all* are possible translations.

And at different times, each one will describe our own sense of following Jesus.

Sometimes Jesus will seem like a remote historical figure to be investigated and tracked down.

At other times, following Jesus will feel more like looking towards him as a guide for a fulfilling life.

Then again, we may seek to walk in Jesus' footsteps – going his way – knowing that we'll be kept safe in his presence.

But – I believe – we'll find the greatest blessing when following Jesus means walking through life with him at our side – the two of us as companions – journeying in friendship together.

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