

7th October 2021

Language

**“When you’re lying awake with a dismal headache,
and repose is taboo’d by anxiety,
I conceive you may use any language you choose
to indulge in, without impropriety.”**

W S Gilbert, Iolanthe

Question: What language does God speak? *Answer:* My God hears what’s offered “beyond language” and listens to what comes from the heart.

When I ministered in my city-centre congregation, there was a long-standing tradition of “processing” the Communion elements into church during the singing of the final verses of Psalm 24, to the tune *St George’s Edinburgh*. It was impeccably organised and timed to the second, including a prayer from me before the procession began.

One Sunday, an elderly lady was in the vestibule with her daughter when I gathered with the elders. She was unwell, and they were waiting for a car to take them home. Wanting to offer comfort to the lady, I turned to a senior elder and asked him to say an appropriate prayer with the others. Comfort was given, a prayer said, the Communion elements processed and the Sacrament celebrated. But the elder confessed to me later: “I was in a panic! The prayer wasn’t up to the mark ... not as good as yours.” But would God have minded if he’d stumbled over his words, said a prayer in Urdu, or prayed in silence? I don’t think so, not the God who hears beyond language and listens to what comes from the heart.

I mentioned recently one of my favourite teachers when I was training for the ministry, Rev Professor John Gibson, professor of Hebrew and Old Testament studies in Edinburgh’s New College. When he died in 2008, his obituary in *The Herald* contained the following story:

On one famous occasion he said grace at a New College meal in Hebrew. Later, a student complained to him that he did not understand the grace, to which Professor Gibson replied, “It was not addressed to you.”

So if, like my panicky elder, “repose is taboo’d by anxiety” in your prayers, you know you can choose any language – or none – “without impropriety”, remembering that God hears beyond words (including Hebrew, I reckon) and listens to what comes from *your* heart.

A prayer for today

Lord, hear me. Lord, graciously hear me ... beyond any words I might use. Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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