

SCRIPTURE
FOR
PREACHING

James P. Scullion, O.F.M.

Inclusive Language and the New Lectionary

This past November with the beginning of the liturgical year a new approved Lectionary was introduced. This Lectionary was a long time in the making. The process began with the revision of the New American Bible New Testament (1986). Work was begun immediately to incorporate this revision into a new Lectionary. The U.S. bishops approved the revised Lectionary along with a revised version of the New American Bible Psalter in 1991. This, however, is not the Lectionary that is in our hands today. For a number of years the revised Lectionary was held up in Rome. Finally, at their June 1997 meeting, the bishops approved a Lectionary different from the one they had approved in 1991. The base text for this 1997 Lectionary was still the 1970 Old Testament and the 1986 Revised New Testament. But instead of using the 1991 revised translation of the Psalter the 1970 version was used ("Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter," 26).

This revision of the Lectionary has been and continues to be a source of great controversy. In the interim, as the Lectionary was held up in Rome, other more inclusive but unapproved lectionaries have appeared and local communities have taken it upon themselves to make the Lectionary readings more inclusive.

The issue of inclusive language arouses passions on both sides because it touches upon core issues of our faith, our image of God, and our image of humankind. The book of Genesis suggests that these two images are intimately connected: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27, NRSV). Inclusive language has two aspects: (1) horizontal, the way we image human beings, and (2) vertical, the way we image God.

HORIZONTAL INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Language is dynamic: meanings change, etymologies are forgotten, and new words are created. The need to revise dictionaries clearly indicates this dynamic character of language. Whereas at one point "man" and "brother" may have been understood as generic and inclusive, these words are no longer so understood by a number of people. Any good translation has to take into account the receptors, the ones hearing or reading the work. This means that when one translates the Greek word *adelphoi* one needs to ask whether Paul intended to ad-

dress just the male members of the community or both the male and female members. Since Paul often mentions women, at times even by name, it is clear that he intends *adelphoi* to include both men and women. The revised Lectionary, therefore, has “brothers and sisters” for this vocative use of *adelphoi* (“Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter,” 27). Some may object that three words (“brothers and sisters”) are used to translate the single Greek word *adelphoi*. A word-for-word translation, however, does not always give an accurate or understandable translation. Hebrew, for example, has an expression which literally rendered would be “to lift up the face” (Gen 19:21; 32:21; Num 6:26; Deut 28:50; 1 Sam 25:35). Even though this is a word-for-word translation, it is largely meaningless. The idiom means “to show favor or mercy.”

The issue of horizontal inclusive language is largely uncontroversial since it has become a part of our daily life. Most style sheets for journals and computer grammar checkers insist on the use of inclusive language. The issue becomes controversial in the translations of some of the Psalms that seem to prefigure Christ. Should Psalm 1 be translated as “Happy are those” or “Happy the man”? If one sees in the psalm a reference to Christ, “man” might make this reference clearer. This interpretation, however, is by no means demanded by the sense of the text or by the history of its interpretation in the life of the Church.

VERTICAL INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

The second and more controversial aspect of inclusive language is the language for God. To begin with, it is well to recall that the Bible uses a variety of images for God. Some of these images are neuter: rock (Gen 49:24; Deut 32:4, 15; Ps 18:2, 46; 62:2, 6) and fortress (2 Sam 22:2; Ps 18:2; 31:3; 62:6; 71:3). Other images are masculine: warrior (Exod 15:3; Ps 78:65; Isa 42:13; Jer 20:11), shepherd (Gen 49:24; Pss 23:1; 80:1), father (Deut 32:6; Mal 2:10; Jer 3:4-5). Still other images are feminine: wisdom (Sirach 24), mother (Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14; 46:3-4; 49:15; Hos 11:4), mother hen (Matt 23:37). A complicating factor is the use of *abba* by Jesus (Mark 14:36) and the early Church (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). This address to God as Father has important theological implications suggesting an intimate relationship between God and Jesus (Fitzmyer, 53-8). While a distinctive New Testament mode of address, it was by no means the only way of referring to God. The New Testament repeats many of the images of God found in the Old Testament.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE LECTIONARIES

In 1990 the American bishops issued *Criteria for the Evaluation of Inclusive Language Translation of Scripture Texts Proposed for Liturgical Use*

(U.S.C.C., 1990; Witherup, 77–85). While these guidelines are directed primarily to translators, they bring to the fore important issues. In addition to an introduction and conclusion, this document consists of four parts: (1) General Principles, (2) Principles for Inclusive Language Lectionary Translations, (3) The Preparation of Texts for Use in the Lectionary, and (4) Special Questions.

In the first part the bishops highlight two general principles: “fidelity to the Word of God” and “respect for the nature of the liturgical assembly” (no. 7). In the second part they make the key statement that

The word of God proclaimed to all nations is by nature inclusive, that is, addressed to all peoples, men and women. Consequently, every effort should be made to render the language of biblical translations as inclusively as a faithful translation of the text permits, especially when this concerns the people of God, Israel and the Christian community (no. 14).

Addressing the issue of horizontal inclusive language they suggest an inclusive translation (nos. 18, 19), but one that remains faithful to the Word of God and the rhetoric intended by the author. For example, “men” is retained in the Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent (Matt 24:37-44) because Jesus uses the example of “two men” (v. 40) and “two women” (v. 41).

Finally under Special Questions the Bishops treat the issues of vertical inclusive language, naming God. They advise that great care be taken translating the names of God and the use of pronouns referring to God. They do recognize that the names of God taken from the context may be used at times to avoid repetition of masculine pronouns for God (no. 26).

PREACHING THE NEW LECTIONARY

The new Lectionary is clearly an interim work. There are many who feel that even the revised New Testament is at best moderately inclusive. The work of revising the Old Testament is still in process. The Lectionary will undergo a full review in five years. In the interim since most of us will be preaching from this revised Lectionary it is important for us to know its history and the issues that underlie it. The issue of inclusive language is wider than the Lectionary text. Preachers have a duty to watch their own language to see that it is inclusive. The homily is also a good place to set forth other biblical images of God, especially the feminine imagery found in both the Old and New Testaments to challenge all to a more inclusive image of God who is all in all (Eph 1:23).

REFERENCES

- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. "Abba and Jesus' Relation to God," 47–63. *According to Paul: Studies in the Theology of the Apostle*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993.
- Jensen, Joseph. "Inclusive Language and the Bible." *America* 171:14 (November 5, 1994) 14–18.
- N.C.C.B. "Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter." 33 (June/July 1997).
- U.S.C.C. *Criteria for the Evaluation of Inclusive Language Translations of Scriptural Texts Proposed for Liturgical Use*. Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C.
- Witherup, Ronald D. *A Liturgist's Guide to Inclusive Language*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

James P. Scullion, O.F.M., is assistant professor of Sacred Scripture at Washington Theological Union and a member of the editorial board of New Theology Review.

Immigration and Migration Resources

Office for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees (PCMR)
National Conference of Catholic Bishops
3211 Fourth Street NE
Washington, D.C. 20017-1194
phone 202/541-3000
<http://www.nccbuscc.org/mrs/pcmr/index.htm>

Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.
National Headquarters
Theological College
401 Michigan Avenue NE
Washington, D.C. 20017
phone 202/635-2556; fax 202/635-2649; e-mail clinicnatl@aol.com
<http://members.aol.com/CLINICNATL/98webpg/index.htm>