



Signs of God

Baby Sheep on King's Big Chair?

(or... Lamb of God on the Throne)

Sign Language Interpreting in Christian Settings.

This paper is an attempt to identify some of the particular problems and challenges of interpreting in Christian settings and how to overcome them. It is based on my own experience and also my observation of and conversations with Sign Language Interpreters in the field.

The problem of attitudes

The Interpreting profession as a whole has to challenge the attitude of many who do not see the necessity or value of providing professionally trained interpreters. This attitude is also to be found within the Christian Church. Churches will happily pay a choir, musical director or administrator, but expect that anyone else will work for free! This does not encourage those learning Sign Language to work hard to improve

In the wider community, there is an assumption that the important interpreting jobs are high profile assignments such as Court and Theatre work, or National Conferences. In fact, a Deaf Person has the right to access an act of worship too and this is as important as any other aspect of their lives. As I explain later in this paper, interpreting in Christian settings can be complicated and demanding, needing the interpreter to have both specific knowledge and wide ranging expertise.

Any interpreting in *any* situation is valuable since it enables Deaf People to have equal access to information and experiences that are their right and heritage.

It is *not* a problem of vocabulary.

Many people assume that vocabulary is the problem. This is emphasised by people who say, "Oh well, the signs are different in Church". Well as far as I can see the sign for FATHER is the same whether it's my Dad or my God! It's true that there are some specialist signs, after all, every discipline has its jargon: HOLY SPIRIT, GRACE, (although the accepted signs for GRACE are fairly inadequate to convey the meaning of the concept of Grace!) GLORY, SALVATION, and many others. However, specialist signs actually make up a very small proportion of the language we use in Church.

It *is* a problem of context

Usually what trips interpreters up is a problem of context and comprehension.

* **"Religious" English:**

Perhaps it is the need to understand an English word in a particularly religious way, such as we find in the Wednesday Morning Responsoy in the Church of England's Celebrating Common Prayer:

"The Word of Life which was from the beginning"

"We proclaim to you"

Of course, the correct translation of WORD (Logos) in this instance, as in the first chapter of John's Gospel, has been a source of debate among translators of all languages for centuries! But the usual sign for WORD will not do. It indicates a single, usually printed, word: the words of a sentence, in fact, not what is meant at all.

* **Understanding English:**

Sometimes it is simply the need to understand the English language.

"Lord of all power and might,

the author and giver of all good things.” etc.

Clearly, one would not sign WRITER for AUTHOR. That is not specifically a religious problem, but it seems that sometimes people’s common sense and general knowledge vanishes when confronted with language in a religious context. The English used in many religious settings is a formal register and so a good understanding of that level of English is essential, as is the ability to recognise somewhat old-fashioned terms and phrases since our hymnody and liturgy are littered with them.

* **Jargon**

Of course, there will be times when an interpreter needs to understand language which is specifically religious - the jargon if you like. If the interpreter is not familiar with these words, then he or she may not even hear them.

The title of this paper came from an interpreter friend who, faced with the phrase “Lamb of God on the throne”, wondered what to make of it.

I interpreted a sermon in which the preacher made reference to ESCHATOLOGY. On the way out of church, my co-interpreter asked me what my sign for ESCAPOLOGY was since she had missed it!

Words such as OMNIPOTENT, OMNIPRESENT, and OMNISCIENT may well pass an interpreter by, and what about KAIROS, KOINONIA or KERYGMA? It may well be that the rest of the congregation do not know such words, but what if the Deaf Person is theologically educated? He or she should not be hampered by an interpreter who does not understand such terms. Even if the occasion is not one where theological concepts are discussed in depth, the interpreter may still be faced with such words as JUSTIFICATION and INCARNATION and should be aware of the depth of meanings in them.

Sign Language

So far I have concentrated on the need to understand the English being used. The interpreter also needs to understand Sign Language. I believe that the most important thing to learn is how Sign Language is structured, especially with regard to features such as PLACEMENT. So many of the mistakes I have seen have arisen because the signer has not used placement and role shift accurately. Along with this goes an understanding of presenting information as a picture and then building on that picture. This understanding enables an interpreter to say quite complex things even if they do not have an extensive vocabulary. Of course, a proficient interpreter will also want to use appropriate Sign Language and so will be building up an extensive vocabulary of “religious” signs. These may vary, not only with different regions, but also denominationally.

The Specialism

In NEWSLI the magazine of the Association of Sign Language Interpreters I once saw the following advertisement:

“Xxxx, Xxxx, and Xxxx - Legal Sign Language Interpreters – legal work you can’t or don’t want to do.”

Everyone admits that legal interpreting is highly specialised. I would assert that Religious Interpreting is also highly specialised, and those engaged in it need to understand their specialism very well.

High on my list of priorities comes the need to have a good working knowledge of the Bible. Biblical images and language permeate our worship and even the so called “every day” speech of Christians.

I was co-working with an interpreter from a Community Church. He seemed to be having difficulty with interpreting the service of Compline. When I asked why, he admitted that he couldn’t cope with the language! I pointed out to him that the language of Compline is taken straight out of the Bible, and he was amazed! He had simply assumed that because it was the Church of England it was flowery language that

had been made up. We need to take seriously the need to pay attention to the source material and not allow assumptions to get in the way.

We also need to understand how the context of worship may affect the way in which something is signed.

An example and a challenge:

An understanding of the Biblical context of the Benedictus (a canticle based on Luke 1-67-79) may mean that the signing of

“You, my child, will be called the prophet of the most high...”

actually makes reference to a baby.

Likewise, the Nunc Dimittis (a canticle based on Luke 2:29-35) says,

“My eyes have seen your salvation...”

Where is Simeon looking except at the baby in his arms? To make reference to a baby when we sign it adds to the clarity of the story. Maybe you think this is adding information, but how would Simeon have signed it if he had been Deaf?

But then, of course, one has to ask the question “What do those words mean to us today in a worship context”. It is not simply a baby we have seen, but the person of Jesus Christ, the Saviour. And, further, we have not “seen” him at all, but rather have perceived him, accepted him or experienced him. Similarly,

“Lord lettest now thy servant depart in peace...”

Maybe you would want to sign “die” for this kind of depart, but is that what we think when we say this in our worship, Sunday by Sunday? (Maybe in some churches it is!)

So perhaps the way in which we sign the Biblical story will be different from the way in which it is signed as a canticle in church. Then, of course, another problem arises:

If I am hearing, I may recognise words from, say, the Nunc Dimittis, as having originated in the Luke story, so that when that story is read, I may experience a moment of revelation as I hear the words that are so familiar. If we sign the Nunc Dimittis differently when it is a canticle in Evensong from when it is being read as part of a Bible narrative, then are we preventing deaf people from recognising that the two pieces are actually the same? Should interpreters develop some pieces, which are always, signed the same so they can be instantly recognised? (Rather like “frozen text” in a spoken/written language.)

One example I know and have used is found in the story of the two on their way to Emmaus. I always sign the reference to Jesus joining them in the same way. Recently I checked this out with a group of Deaf Lay Ministry Students. I asked, “What Bible story is this?” and I gave them simply the signs for two walking together and a person joining them. Instantly came the reply “Road to Emmaus.” So there are obviously some visual elements, which are such strong pictures they can fix the story clearly in a person’s mind. That concept may lead eventually to individual stories in the Bible being given “sign-names”.

Generally the Bible stories appear as welcome relief to most interpreters since they are comparatively easy to sign. However they can also cause problems, especially if they appear unexpectedly in a sermon. Let’s return to Emmaus:

“Just like that moment in Emmaus, Jesus, once recognised, may unexpectedly seem to leave us.”

If an interpreter does not recognise the story and make a picture of it, then the reference may be lost. And what if later the preacher says something like,

“On the road, or in the house, in talking and in breaking bread, Jesus is there.”

If the interpreter has built up a picture of the Emmaus story, then the second comment will be easy to sign. If the first reference passed the interpreter by, then so will the second.

Knowing the story means that the picture can be set up quickly and clearly. I have watched interpreters run out of room when a story has more people in it than they expected, and I once saw an interpreter make

a spectacular mess of the story of Gideon and the soldiers going to the stream to drink. When I asked her why she had got muddled, she confessed that she did not know the story. Needless to say, she had not received any information prior to the assignment!

I would say it is even useful, although not essential, to know the order of the books in the Bible. When the preacher says, “*OK so much for Isaiah, now turn with me to Proverbs.*” Which way will you “turn the pages” when you sign it?

But even if you know the Bible inside out, some passages can still trip you up. I interpreted a song based on Psalm 87:

“They make music in their hearts. All my fountains are in you.”

Well, even now after looking the Psalm up and using a commentary, I am not sure how to interpret that particular song.

I have also not really worked out what I could have done when, after reading the description of the Temple in Ezekiel 47, the preacher stated in his sermon “The river flows south...” Now I had carefully prepared and signed the reading to make clear exactly which way the river was flowing. There was no way I could sign the preacher’s mistake, short of building a dam!

Other considerations

An Interpreter will want to match not only the mood and tone of the speaker, but also his or her theology. Sometimes that will be obvious from the sermon or lecture, sometimes it may need some conversation with the speaker in order to understand exactly what he or she means by, for example, “Christ died for you”. (Christ died as a sacrifice? a substitute? or an example?) That may influence the choice of signs. Equally, the interpreter may want to use denominationally appropriate signs, for example the Deaf Christian Fellowship sign for CHRISTIAN or SAVIOUR, or the Roman Catholic sign for APOSTLE, depending on the circumstances. (A useful resource for such signs is the Christian Signs Website: www.christiansigns.co.uk)

Certainly an understanding of poetry and song and music will be useful as will some basic Greek and Latin, or am I asking now for the impossible? (What about a knowledge of drama to enable you to interpret the Drama Group’s production at your Church? And what about experience in performance interpreting to enable you to sign the solo item by one of the singers?)

What can we do?

Interpreters intending to work within a religious context should spend as much time improving their skills and knowledge as they would in any other field.

Again, I would like to draw a parallel between religious interpreting and court work and suggest that interpreting, say, for a Deaf Solicitor who understands the culture and jargon of the legal system, and interpreting for a Deaf Person who finds him or her self unexpectedly in the dock or on the witness stand are two quite different things. Most people do not have extensive knowledge of the courtroom (except from the Television) and will not necessarily understand the jargon. This makes the interpreters’ task even more difficult. Similarly, many people do not have the background knowledge that enables them to understand an act of worship so that when they attend a funeral or wedding, it is even more important that the interpreter is able to communicate clearly the meaning of what is going on. On the other hand, Deaf People training for the Ordained Ministry will also need interpreters who are theologically skilled and educated.

In 1997 *Signs of God* was set up to begin to offer a way forward for training and exploration. It was not intended as a training agency, but rather as a vehicle for creating opportunities to discuss religious concepts in BSL. We felt that if we used the “target” language throughout the workshops, then we would begin to express religious concepts without having to translate them. This was successful. It was also very popular and so *Signs of God* has run two or three such workshops each year to try to meet demand. We

also offer single Day-workshops in a variety of subjects and aimed at different skill levels. We run a Summer School every two years and also offer training and advice for professional Sign Language Interpreters. All our workshops and residential training events make use of Deaf Sign Language Teachers and Consultants as well as experts in the field of theology, Biblical Studies and Liturgy.

The training was originally aimed at those who were practising interpreters or training to become interpreters. However, we have had to take seriously the need for people at other levels to be able to offer something in their local church. At first we were wary of offering training to people who were at, for example, CACDP Level II. We didn't want to be seen to be lowering the standards. But at the Summer Schools we were able to make clear the difference between interpreting and presenting. So a person who is not an interpreter is, nevertheless, able to prepare and present a song or Bible Reading with a set liturgy. We also had several requests from Deaf People who needed to be able to make sense of complicated religious language as they led worship in their own Deaf Churches.

There is still a lot to study and discover. The workshops and the Summer School continually throw up new questions and ideas, which need to be considered. Sometimes the task seems enormous as we realise the need for a Church Interpreter to be a theologian and Biblical Scholar as well as a good interpreter. Thankfully we are seeing more people becoming interpreters with the necessary skills, but then, more churches now want to offer a ministry to Deaf people. *Signs of God* has grown too, over the last seven years. We now have a team of committed leaders and teachers and our mailing list has reached over 2,000. We have begun to meet the need – it's not enough, but it is at least a beginning on which we can build as we continue to pray and plan, teach and evaluate.

Gill Behenna

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