

Christmas 2017

On Sunday I preached in a town up at the border near Switzerland. The circuit in which I serve is huge and sometimes I leave the day before to ensure I get there on time. The church in question have not had a minister for three years and were overjoyed to have anyone (even myself) come to preach.

The ride there was stunning, but I had to travel for more than 2 hours, through roads that coiled round mountains like a snake on a rock. It was very cold. Nevertheless, for most of the drive there was a spectacular view alongside, a lake glistening like glass in the winter sun.

On arrival I was given some food and a cup of hot ginger tea - not the tea I'm used to, but ... nonetheless, it was a very warm welcome. The community consists mainly of Italians and so this would be my first service in which I only needed to use Italian. I was extremely nervous but managed to get myself through both the liturgy and the sermon without sounding too much like a drunken Yorkshire-man. Italian is not easy but my attempt was obviously passable as they have invited me to come back.

While it was some distance to the church, my journey in the Italian language has been far longer and much more difficult. For instance, this time **last year** when I was on the tram, a man sitting next to me said: "*dove si trova la fermata per l'ospedali FatebeneFratelli?*" Feeling quite pleased with myself, I responded "*Scusa, ma non so tuo fratello - non so dovè (I'm sorry, but I do not know your brother - I do not know where he is)*". Unable to conceal my delight - at having responded to a question in Italian (unprepared) - my face had beamed with an enormous smile. To my surprise the man didn't seem to share my joy. In fact, he looked rather confused. All of a sudden, my son said: "No daddy, no, he wants to know where the [*Fratelli means brothers*] hospital is."

It's been a long and winding road - at least one of us is making rapid progress. In fact, my two sons are speaking Italian like natives. My daughter has also been learning words from her brothers (*I suoi fratelli*) and now she has started nursery so I will soon have three personal assistants who can interpret for me. As you can see I am also progressing (I can now read French newspapers without much difficulty) so, *gradualmente*, we are all moving forward (do pray I improve a lot more ;-).

It's so easy for misunderstanding and confusion to arise when people are from different cultures and have different languages. Many of the problems, even the wars, in our world begin with unintentional cultural misunderstandings. In Cameroon, where I used to work, there are two official languages (French and English). Sadly most of the French speakers would not speak English and most of the English speakers would not speak French. Please pray for the situation there as at this moment the country is very tense. After riots in the English speaking zone (where we used to work) the military has closed roads and has even been shooting people dead. This terrible situation offers a tragic example of how language and misunderstanding can divide people.

When I think about Cameroon, I am deeply troubled by how easily misunderstanding and confusion can bring about so much pain. The world is full of such conflict; there are many people trying to deliberately bring confusion and misunderstanding. Nevertheless, at this time of year, I am also compelled to reflect upon the lengths to which God has gone to communicate with us.

At Christmas we are reminded that "the word became flesh" (John 1:14), that Jesus himself is a clear communication of God (Col 2:9-2:9). It is *incredible*, but, God came to earth in Jesus to communicate God's true nature in a form we could understand: Love. If we want to know what God is like we need only to look at Jesus. If we look at Jesus' life, death and resurrection we clearly see what God's love for us is like. Happy Christmas!