WOULD YOU PREFER A FISH OR A SNAKE?

Posted on October 6, 2015 by Eddie

There is plenty of meat on a python (though there are also lots of bones) and it does taste like chicken. Of course, i makes a wonderful change from fish.
Category: Gospels

> *Â â€œYou parentsâ€"if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Â Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! Â So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him. (Matthew 7:9-11)*

This passage God's care for his people is well known. Jesus illustrates his point by demonstrating that human fathers do their best for their children, so surely God will do even more. One of the ways that he underlines this is by saying that if a child asked for some fish, no human father would respond by offering them a snake.

It's all very straightforward.

Now, imagine that you are living in a Kouya village in West Africa. Every evening when you sit down to your evening meal it's likely to be the same old thing. Pounded cooking bananas, a sauce and smoked fish. Fish is plentiful and cheap. You might get beef or chicken at some important event, but otherwise you are likely to be eating fish, day in and day out. The only change would be if someone had managed to catch or snare an animal; perhaps a cane rat or agouti (much nicer than it sounds) or perhaps a nice python. There is plenty of meat on a python (though there are also lots of bones) and it does taste like chicken. Of course, iÃ makes a wonderful change from fish.

> *Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake?*

Of course you do! If you can.

For the Bible translator, this isn't just an interesting cultural phenomenon, it's a real problem. If you translate Jesus' words literally, you turn the whole passage on it's head. Any father who would only give a fish when he could give a snake has to be pretty mean. This plays into a very legalistic narrative which emerges out of much African traditional religion and which isn't very helpful.

You have to translate the meaning, not the words.

In our case, we found a specific species of snake that was considered unclean and which no one would consider eating and used that instead of the generic term "snake". That did the job, God wouldn't give you and inedible snake rather than a nice bit of fish.