THE GOSPEL AND CULTURE: THE HOMELESS GOSPEL

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A few days ago, I posted a short piece on the Gospel and Culture with five bullet points. I want to unpack each of these points in a series of posts over the next wee while, starting (somewhat strangely) with the first point:

> *The original language and culture of the Gospel are not sacred... this underlies a fundamental principle of the Christian faith which is that it can be lived and experienced in any language and culture.*

The Judeo-Christian tradition has a long history of translating the Scriptures. The Old Testament was translated into Greek so that those who didn't read Hebrew would have access to it. When the Gospel writers came to record Jesus words, they didn't do so in the Aramaic he spoke, but rather then used Greek which could be understood across the whole Roman Empire. Lamin Sanneh writes about this:

> *Christianity seems unique in being the only world religion that is transmitted without the language or originating culture of its founder. (Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West p.98)*

The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) made it clear that Greek background believers should not be compelled to adopt Jewish rules and culture. It is true that Paul says "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28) but in this context he is talking about the reality of the unity of the Church expressed through baptism he isn't addressing the issue of diversity.

In our contemporary society, we have seen Western converts to Buddhism with shaven heads wearing robes and sandals, or English women converts to Islam in a headscarf. When Cat Stevens became a Muslim, he grew his hair and beard, wore different clothes and changed his name to Yusuf Islam. Christians, however, are not expected to adopt the dress, manners or language of first century Palestine. The writer to the Hebrews says that Christians don't have an 'enduring city' on this earth (Hebrews 13:14) and the same is true of the religion as a whole. We don't have a holy land or language in the way that other faiths do. The Gospel has no linguistic and cultural home of it's own and because of this it can make itself at home in any language.

Of course if there is no such thing as Christian culture or language, we cannot define who is a Christian in those terms. There are those who would say that being born in a *Christian country* makes you a Christian. However, it should be clear that I reject the idea of *Christian countries* in the first place. Ultimately, whether someone is a Christian is between them and their creator, but in practical terms I would tend to accept that serious assent to the historic creeds of the Church is as close as mere humans can get to understanding this question.

I know this all sounds very obvious; but as we discuss different ways in which we can express and

live the Gospel we have to start from the point that there is no *one* right way to do it. You cannot impose a language or cultural standards (dress, music, use of time) on people saying that this is Christian language or culture. There is no such thing - the Christian faith simply does not work that way.

Later posts in this series will look at what happens when the Homeless Gospel moves into a home, puts its feet up and has a cup of tea.