

# It's all Greek to me

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Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

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Today, we're going to peek behind the curtain and see the bones on which a sermon can be built.

When I got to Theological college, I thought I was a pretty smart person. I had a few degrees under my belt and a successful career. How hard could it be? I spent the first semester sitting on my office floor with a textbook in my lap, a dictionary beside me and a large, annotated study Bible. I would read a paragraph or page of the textbook, pick up the dictionary and look up at least 3 words and then read the passage in the Bible (with study notes) ...before moving on to the next page. They were throwing words around that I had never heard of and assumed I knew my Bible backwards and forwards. Even the way they put the discussion together was a mystery to me.

In case I wasn't feeling out of my depth, the classroom was filled with people who had never been thrown out of Sunday school. Good little girls and boys much younger than me, with many years of elementary Bible study and many of which were the sons and daughters of clergy. I felt about this € big.

With all the big words being thrown around – there were two that proved really helpful when you have to write a sermon: exegesis and hermeneutics. Don't worry if you can't remember them – I can't spell them. It's what they do that counts – or rather it's what they make YOU do that counts.

Exegesis is the process that we use to explore and explain a Bible text. It requires us to look at a passage from different angles. Imagine the words sitting in the middle of the carpet and we walk around them. We look at the history of the time – what was happening politically. This might give us some information on motivation, political commentary or even satire<sup>1</sup>. We look at the social norms which might give us a clue as to why something is mentioned or challenged. We look at the geography both human and physical. For instance, the text may use metaphors that relate to different regions or industries. It might name towns to show something is nearby or far, far away.

And finally, we look at the words themselves. Most of us cannot read Greek so we depend on English language Bible translations. Some Greek words, like Hebrew

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<sup>1</sup> In the day, as it is today, the only way to make a political comment under a repressive regime is to use allegory (fictional stories) or humour (think of court jesters)

and English have multiple meanings<sup>2</sup>. Different Greek words were translated into English differently according to the skills and the inclinations of the translator, so it is important to look at the sources and compare different versions. When looking at the text, we also look at the differences in style and form<sup>3</sup>– how the story compares to the same story in other Gospels.

Think of exegesis like a Christmas tree or a medical skeleton that we can hang the different bits of information from. We may choose only one or two ideas to talk about in a sermon or do the whole dance. Although there's a lot of thought behind it, the skeleton should always be invisible.

For example, in our reading today, we might wonder why it is important that some Greeks want to see Jesus. Deep in this brief passage is another clue as to why the Pharisees were so worried about what Jesus was doing and saying. It was concerning enough that Jesus was preaching to a Jewish audience but what if his influence went viral? It was becoming interesting (and attractive) to people who were not Jewish. The chosen people were a closed shop. You had to be born Jewish – outsiders were not invited. They believed God had given Moses, and thus what was now considered the Jewish people, the law. God had led them out of Egypt and so it was a firm belief that they had a monopoly on God.<sup>4</sup> Think of it like the current immigration debates. Knowing this, puts a whole different slant on that paragraph.

Hermeneutics is a little harder to explain but to put it simply it is the more philosophical part of Bible study. Exegesis deals with as many 'facts' as we can know about a specific passage while hermeneutics deals with understanding: what we don't know but might discern. It looks at the whole story and divine interpretation. When we look at details of a passage – we might have a better understanding of why something is said or done or described but it needs a harder and deeper examination to understand the meaning.

And that's when we look at the Jeremiah passage again. This leads us to ponder what they might be telling us.

Jeremiah reveals that we no longer need to be taught about God because God's promise is that we will know the Lord. It is written in our hearts. His promise is that we are inseparable and that we will know him when we meet him.

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<sup>2</sup> Pair – to match? A couple? Sounds the same as the word 'Pare' to carve or reduce. Try and explain lead – is it to go in front or is it a metallic element? The concepts are entirely different.

<sup>3</sup> (writing style, poems, songs, stories)

<sup>4</sup> The Jewish faith does not seek or encourage converts even today. They do not evangelise. You can convert but in orthodox society, you will never have the same status as a person born Jewish.

Philosophically, we are talking about an in-dwelling God – not an abstract concept up in the clouds. This passage is a major shift in how we think about God.

In the John text, Jesus confronts his death – something we should all do. It also tells us of the scepticism of his audience. In this life, our children will not let us have the conversations we must have about our wishes around the inevitable. He says the rulers will fall away which could mean the Caesars, kings and governors become powerless but also all the things we strive to collect: power, money and security are immaterial. And then he indicates that when he dies, when he is lifted from the earth, we will be lifted as well. There will be nothing else but to be with God. Is that not a powerful and comforting message?

This passage tells us it is normal to be troubled when confronted by death. It is human. But that should not stop us from insisting we have the conversations that must be had. And we do this with the comfort of knowing we are not alone. In life as in death – we are with God.

Next week is Palm Sunday – we are pounding our way to the cross. It is time we think about death before we leap to Easter Sunday.

I want to leave you with a moment of silence. I want you to use this time to begin to write a eulogy in your head<sup>5</sup>. Not yours. My question is, “how well do you know Jesus?”

How will you tell the mourners about his life?

Before you begin to imagine His eulogy, you must first decide whether you are writing it as a friend, a parent, a sibling, cousin or a colleague. (I have some pens and paper here if you want to make a few quick notes).

(silence)

Finally, there is another essential element to a sermon – you.

We live in this world, with our families and our rulers and Pharisee-like judges. Our experiences and our understanding of God is another filter through which we read and understand holy texts. We are like another translation even though we don't always recognise it.

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<sup>5</sup> I cannot take credit for this brilliant idea. It came up in conversation with Rev Sharon Cutts of St Ninians. She said she was considering writing her sermon around Jesus' eulogy and her comments exploded 100 creative possibilities in my head.

As the sermon writer, your job is to find how you are part of the story and how the stories relate to our lives in this day, in this modern world.

There you have it – a peek behind the curtain that helps us see through the centuries and hear God’s voice in the texts.

*I pray: Lord, imbedded in my heart and soul, may I read these ancient verses with a curious mind and an open heart. And when I am finished discerning, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Based on Psalm 19.