



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## Diving into Scripture

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There are some important guidelines for interpreting the Bible and the words used in it. #1 important thing for us is to keep in mind that we are reading a translation. By its very nature, translation is interpretation. Translators work hard to be as neutral as possible but there are always choices to be made to be made. There is often no exact equivalent of a word from an ancient language. Some words are translated differently in different books. Greek has four different words that are all translated into English as love but they mean very different things. However, a Greek word like *logos* can be translated as *word*, *idea*, *reason*, and other possibilities. The translator must choose the best one for each case.

Choosing the best one requires a deep understanding of context. That is the attempt to understand what the writer was trying to convey and how it would be heard by others at that time. This takes into account history, culture, politics, linguistics, literary style – it's very complicated. Jesus talked to farmers. He used a mustard seed to illustrate the Kingdom of Heaven. To us it sounds charming and a good metaphor for something so small that leads to something so grand. However, if you were a farmer, the mere mention of mustard seed would have invoked images of disaster – it is the most prolific weed imaginable and they would put all of their energy into tearing it out. Jesus was saying something much more radical than we might understand with our modern, non-farmer ears.

So, when I was in seminary I was given a text and told to write an exegesis. Exegesis means to draw the meaning out of a text. I settled into the library for a long winter's night. I started with a set of reference books in which I could look up scholarly articles on the passage to see what others had to say about it. Then I went through a number of the articles that I found, got sense of how it had been interpreted in the past and pulled out the pieces that seemed relevant to me – of course, keeping good notes on my sources so I could cite them properly and not be guilty of plagiarism.

Then I began to take individual words and to work with them. What did they mean, how were they used, how was that word, in that form, used in other places. In this case, I was working on a passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, so I was Paul the Apostle's territory and theology. I had to understand his vocabulary and how he used words. I had to understand how he saw his mission, what his worldview and context were. It was like a scavenger hunt and mystery novel

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all at once. Subtle clues became enormously important. I had no idea how huge was the cloud of meaning that surrounded the word *reconciliation*. It was exhausting and exhilarating at the same time. It took two full weeks to research and write the paper, but it was one of the most worthwhile experiences of seminary. I learned a lot. Did I mention I got a perfect score? It was awesome.

Now this was just on 5 verses. There is this kind of information available on nearly every word used in the Bible. More commentaries have been written on each book than you can possibly imagine. The upshot is that the more we learn about ancient cultures and have access to very old texts, the more surprises the Bible offers up. The world is littered with Bible scholars who agree on many things and disagree strongly others.

Today's reading from Luke is an extraordinary case in point. The story is also found in the Gospel of Matthew. From where we sit, on this side of an English translation, this is a nice story about a soldier who asked Jesus to heal his servant or slave who was paralyzed and near death. It seems quite straightforward, in a Jesus healing miracle kind of way. There are a number of things to note before we begin playing with words. First of all, Israel was an occupied country. A Roman centurion was a representative of a harsh occupying empire. Soldiers had a great deal of power over the Jewish citizens and it was not always used kindly. But here we have members of the Jewish leadership coming to Jesus on the soldier's behalf, saying that he is a good guy and had affection for the Jewish people. That in itself makes this story notable. Enemies are not always what they seem. Jesus does what he always does; he responds with compassion and love and with a thought, heals the servant of the soldier.

The story has within it, some measure of intrigue. It says that the slave was, in our translation, *highly valued*. Greek dictionaries give several possibilities in translating this word – valued, prized and precious. That the Roman centurion was seeking out a Jewish healer for this valued slave indicates that there was a relationship beyond master and slave. The word for slave or servant is *doulos* it appears some 120 times in the NT. Jesus refers to becoming a servant of all. However, there is another word used here and it is the source of considerable conjecture. When the centurion speaks directly to Jesus he doesn't use the word *doulos*; he refers to the person in question as his *pais*. This word has its own cloud of meaning. In the Bible it is translated as *child, son, or servant*. It is what the word means in the literature outside of the Bible that raises eyebrows. In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, by Thucydides, in Plutarch, Plato and others, the word *pais* is used to refer to the younger partner in a same sex relationship. Such relationships were common in Greek and Roman culture, particularly in the military. The centurion in our story today makes a distinction when he talks about ordering slaves to do his bidding and they do – he uses the word *doulos*; but when he speaks of this

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young man who was important to him, he called him his *pais*. It is very possible, if not likely, that those hearing this story, during the time that Luke wrote this Gospel, would have made the connection. It was a common enough situation in the world at that time.

Needless to say, there are widely divergent opinions on this translation of the word *pais*. We are left to ponder for ourselves what its implication might be in the Jesus story. There was clearly no condemnation from Jesus, a very Jewish teacher, only an immediate response to the authenticity of the worried centurion and the one who lay dying some distance away.

That Jesus expended himself for those who were outside of society's boundaries is his story. He spent time in scandalous conversation with a Samaritan woman who was a social outcast for her relationship to many men, including the one who was not her husband. He did not recoil in disgust at the woman who touched his prayer shawl to draw healing power so that she might be freed of years of uncontrolled bleeding. He rescued the adulteress from those who would have stoned her. He allowed the woman with a questionable reputation to wash his feet and dry them with her hair, to the outrage of his dinner hosts. He did not judge any of them. He gave them new life. That is just what he gave to the centurion and his *pais*; new life and his love. May we all know that it is there for us too, when we need it.

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