“Five Words”

Isaiah 2:2-4 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

There had been Christians and Christian missionaries in China going back to at least the 7th century. Mostly they had ministered to Europeans and other immigrants rather than to the Chinese themselves.[[1]](#endnote-1) But in 1368, there came a new dynasty in China that sought to lift up Chinese culture and force out outside influences. By the time the 16th century rolled around, we can’t find any reliable records of Christians in China.

Enter the Jesuits. In 1563, they were allowed to establish a settlement in China. They knew that if they were going to make it, they would need to do a lot of work first. Italians Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci were tasked with learning the language, studying the culture, and making inroads to real connection. In the 16th century, most missionaries believed that it was their role to teach not just Bible and theology, but also their own cultural values, mode of dress, and style of conduct. They didn’t separate any of these things, but traveled the world to impose them as the Gospel. The Jesuits came to understand that this approach wouldn’t work in China – they’d get run out of the country as soon as they said, “hi, you have to wear this suit for Jesus.”

Ruggieri and Ricci learned Chinese – the language, alphabet, and how to write it. They studied the culture and the major religions. They wanted to know what the people connected to spiritually so that they could speak with them and hear them. Fr. Ricci arrived in China in 1582 at the age of thirty. He wrote that any priests joining him would have to be, “good [but also] men of talent, since we are dealing here with a people both intelligent and learned.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Fr. Ricci became well-known as a mathematician and cartographer, which brought him to the attention of the governor of the province, gaining him greater access. “In 1601, [Fr.] Ricci was invited to become an adviser to the imperial court of the Wanli Emperor [and was] the first Westerner to be invited into the Forbidden City.”[[3]](#endnote-3) He established a Cathedral there and even received a large grant from the emperor for his work. Ricci did not come to them as an outsider; he honored their manner, dressed in the robes of a Chinese scholar, and he met them where they were, as they were. Because of this, many Chinese people converted.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Part of his success, I think, is that he wasn’t shoving Christianity onto them as something that was foreign. Much like the missionaries to Ireland working with the Celts, he sought to show them that Christianity fit their core values and understanding of the world. You didn’t have to become a Westerner to be a Christian; you could be 100% Chinese and 100% Christian, too.

You will probably not be surprised to learn that Ruggieri and Ricci’s approach to mission was pretty controversial at the time. In our letter to the church in Corinth, we find a different controversy at play in the church. It seems that their worship services had been practically overtaken by people speaking in tongues – and not just speaking in tongues, but a lot of people doing it at the same time AND without any kind of interpretation.

It’s likely that Paul is the one who founded the church in Corinth so it’s personal to him that they do this Christianity thing right. He wants to caution them about speaking in tongues. It’s not that that’s bad, he says, but when you speak in tongues, you are having a special communion with God. You need to think: when you’re all together in worship, is the church being built up? If you plunge into the deep end of your faith and it’s mystical and spiritual and glorious, but no one else in the church gets to share in that experience…what then? Paul emphasizes prophecy instead. This is a gift that all can hear, not only those caught up in the Spirit at that very moment. This is a gift where anyone could receive a word from God for them – not just the church, but even unbelievers who wander in off the street!

The thing about church is that it’s really easy for us to accidentally get into the habit of only speaking to each other – of reinforcing that the way we do things is the only way to do things; that because it’s ours that automatically makes it right and righteous. But we’re not here to build ourselves up or our own culture or our own language or anything else. We’re here to worship God and Christ and Spirit with everything that we are and everything that we have.

Paul says we should prophesy so that we can be heard and understood by others. Each one can prophesy so it’s on us to learn how to hear and weigh and understand what each one says – including the outsider and the foreigner. Paul says “I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also. Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving”? I bet Fr. Ricci heard these words echoing as he worked to understand a culture and language so different from his own. Because, funny thing, “Amen” is a Hebrew word that came into Greek as “Amen” and into Latin as “Amen” and, as far as I know, into every language and culture that practices Christianity around the world as “Amen.”

Paul said, “I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Reaching out across all of these cultural and language and personal barriers is an enormous task that at times feels impossible. It is full of missteps, embarrassments, and grief. But Paul says that five words shared mean more than even 10,000 that are only heard by a few. Even if we can only say “Jesus” and “amen,” “grace” and “mercy,” and “peace” – we will have made a sacred effort to see beyond our command of the English language into something delicate and holy, and perhaps more miraculous.

Because Isaiah reminds us that in the days to come, the Lord’s house will be established on the highest of the mountains and all the nations – all the nations will stream to it. Everyone will seek God’s justice. And, as the Lord’s house is lifted up, we’ll all look at one another and we won’t be lifting up swords in anger and vengeance. We will plant and harvest together.

As we celebrate World Communion Sunday today, we remember that the Church is so much bigger than our church here. There are about 2.3 billion Christians in the world[[5]](#endnote-5) and only 40 percent of those are in North America and Europe.[[6]](#endnote-6) One billion Christians – almost half of the total number are in Latin America and Africa.[[7]](#endnote-7)

When we come to this table, we rejoice to remember that we are at table with Christ and the apostles, we think readily of the wine and bread that we share. But I think sometimes we forget that we are anticipating the feast of the messiah which we will share in heaven. For me, that changes the image somewhat. Now, I don’t just see Christ, the one who calls us here for life and salvation – I see Christ and my friend and a stranger and Christians from all over the world. And I see each one bringing their whole selves – their personalities and cultures, languages and, last but not least, their fabulous food! This feast wouldn’t just be what I’m looking forward to for Thanksgiving dinner – it’ll be fruits I’ve never heard of from countries I’ll never visit. It’ll be curries and sushi rolls, enchiladas and injera, every kind of coffee, every kind of tea. This means that we have a chance here and now to anticipate this banquet – not just at communion, but in our daily lives. When we learn of other cultures, meet someone new, try to understand them for who they are – well, that’s just us practicing for heaven. When we step outside the familiar, it may be uncomfortable, we may fall flat on our faces, but Christ is there and so from deep within our souls, let us celebrate in one another and learn to sing a new song. Amen.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europeans_in_Medieval_China#Missionaries_and_diplomats> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesuit_China_missions> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matteo_Ricci> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)