

A Liturgy for Learning a New Language

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. — John 1:1

O Christ the Word,
who spoke this world into being
and upholds it
even now
by the word of your power,
grant me understanding
of this new language.

The first task of man was one of language:
to name, to find the fitting word
for the fitting creation,
to lock noun and form together,
the sign and the signified.
And for those of us born after Eden,
the learning of words and meaning
remains one of our first tasks in life.

Now, I find myself in the place
of an infant again,
puzzling out new forms,
new categories of expression,
and sounds that don't form naturally
to my tongue.

Give grace, O God,
for I find myself increasingly frustrated
with my own inability
to easily assimilate and recall
the varied pieces of this new language—
as if the years I have spent
in my native tongue have built up
a mental wall of resistance and doubt:
doubt that these new forms
might ever become familiar to me,

that I might ever move through a page
or conversation without this present strain.

Give grace, O God.
Renew my joy in this work
and help me trust this process
yet again, as I have before.

Let my own inadequacies humble me
and render my heart more teachable.
Spirit of God, be at work in my mind,
as I work to remain receptive
to this new form of thought, speech, and writing.

Keep my eyes fixed
on the worthy purposes of this study—
my love for the neighbor
I might know better through this language;
my love for the culture and people
whose daily interactions are expressed
through this language;
and my love for you, my Lord,
who have seen fit to create a world
in which language is foundational
to life, truth, and beauty.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” — Revelation 7:9–10

For I know that the space I am entering
each time I sit down to study vocabulary,
learn new rules of grammar,
or put my pen to a translation

is a sacred space.

It is the space shaped by an entire culture
that has sung songs, written verses,
told stories, kept records, shared recipes,
grieved the dead, rejoiced in the good,
encouraged the sick, and named children
with these same words I now seek to learn.
It is the space of an entire culture
that has interpreted the world through
the unique lens of this language.

Help me then, O Lord,
to see through the eyes of others,
to know the world through
their language and not just my own.
Let this process serve
to uncover my own blindspots toward ideas
I have not yet considered
because I have not yet had the words necessary
To guide my thoughts.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. — Hebrews 1:3

Grant me the skill to go a step beyond merely
translating this language into my own—
knowing it only secondhand,
as it relates to my own native perspective—
but to know it for its own sake,
absorbing and appreciating its unique metaphors
and images and turns of phrase,
its own reflections of eternal beauty.

May it be for me a means
by which I might love those
who until now have been strangers—
across the room or across centuries—
and in doing so, may it begin to bridge the
divide
that tore through creation at Babel,
when man's pride brought about

this separation of speech.

Let my learning of this new language,
even today, play some small part
in the reversal of that division—
that day by day, as I labor
toward learning this new language,
I might add a few bricks to the construction
of one of those many bridges
from one language to another
that will unite the multitude
of nations, tribes, and peoples
in your eternal Kingdom.

Amen.