

MAY 3

Have you ever been in a conversation during which you hear from the other person, “I remember you saying...” or “our mutual friend reported that you said...”—but you know you never said that or words to that effect? I know I have been in that situation.

It need not have been a deliberate attempt to mis-represent your thought. People hear things in ways that weren't meant or from a viewpoint the speaker didn't take into account and confusion, mis-understanding, and worse is the result.

Sometimes, though, it can happen that someone makes a good faith effort to communicate something you said, but their word choice doesn't really capture your meaning or give an accurate paraphrase of what you said, and confusion results.

At some point, if it is possible, your actual statement may get repeated and the confusion is cleared away. Whatever comes next, at least your actual words are presented. And the relief is palpable. At last, accuracy has its moment!

Our first reading for the 4th Sunday of Easter (Acts 2:42-47) has in it a word that is so commonly used that it seems as plain and functional as it can be. In Greek the word is 'dia', in English, the most usual translation is “through” or “by means of”. It is a preposition.

The word is meant to convey how something happens—the rainwater was carried away through (by means of) the drain pipe.

What is not meant or implied is that somehow the drain pipe chose to lay itself down in a useful spot during a rainstorm. That's an absurd idea. Drain pipes don't decide to be somewhere.

So what needs to be added or brought into the account of the fortuitously available rain drain? Some bright person put the pipe there in preparation for some future rainy daytime. That seems plain enough, doesn't it, (let's leave aside the remarkable possibility that an earthquake rolled several lengths of pipe together, buried them, opened a channel to the surface and extended itself from St. Giles to lake Michigan; just because we can imagine a logical possibility doesn't mean it would ever happen).

That someone planned for the rain and arranged for the pipe is an example of purposeful action, right? There's a word for that in philosophy and psychology: “agency”, which is the capability to chose to perform an act or not. Choice and ability are the keys. They imply an “actor”, not merely an action.

This sounds abstract, but it isn't. Here's what at stake in our reading from Acts for today.

Verse 2:43 has our little word 'dia' in it, and a literal translation of the text goes like this, "many wonders and signs through the apostles happened". So what's being said? "signs and wonders occurred by power that moved by means of the apostles". Hmm, "through / by means of / the apostles" expresses a lot. The apostles are a channel—a drain pipe!—for signs and wonders.

But the apostles are not inanimate pipework, they are human beings who have...agency. They have the capacity to chose to act or not. The whole of the biblical story from Genesis onward is full, full to bursting with the idea of, the insistence on, human agency. The commandments, the prophets, on and on. Joshua's famous challenge, "Choose this day whom you will serve...", Micah's summary of Israel's calling in the world, "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly (go along with, do your part in the world with) your God", the summary of the law that Jesus gives, to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, all this is about agency, the human capacity to choose, to participate, to plan, prepare, assess, evaluate, in short to decide to be an agent of God through whom the power and presence and purpose of God comes into the world for God's purposes. And this participation may result in so exalted a thing as music, art, science, literature, poetry, other great attainments of the human mind and spirit, or more modest demonstrations of going along with God.

When I encounter this little phrase in Acts I am reminded of Jesus saying to his disciples, "You will do greater signs than these (that I am doing)" (John 14:12-14) because the Father will work in and with and through them.

So, is there a problem in translation? For me, yes. You see, the frequently given translation of our little word 'dia' in our text is subtly different. It is simply rendered as "by". You will find it so, for example, in the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the New English Translation.

Contrastingly, the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible all use "through", (mostly older translations)

Annnd, the point you're aiming at, boyo?, As the Irishman said to the thumbtack on his chair.

The point is significant. If you ask me, who wrote that book you're reading, and I say "this book is by Sally Sue", I am saying she is the originator, the source, of the book—perhaps inspired by someone or something else—but it is her work.

If I say, "this book comes by means of or through Sally Sue", that is not the same thing at all, is it. She may have co-operated with, participated in, arranged for, set things in motion to, but the book is not entirely hers—in fact, she may have been any thing from the post person to an amanuensis to a ghost writer, etc.

Getting back to our text, can you see that if you are implying that the signs and wonders are being done by the power of the apostles, by their capability, that is a very different

thing than saying the signs and wonders came by the power that worked in or through them, as I mentioned in discussing Jesus' words from John above.

The difference is in how we understand human agency. Are we going along with God or are we hewing our own path? I am not trying to say we never initiate anything or that we have no volition. But I am saying that how we translate texts matters. Simply using "by" in the translation leaves open an unfortunate reading of the passage (for me, at least). If the signs and wonders are done by the apostles, what do we say about the church today? When the apostolic age ended, were there no more great acts of power?

If, on the other hand, we claim the ordinary meaning of that little word 'dia' as 'through', then what possibilities for the Spirit to work in us are there—infinite! We are then, as we open ourselves to that power, channels for God in this broken and suffering world. Our human dignity is manifest in our choosing to go along with God, not making our own way alone. St. Giles has access, opportunity, even responsibility to go along with what God is doing in Northbrook and the wider world. We are GOD'S PEOPLE at work in the world God has placed us in. We don't have to invent a purpose, we have to pay attention.

It is the difference between the bluster of self aggrandizing ego or the fear of pointless business and the ballast of a soul linked to Christ.

It is the grace and the gift to be able to say, "I am doing and saying what I say and do by the power working/vested in me by the Spirit given me in baptism and confirmed in my acceptance of those promises made in my name."

As Paul wrote long ago, " And now unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly all that we can ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, to him be glory and honor in the church, by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen".
(Ephesians 3:20-21)