



*I lift my eyes to the mountains...*

# Reading the Bible with Tibetan Buddhists

*I work as a language teacher in a Tibetan area of East Asia. Many of my students are Tibetans, so I started learning their language while I was teaching them English.*

After a year of studying a rather dull Tibetan grammar book I decided that it was time to start learning some special vocabulary so that I could talk about eternal things rather than just talking about farming, or herding sheep and yaks.

Since there was no religious language textbook and since the gospel of Luke had just been published in Amdo Tibetan I decided to use it to learn the vocabulary that I needed. I wanted to be able to talk with my students and my neighbours about topics of eternal significance. My

language tutor is a Buddhist monk; I'll call him Norbu Tsering.

Someone with poetry in his soul has translated the Lord's Prayer into Tibetan, using the seven syllable-chanting meter. So now, at the beginning of class we chant the

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Lord's Prayer:

**Heav-en Liv-ing our Father,  
Your name be ve-ry ho-ly**

It sounds beautiful in Tibetan and my language instructor, who is used to chanting Buddhist scripture, loves the rhythm. Norbu had it memorised in one day! I'm a little slower at memorising Tibetan chanting so it took me several weeks to memorise the Lord's Prayer in his language.

We started our language lessons at the beginning of Luke more than a year ago and we've just reached the part describing the empty tomb. It was December 2005 when Norbu and I read the first Christmas story. When Miriam visited her relative Elizabeth she sang a song which, when translated into Tibetan, says,

**"God, the humble people  
you have lifted up.**

**God, the hungry people  
you have fed good food.**

**God, the rich people you have sent  
away empty."**

After reading this Norbu asked me, "Does this mean that your God favours the poor?". In Tibetan Buddhism the poor are poor because of bad karma in a previous life, so Norbu was surprised that in this scripture it seemed to say that God was helping the poor because He cares for them.

Later in Luke chapter six this observation was confirmed when Jesus taught his disciples, **"You who are poor are blessed / the kingdom of God belongs to you!"**. This was a revolutionary idea for Norbu Tsering. The Tibetan word for "disciple" is

actually translated "spiritual son". Four verses later Jesus said, **"But the rich people great sorrow will have, since now your comfort have already received."** Norbu realized that this teaching was very different from the Buddhist doctrine which teaches that the rich are wealthy because of good karma from a previous life. Poverty is seen as a punishment and not a state that is blessed by God.

Sometimes Norbu seemed to have spiritual insight while we were reading. When we read the story about the widow of Nain's son being given back his life, he said, "Of course, Deliverer Jesus can raise the dead – since he is

God, he can do anything!"

This story didn't seem that miraculous to him! It was just a normal account of God doing what God does.

The parables of Jesus are Norbu's favourite part of the scripture. When we read the story of the shepherd with the ninety-nine sheep and the one that was lost, he immediately said, "This story isn't really about sheep and shepherds. This story is about God caring for people. God himself is the Shepherd and his people are like sheep. If a person gets lost, God will hunt for him until he finds him." My hope is that sometime soon, Norbu Tsering will realize that he is lost and he needs to be rescued by the Good Shepherd.

After Norbu made this statement (that God was a Shepherd) I decided that it was time to memorise the Psalm 23 with him. This has also been translated into the seven syllable-chanting meter. It ends with the verse: **"We will live in God's house forever."** I told him that this is often recited at funerals

because we believe that a Christian goes to be with God in heaven when he dies. His comment was, "That is very different from Buddhism!"

Tibetan Buddhist often say that Christianity and Buddhism are almost the same, that they are just two paths leading to the top of the same mountain. However, since we began reading the scriptures together, Norbu Tsering has pointed out the real differences between the Christian faith and the Buddhist doctrines. One of the major differences was explained in a footnote to the verse in Luke 18:26, "Who then can be saved?". The Tibetan term for saved means "liberated" or "freed from the cycle of re-births". The footnote explains that according to Buddhism many meritorious activities must be done to achieve liberation, but the Christian message is that Jesus himself has done all that is necessary to obtain the gift of salvation for us.

Perhaps some day my language instructor will take off his Buddhist robes and put on the robes of a Christian teacher. He once asked me if there were Christian monks and nuns. Since he has been a monk all his adult life, he knows no other way of life. Perhaps he was wondering if it was possible to be a monk and a Christian, too. Perhaps one day he will encounter the truth. ■

### Prayer pointers:

- **Please pray for all our Partners as they find new ways to spread the Good News to people of other faiths.**
- **Pray for Sarah as she serves God in such a remote location**