

Pentecost Reflections

I'm not sure when I first became really aware of the meaning of Pentecost. For some time and somehow, I associated it mostly with the story of the Tower of Babel, which we know best from the account in the Book of Genesis, we have just heard.

The normal interpretation of Babel goes something like this: humanity became diverse in every way, got too big for its boots, and discovered how to build. This skill went to peoples' heads, and they felt there was nothing they couldn't do, and started to think they were gods. But Almighty God intervened, and punished them by destroying their Tower, and by confusing their one language, by turning it into lots of different languages – so that never again, could they unite and threaten God's own power and authority.

This interpretation is rather neat, easily understood, but it is rather dangerous - since it suggests that the diversity of peoples, cultures and languages is a punishment from God.

This quite well-known picture, is a depiction of the Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the Flemish painter, and it is his 16th century 'take' on the story. Here, Bruegel challenges the traditional understanding of the Babel story, pointing us towards what - I think - is a more helpful and faithful interpretation of the Bible text.



Bruegel's depiction of the Tower's architecture seems to attribute its ultimate failure to engineering difficulties rather than to some sudden, divinely-caused, linguistic differences, as described in Genesis. The foundation and bottom layers of the Tower hadn't been completed before the higher layers were constructed, and thus, the Tower's poor foundations were the main cause of its destruction.

In the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, you might just see the King, exhibiting all of his power to his subjugated people as he comes to inspect progress on the Tower - it's all about power. And God's response to this lust for power - was the destruction of the tower project. God freed the people by creating difference.

Babel's attempts to have one, dominant language and culture, was transformed by God into hundreds of different systems and peoples... a diversity capable of liberating people from dominating powers enforcing uniformity. The destruction of Babel, therefore, was about celebrating diversity in which God creates ...and delights.

Turning now to the detailed account in the Acts of the Apostles that Catherine read to us, and where many languages again feature. The imposition of one language and culture, as in Babel, was, and still is – *think of the beleaguered Uighur people in China today!* - a typical approach of Empires. Certainly, Rome aspired that everyone might speak Latin. At Pentecost, we don't know in what language Peter was speaking at first - *Hebrew, Latin, or probably Aramaic*. However, the diverse people present – heard the Good News in their own languages, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. At that first Pentecost, the Church was born in diversity – and all people heard the Good News comprehensibly

The Holy Spirit drives us to new challenges, to pass on God's news to other people, to create a diverse Church. At that first Pentecost, a Jewish sect was to become a rich, mixed Church - of slaves and free people... Jew and Gentile... male and female...old and young – totally different to what Rome was imposing. We are recalling today the Holy Spirit being poured out on all kinds of people from across every nation. It was a key moment in history.

It is sometimes said that Pentecost is the 'birthday' of the Church. And, of course, we want to celebrate our birthdays – *well, at least we do so with enthusiasm until reaching late-middle age* - but inevitably, it is a backward look. In preparing for today, I kept noticing that the Holy Spirit challenges us to look forward, as we try to understand what the Spirit is prompting us to do, today and tomorrow.

Another, if inexact, parallel comes to mind... We learn that recently the disciples had been experiencing their own 'lockdown' but nevertheless, they were expectant. Jesus told them, before He ascended, to wait in Jerusalem, "*and you will be baptised by the Holy Spirit within a few days*". That promise is constantly renewed. As we await substantial release from our lockdown, might we ask what the Spirit is prompting us to do now?

One issue with the colourful passage we heard from Acts might be its familiarity.... but there is usually benefit in trying to read it as if for the first time... to look for what stands out. We hear of Peter's powerful speech to the crowds of thousands. But we might pause to remember that only seven weeks earlier... this man, now preaching fearlessly, had skulked away, having denied Jesus three times. *Wasn't Peter the man who got out of the boat boldly, and started walking across the water, but whose courage then failed him?* What had changed? The change was that the Spirit had emboldened himto fulfil potential Jesus had always recognised in him.

The passage from Acts then lists the multitude of places represented in the throng that day – arrived from their homes across most of the then known world – with everyone present able to hear the 'great things God had done' in their own language. No one was excluded...the message was for everyone..... Once again, no discrimination.

Before concluding I would us to consider the verses read to us from the Gospel of John: In this passage, the Holy Spirit is very different from the tongues of fire and rushing winds described in Acts. Here, Jesus is preparing the disciples for his imminent departure. He will send the Spirit to them, and conveys the sense that the Spirit would be alongside them... prompting, supporting and empowering. They are called to speak about Jesus, through the power of the Spirit, and Peter was doing just that.

And that same Spirit is not confined by time or place. It can empower us still today to speak about God's love revealed through Christ. It seems to me that we will do so with conviction only if we resolve to knowing Jesus better.... wanting others to know Him too.

None of this contradicts fundamental truths of our faith revealed to previous generations, but rather it guides and can equip us to understand better... what Jesus is challenging us, individually and importantly in support of one another, in this generation, even here at Trinity. Might each of us ask ourselves more often if we are really listening hard enough

to that same Spirit? If ever there was a time when we need a vision about how things should be, post-pandemic, surely it could be now?

And to end.....Erasmus, the famous Dutch Renaissance scholar, once told a classic story, designed to emphasise how important it is that we should take up the torch of Christ's ministry with commitment.

In the story, Jesus returns to Heaven after His time on Earth. The angels gather around to learn what had happened during His earthly life. Jesus tells them of the miracles, His teachings, His death on the Cross, and His Resurrection.

When He finishes his story, Michael the Archangel asks Jesus, *"But what happens now?"* Jesus answers, *"I have left behind eleven, faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have followed me faithfully. They will declare My message and express My love. These faithful people will build My church."*

"But," responds Michael,

"What if these people fail? What then is Your other plan?"

And Jesus answers, *"I have NO other plan!"*

Today, as we celebrate the birth of the church, we learn again how we Christians ARE the plan!... and how Jesus is counting on EACH of us.

The good news is that we have not been left alone. The Holy Spirit is here with us, now and in the days ahead, ready to use us. Mostly, I suggest, we just need to listen more, and trust in God.

AMEN