

Pentecost Sunday Yr C, 19/05/2013
Gen 11:1-9 & Acts 2:1-21
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“Speaking the Holy Spirit’s Language”

You most likely have heard or even spoken the old, familiar phrases: “Watch your language,” and “he or she is talking my language.” The first phrase is often considered to be a negative message and a warning. The second phrase is most likely considered to be taken as a compliment.

A few days ago, I was engaged in an interesting conversation with a retired teacher. We were speaking about the importance of stories and storytelling. She told me that when she was a teacher, she used to cringe when some of the other teachers placed too much emphasis on grammar; she called them “the grammar police.” Oftentimes, she said, these teachers succeeded in stifling students from writing stories or telling stories because all they seemed to care about was getting the grammar correct, while not paying much attention to the content of what the students wrote. I agreed with her, and added that most likely we need to live with a healthy balance of stories that do pay some attention to grammar; while simultaneously incorporating enough creativity in their content to make them interesting for people to read or listen to.

Today in our first lesson from Genesis and our second lesson from Acts, we learn of the importance of language and speech. In the case of the story of the tower of Babel, we learn of human beings gathered in one place and sharing one language with the same words, the same speech. However this single language and speech is human speech reflecting the goals and aspirations of the human spirit. The narrator of this story tells us that God is not happy with the people gathering in Babel and speaking one human language.

Why is God not happy? Well, if you remember back in chapter one of Genesis when God created human beings in God’s image, he told them what

they were to do to make God's image known: "Be fruitful and multiply, *and fill the earth...*" (1:28) Here in this Babel story, the people seemed to have forgotten about filling the earth with God's image. Rather, they want to settle down in one place and make a name for themselves, not for God. They want to immortalize themselves by speaking the same language and by building their way to heaven. Or were they perhaps trying to build and create their own heaven?

Human language motivated by the human spirit has the potential to do crazy and dangerous things. Often such language may sound rather impressive at first blush—however once you start going deeper into it, you realise how dangerous it can become. Often it is motivated by fear and leads human beings down the pathway to destruction. Historically, human language and the human spirit have created tyrants who employed fear to enslave and destroy entire populations. Human language and the human spirit have created things like nuclear bombs that, if their full fury was ever unleashed would destroy the human race. So human language and human spirit more often than not are an embodiment of our fallen, sinful state; abusing power; defying and shaking fists at God; and arrogantly trying to be god in God's place.

So God, in the story of the tower of Babel decides to take action by confusing the language and speech of human beings and, by doing so, scattering "them abroad from there over the face of all the earth." God does this perhaps not so much as a punishment; rather as an opportunity for human beings to fill the earth with God's image and make a name for God rather than for themselves.

Now we fast forward several centuries to our Acts passage and the day of Pentecost. On this day we witness a reverse of the tower of Babel story. Now human beings who had been scattered and divided by language and speech are gathered into one place in Jerusalem. All of a sudden God once again decides to take action by sending the Holy Spirit in the form first of a mighty wind filling the whole place and then fiery tongues. Language and speech of

the Holy Spirit. Human beings able to speak and understand one another in their own mother tongue. The Holy Spirit as Communications Expert—allowing human beings the perfect combination, the perfect balance of grammar and creativity to create, write and speak the perfect story.

Pentecost is a celebration of combining God's Holy Spirit with our human spirit; God's language and speech with our human language and speech to spread the perfect story; God's story to the whole world. The Holy Spirit and the Holy Word unlike the human spirit and the human language is motivated by love rather than fear. So Luke tells us that even though some were sceptics and thought that the people were filled with the spirit of alcohol and drunk on wine; others realised and came to believe that the people were filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking the Spirit's language "about God's deeds and power."

The work of the Holy Spirit on that day of Pentecost has been taken very seriously by Christians down through the ages and right up to the present day. The Holy Spirit as our Communications Expert helps us in reading, writing and speaking with the work of Bible translation. Language is a means to understand a people, a culture and a nation. Over and over again, Christians have told stories of how people become more receptive to God's word and the Christian faith because the Bible has been translated into their language.

The Holy Spirit on that day of Pentecost long ago came in the form of fiery tongues and unleashed the gift of speaking in languages that everyone could understand and communicate with each other to celebrate God's deeds and power. In real life fire brings light and heat to human beings and requires oxygen to burn. Today we celebrate the Holy Spirit's fiery language working through human and divine words to bring light and heat, oxygen and breath to our hearts and lives that we may understand and communicate with each other and our God; that we may be inspired to share God's love with the world. In this sense Pentecost is an ongoing event in the life of the church.