

## **Sermon - the church is empowered to continue Jesus' ministry**

Based on the readings: Genesis 11.1-9; Psalm 2; Acts 2.1–21; John 15.26–27, 16.4b–15

### The tower of Babel

- The first two readings today wonderfully contrast with each other.
- In the story of the tower of Babel, humankind decides to assert its domination not only over the material aspects of life, but also over the supernatural - or spiritual - aspects of life.
- It was well established in the ancient world that if one wanted to commune with the god or gods of one's religion, then one popular option was to ascend into the sky by climbing a mountain.
- This is why the ancient Greek pantheon of gods was to be found on top of Mt Olympus, for example, or why Moses and other prophets went up Mt Sinai or Mt Horeb to commune directly with God.
- Even Jesus went up a mountain for his experience of transfiguration.
- As the people on the plain were removed from the mountains, they decided to create a mountain, or tower, of their own:

*'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.' (Genesis 11.4)*

- They were filled with their own importance and so wanted to make their own mountain to attend to their own spirit, rather than with the Divine Spirit.
- Psalm 2 speaks to this:

*The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers conspire together:*

*against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,*

*'Let us break their bonds asunder:*

*let us throw off their chains from us.'*

*He that dwells in heaven shall laugh them to scorn:*

*the Lord will hold them in derision.*

*Then will he speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury.*

- And so the Lord then confuses the language of humankind, and they are no longer able to work together.
- I suggest that this is another way of pointing out that since they were each focused on attending to their own divinity, that they stopped having a common language and understanding.

### Pentecost

- Now we turn to the Pentecost story from Acts, which makes for an insightful contrast.
- The disciples were gathered together after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, focused on supporting each other and on praying.
- Acts 1.14 says: *All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*
- What were they praying about? We don't know, but we do know that they had come through a profound experience in which their Lord and teacher had been through hell, had been killed, had then reappeared and encouraged them to wait for anointing by God's Spirit, before leaving them.
- I imagine that they tried to make sense of it all by referring to the Scriptures, discussing Jesus' teaching and ministry, and - most significantly - turning to God in worship and thanksgiving, and asking for guidance and encouragement.
- The point is that they were beyond being able to make sense of their experience in their own terms - they could only turn to God for the meaning.

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- And in doing this constantly over a period of time - possibly over the nine days between the traditional dates of Ascension and Pentecost - they were inadvertently preparing themselves for their baptism by the Holy Spirit.
- So we come to the Pentecost experience itself.
- The outward description of the violent wind and the tongues of fire are probably inadequate descriptions of how each of them experienced this moment.
- What is significant is that they emerge from the house transformed - filled with courage and conviction about what they have been called and now anointed to do: to share and enact the transformative good news of Jesus Christ, and invite others to enter directly into relationship with God through the same Jesus Christ.
- And this is where the contrast with the Tower of Babel story becomes most obvious.
- In that story people became disunited because they could not understand and engage with each other.
- In the Pentecost event, people of a multitude of languages found unity in understanding and engaging with the divine word spoken through the apostles.
- In the Tower of Babel people were focused on their own divinity, with calamitous effect.
- In Pentecost, people were focused on God's divinity, with a transformative effect.

### Jesus explains his need to leave

- Now I'm going to turn to the Gospel passage, taken from when Jesus was talking to the disciples during the Last Supper.
- He assures them, yet again, that they too will be anointed with the Holy Spirit, just as he himself was at the start of his ministry.
- His reassurance also covers his impending departure, and even though he acknowledges their sorrow at hearing of this, he says: '*I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*' (John 16.7)
- Jesus provides a basic lesson here, not only for those disciples, but for every disciple since then - including us.
- If Jesus was here with us in exactly the same way that he was with the first disciples, then that would be wonderful, and we would benefit so much.
- But if he just continued to be here, then our spiritual growth would slow to stopping.
- Spiritually, we would be like perpetually youngsters, always dependent on parents, and dependent on the home they provide.
- Rather, Jesus in a sense kicks us out of that dependency on *his* faith relationship with God, and in effect says: You can have the same direct relationship with our heavenly Father as I have. In fact, I will ask him to anoint you with his Spirit, in the same way that he anointed me.
- Because then our spiritual growth would resume, and we could become mature in the Spirit.
- This is not about physical maturity, but spiritual maturity - being able to function independently in our own faith.
- Not independently of God, or even of Jesus as we engage with him spiritually - but independent of another person's faith relationship.

### Empowered by the Spirit

- And Jesus points ahead to the spiritual growth that he expects us to engage in: '*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth*' (John 16.12-13)

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- The subsequent Pentecost event is the start of that, and it then plays itself out through the rest of the book, *The Acts of the Apostles*.
- It has been suggested that the book should be renamed: *The Acts of the Holy Spirit* - because it describes how people are empowered, encouraged, and guided by the Holy Spirit.
- They endure persecution, undertake missionary journeys, preach, write letters, heal, argue, pray, sing hymns, enact social justice, and keep witnessing to the Good News that God has revealed through his Son - and keep doing this through the power of the Holy Spirit, in which they have been anointed.
- Jesus also gives encouragement to all Christians who face misunderstanding and opposition and injustice because of their enacting of God's sacrificial love.
- We're not talking about Christians who suffer because they've followed their own hearts - like those who built the tower of Babel -
- but about Christians who are right-wisely aligned with God's desire, and who are truly manifesting God's love, light and life.
- Jesus reassures such Christians that by being anointed with God's Spirit, '*he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement*' (*John 16.8*)
- Just as Jesus was treated as a sinner by the Sanhedrin, so the Spirit will prove similar mistreatment to be wrong.
- Just as Jesus was regarded by the religious leaders as being unrighteous - that is, out of alignment with God - so the Spirit will prove that similar attitudes towards those who are truly right-wise are wrong.
- And just as Jesus was judged and condemned by those motivated by evil, so the Spirit will prove such evil judgement as wrong.
- If we align ourselves with the spirit of this world, and give priority to our own desires - like the builders of the tower of Babel - then we are vulnerable to making the same mistakes as those who mistreated Jesus.
- But if we do what the first disciples did - aligning ourselves with God's Spirit, and giving priority to his desires - we then become open to being strengthened and guided by the Spirit.
- In fact, that is a fundamental reason for gathering together regularly, as we do each week, to keep on realigning ourselves to God, and to being reinvigorated in our faith.
- And so we pray that just as the first disciples were anointed with the Spirit at Pentecost, so too may we be refreshed in our own anointing by the Spirit, even now.
- Here again is the collect for today. Let us pray:

Almighty God,  
you sent your Holy Spirit  
to be the life and light of your Church:  
open our hearts to the riches of your grace,  
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit  
in love, joy, and peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.