

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

PENTECOST

SUNDAY 23 MAY 2010

Mr Robert Sanderson

Genesis 11: 1 - 9; Acts 2: 1 - 12

"The Wind of God"

Before we examine the Pentecost story I should like to start with a simple reflection.

Much of our discussion this morning will be about culture. You may have been on a QANTAS flight and the captain has announced as the plane is taxiing to the runway, "We will be airborne shortly." Or, if you have been on an American airline flight and the captain has announced, "We will be airborne momentarily."

I tell you this little story to make this important point:

*Irrespective of the words and the language and the culture,
you will still reach your destination.*

1. Pentecost

Pentecost is a very special event well worth celebrating. It comes from the Jewish festival of *Shavuot* which is 50 days from Passover – hence the name Pentecost. Fifty days is 7 times 7 (a week of weeks) + 1 and marks the end of the Spring harvest when all the grain has been collected and stored. It was a very important day for the Jesus followers on that first *Shavuot* after his death because so many of them would be there worshipping in the temple at Jerusalem.

Luke recounts this story right at the beginning of the book of Acts. In his characteristic way, he wants to convey much more than narrative. He wants to convey the awe and wonder, the hope and joy of what it was like to be there. He fills the story with powerful symbols from the Hebrew texts. The rushing wind – the wind of God that moved over the waters at creation; the tongues of fire – God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush and instructed him to go to Pharaoh and ask him to liberate the Israelites. Luke is saying, "Look, these are happening again."

Finally, there is the strange story about speaking. The speech of the Jesus followers was understood by visitors from every country in the known world in their own language. This is a clear reference to the story of the Tower of Babel. We need to understand this story because Luke's account at Pentecost depends on it.

2. The myth of the Tower of Babel.

I use the word 'myth' to describe this story because myths are not to be taken literally but they do have their own 'truth'. Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God* says a myth's "purpose is to help us contemplate the human predicament." In this case, the story is an attempt to explain why the world is made up of different languages and cultures.

So here's the story...

At a time when there was only one language and one people, the people became arrogant and started to build a vast city with a tower that would reach to the heavens. When God saw what the people were trying to do, they were given different languages and banished from the city. They left in their cultural groups to settle in different parts of the earth.

We are not told why being one people speaking one language was so arrogant. The most plausible explanation is that if there were only people of one culture, they would be tempted to believe they were always right and that would be to be like God. Hence the desire to build and climb the tower to heaven.

Frequently, when talking about this story, we hear people claim that cultural diversity is God's *punishment*. It is the exact opposite. St Jerome pointed this out in the fourth century. Languages, cultures and races are *blessings* that God gave to humankind.

But we must go one step further and take the warning of this story to each separate culture. If each culture sees itself as the *only* culture, it is in danger of building its own Tower of Babel. The dispersing of the cultures in the story is a shift from primitive tribalism to respect and cooperation. A shift from the fear-driven division between 'us' and 'not us' to rejoicing in the diversity and understanding of others.

The most obvious social example is the way the Italians after WW2 (many of whom had been imprisoned for the duration) made their way, and ways, into the hearts of all Australians. After all, it was they who weaned us off fish and chips, and roast and three veg.!

I wonder if you realize just how multicultural we are. In the 2006 census 23% of residents were born overseas and 40% had one parent born overseas. But let us look at a few specifics. There are some Muslim women today who have been denied a job because they wear a hijab (head scarf). Or that some recent Sudanese refugees have few prospects because of poor English and few opportunities to rectify the situation. There is still much work to be done.

3. Religious plurality

So let us return to Luke's story. On first reading, it may seem that Luke's account of the languages is the opposite of the Tower of Babel but there is more to it than that. It's not that there is now one language, it's that now the speakers of all the different languages hear what is spoken in their *own* language – a kind of auto-translation. They are still the same as they were but the Spirit has changed what they hear. They now hear the language of love and compassion – and that's a universal language. (Notice that this is not "speaking in tongues" – 'glossolalia' – which is incomprehensible to others.)

What has happened to make things different?

Before this time religion was tied to the culture. Religion helped people overcome their fears and gave order and law to the tribe. It defined what was acceptable and what was not acceptable. In early Israel, those who worshipped other gods were regarded as idolatrous and often became someone to blame for the ills of the tribe.

Sound familiar? I am sure you can think of some examples. After all, tribalism is engrained in our

psyches.

While Israel was one of the first cultures to become monotheistic, the early Jesus followers saw themselves as believing in the god of everyone. There was a break between the culture and the god. It was now one god for all people. The teachings of Jesus were quite consistent with the view that many cultures were a blessing to humankind as we discussed before.

Prof Choan-Seng Song, Professor of Theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion has this to say:

“The New Testament adds something crucial to this insight: Cultures need each other, cultures need to interact. One of the most scandalous aspects of Jesus’ ministry was his practice of mingling with people who were different. Even more scandalous, Jesus said that the Kingdom of God encompasses this same radical diversity. In Jesus’ parable about the Great Banquet (see Luke 14 and Matthew 22), guests were invited from all walks of life, and many were ‘outcasts’ in the eyes of the cultural purists of the day. But by bringing these guests together, God, the host, honored their differences. The feast was not the elimination of differences; it was their affirmation. The feast did not separate differences from one another; it joined them together as continuing differences. The Great Banquet is the symbol of the kind of world that God, through Christ, is already bringing into our midst.”

Did you notice, in the reading of the Tower of Babel, God speaks in the plural? “Let us go down and confuse their language.” This is not the royal ‘we’ applied to God. This occurs because it is one of the early stories written by people who worshipped many gods. You will remember that one of the creation stories similarly has the words, “Let us make man in our image”. In the Babel story it is obvious that those who were scattered into different cultures had different gods.

4. The Wind of the Spirit

In Luke we have a diversity of religion too. He tells of people of every known language being present. This was clearly about Jews of every language since they were all there to celebrate *Shavuot*. But later in Acts 10 Luke includes all non-Jews in a similar manifestation of the Spirit. The Spirit can infuse and fire those of all cultures and *religions*.

The ‘great commissioning’ at the end of Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 28: 19-20) clearly indicates the universality of Jesus’ teaching. To go out into the world and share the love of God with everyone no matter what their tribe, race, culture or religion. The Spirit is in everyone and everyone is part of the Spirit.

It is unfortunate that the acceptance by Jesus of both religious diversity and the Spirit of love has had a difficult progress. While the acceptance of diversity of religion is one thing, we find that things go awry when we find people want to impose uniformity of belief. And this is because they want to demand that they alone have the truth. This is the danger of the Tower of Babel. It is to risk equating oneself with God. One of the great tragedies of Christianity is that this ‘great commissioning’ would be later interpreted to mean *convert* everyone to Christianity. This intolerance has led to, and still leads to, harm and lack of respect; even to religious wars and all manner of cultural and personal violence.

If we claim the Spirit of Jesus and see him as the beginning of a new humanity that cherishes diversity, we can build the Kingdom he spoke about. Not a humanity where everyone is the same but where everyone respects the diversity of others. It is as though the Spirit produces a new awareness

of God's immanence that continually breathes life and fire into us. The Spirit gives us the power to change the things around us to produce a world that continues to evolve for the better.

We all can be the instruments of change. If we are in touch with the source of the Spirit we can work with those around us to continue to bring more love and compassion into the world. No matter who we are, we have the ability to improve the life of those we encounter.

Cast off fear... Cast off greed... Cast off sorrow...

Embrace the wonderful diversity of the world. Let the wind of God loose in your lives and experience the joy and hope of a better world.