

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

PENTECOST

SUNDAY 12 JUNE 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Genesis 11: 1-11; Acts 2: 1-4

“Building a Tower of Grace”

The more I read and interpret scripture, the more I am in awe of the profound depth and breadth of its meaning. Over the years I learned to look at the scriptures with eyes that see far more than the surface. More than a story that may, or may not, have historically happened. And more than a moral message one can or will agree with or not. I guess that started, as far as I can remember, with my grandmother telling me the old stories and connecting them to life in the here and now. I can still hear her voice asking me what I thought I would have done or felt if I had been one of the shepherds in the Christmas story, one of the people following Jesus, one of the soldiers at the cross or one of the disciples at Pentecost. I can hear her telling me about her own experiences in her life of things that had happened to her that were similar or totally dissimilar to those.

She told me about having the drawer in the old bedstead where babies used to be placed and that, when two children were born too close together, they'd used a wooden box with straw in it, just like the one the baby Jesus had slept in and put that in the bedstead as well. She told me about a minister who had been so inspiring that she'd moved church to be able to listen to him, in defiance of my grandfather. She talked to me about her guilt at turning away a Jewish family at the beginning of the war because she didn't want to put her own family at risk and how she felt that she could have nailed Jesus to the cross on that day. She also talked about the moments, when deep in prayer, she could feel the Spirit move inside her and would start singing, or feel words well up inside her she didn't know she had, about that time she had fainted in Church because she felt so completely overcome by the presence of God.

My grandmother, by showing me she saw a connection between those age old stories and her own story, helped me see there might be a connection between those stories and my own story. She taught me there was more to them than just learning about past realities, but that they were stories that longed to speak to the present and connect to our lives.

Much later, when I worked at the University for a while and did research on the linguistic structures of the gospels, I learned to see in yet another way there was much more to these stories. That there was more than history, more than a moral message, more even than “just” seeing if they, in any way, connected to and mirrored our own experience. That in fact all of that was only the tip of the iceberg. And ever since I have lived in increasing awe of those stories and what they can tell us.

The two stories we have read today are both incredibly rich in that way. Taking them “only” at face value does, I sincerely believe, not do them justice. Asking if it “really happened” is similar to asking, after listening to Beethoven's ninth, to discuss how many notes are in it. Although I guess at some level this may be interesting to know, it is at another and far more important level, totally beside the point.

Did it really happen? Did they build the tower? Was there wind? Were their flames? And even more intriguing: did they start speaking in languages they didn't know?

As for the tower... At the time the story was written there were towers being built everywhere. Ziggurats they were called, and they were part of the Babylonian empire's aspirations to show they were in charge of the world. It is a funny story, and it was probably good it was written in a language the Babylonians would not have understood. Babel in Babylonian meant "gate of heaven", but in Hebrew it means babble. A child would have gotten that one. So here are these babblers, building their towers and making a name for themselves, like so many world powers before and after them. Thinking they own the place. Until their communication falls apart. Then their empire falls apart as well. Like so many empires have done and still do. They aren't almighty, another power is. A power that likes variation, that likes to spread things out a bit. A power that is allergic to the type of monoculturalism these guys were trying to impose on everyone, including the Hebrew people who wrote this cheeky story. They may have been living in the shadow of this great empire at the time, suppressing their culture and faith, but their faith tells them these powerful tower builders will not have the final say in what will happen in the future. That there is something else that is much more powerful than them.

Ever seen a power like that? I don't think I have to point out to you how our world is full of Ziggurats imposing a monoculturalism on all of us. I don't think I have to tell you about superpowers who lose their grip because they have concentrated on building themselves a name and forgot to make sure the lines of communication stayed open.

Ever met an empire builder in your life? One of those people who has this incredible drive to gain control and will go to any lengths to get it? Ever tried to stop one? What would it be like if you could look at someone like that and think: I happen to know this story about some people who were just like you, believed they were invincible, just like you do, but found out there is more to life than gaining control and keeping it.

Have you ever looked in the mirror and realised you are one yourself? Someone who likes to make a name for themselves, someone who loves control, and hates losing it, someone who can be so busy striving for one thing you forget your support base is falling away while you are at it? Building a career, work, can make you lose connection with your family for instance, or being passionate about something you can maneuver yourself into a lonely corner of life where you've lost contact with your peers. There are a multitude of things that can cut you off and leave you stranded because you lose sight of what is important while pursuing something that only seems to be so.

If you look at the story like that, does it matter if there was actually, ever, one historical tower built by people who were driven by pride and power, and losing the ability to speak each other's language in the process?

Through the story of Pentecost, if we listen carefully, we can hear an echo of this much older story. Instead of losing the ability to communicate, here people from different cultures and nations suddenly find themselves understanding each other with perfect clarity, each in their own language. A dream come true. No monoculturalism here, or repression, but an open communication between people of every race and every nation. No babbling at the gate of heaven, but crystal clear communication about a God whose mind blowing presence speaks so convincingly that three thousand people join the movement right there and then. For anyone who was familiar with the other story this would have been speaking volumes: Babel is reversed. Where the Spirit enters communication starts to flow. People's internal drives and ambitions are drawn towards the same direction like iron filings to a magnet. The message of Jesus, the message of the Kingdom of God, attracting them and directing them towards a future where justice and peace will create a culture of wholeness and compassion for all of them.

The Spirit, that intangible moving presence that has been around since the beginning of creation, blows in and moves about and suddenly things start to happen. For anyone who has ever seen or felt the Spirit at work that will not be history but in the present. Here in Balwyn North where Trinity and St. Aidan's are finding a common language after seventy years apart. Here at Balwyn North where a Chinese pastor and a Dutch minister try to communicate across ethnic, historical, spiritual, and cultural divides that would blow your mind away in any other environment than the Church. Here at Balwyn North where people still feel the breath of wind and fire that came down two thousand years ago. Here in the Uniting Church where we are struggling to discover what Spirit filled communication means in a world that has turned secular and multifaith and a Church that is multicultural, multiethnic and not too sure what the future will hold. Here, where you and I are trying to make sense of our faith and catch a whiff of that old Spirit we knew, that old spark that used to burn, and trust that our own story with God is not only history, not only of the past, but something of the present and the future.

While they were waiting, while they were praying, the Spirit came. Two thousand years on the story repeats itself. We are waiting, we are praying, hoping for wind and fire to touch and move us to a place where Babel can reverse itself, where barriers are broken down and divides lose their meaning in the face of something that is much stronger than the towering names we try to build for ourselves. Where there is no Trinity or St. Aidan's, or ethnic Chinese, or Dutch, or Korean, or Tongan, or Muslim, Buddhist or Jew or whatever else our world happens to be made up of.

Amen.