

Along the track

Babel

Ancient stories, often very familiar to us, can teach us very up to date and relevant lessons. The story of the building of the tower Babel in Genesis starts this way: "Now the whole world spoke the same language, using the same words." The people propose to build a mighty tower right up into the sky, a building that would make them famous and fill future generations with wonder and amazement. They begin with great enthusiasm but after they have been building for a while, there is an intervention from on high. The people wake up one morning to discover they can't understand each other's words any more. God has given them a very mixed blessing - the gift of many languages. The tower project has to be called off because people can't work together. But even so, the unfinished tower is remembered by the name they gave it, Babel.

The Babel story is not just an imaginative explanation of why there are different languages. It is about our arrogance, forever thinking we are in control, that we can make anything we like or do anything with the world or the society to which we belong. It is also about what happens when people lose touch with and respect for the land, the earth from which we came. It is also a reminder that many cannot understand what others are saying because they have closed their ears and their minds to other messages.

This story is told at Pentecost to set up its reversal: that day when people come from many lands and cities to Jerusalem. These visitors speak dozens of languages but when they crowd together to see what was the sound of the wind and flames all about, and when they hear what Mary and Peter and James are saying, they realise that each person hears in their own language. It is Babel turned upside-down.

Retelling this story at Pentecost raises some very pertinent questions. What are we doing do cooperate with God's creative Spirit today? Like the citizens of Babel, what do we imagine today? The Spirit so often works through our imagination; 'vision' or 'dreams' so often described the visitation of the Spirit in the Scriptures. So what do we imagine for our nation, our church, our parish, our community? The Spirit wants to work with us. What do we want future generations to discover about our age, our times? A failed tower or will they see us as a compassionate society, one where people are

treated with dignity, fairness and respect, or will they see us as putting up barriers, fearing the stranger, unable to hear those who come from other cultures and other faiths? The Spirit is at work within them too.

Have we lost touch with the earth? If we take scripture seriously, we can see that like us, it is God's work of art. Ultimately we are part of God's creation. The world does not exist simply for our benefit. In the words of Pope Francis:

"Respect for creation, then, is a requirement of our faith: the 'garden' in which we live is not entrusted to us to be exploited, but rather to be cultivated and tended with respect."

We have been entrusted with the guardianship of that creation and the environment in which we, and future generations will live. They deserve a world, an environment that can support them, that can give them a secure present and a safe future. What we do today, what we neglect to do, will have a profound effect on creation and thus the future generations who come to live with it. Scripture challenges us to recognise that the world has value in itself ("it is good") apart from us. What we hand over to future generations is within our own grasp, that will be as good or as depleted as we decide, it will be made up of the decisions you and I make each day. Creation is not here simply for us to exploit.

At Pentecost we pray for the Spirit to renew the face of the earth. The Pentecost Spirit is one that disturbs us. We live in a beautiful world yet so much about it should make us deeply unsatisfied, should make us hungry and thirst for change and for justice. Work is so often not seen as a creative endeavour but a dull routine, where workers are exploited for the benefit of others, for the generation of wealth for the rich few. Are we content with what the media call entertainment where the basic values of human decency are so often disregarded, where truth is often a casualty of the race to power and influence.

Does the Spirit of Pentecost challenge?

Regards
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