

# BABEL TO PENTECOST

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The people of Israel were taken into exile in Babylon – modern day Iraq. And there they saw great ‘Ziggurats’, huge towers built of brick reaching up into the sky. And they asked what happened to those who built the towers? And they told them the story of Babel. Originally human beings spoke one language. But in their pride they built a tower that reached to heaven. And God judged them and brought the tower down, and now we have a world divided into different nationalities, speaking different languages and everyone in conflict with everyone else. And that’s the story we have in Genesis 11.

People sometimes try to dismiss these old Genesis stories saying they are old folk stories – of course they are. But my goodness what a punch they pack! Why is the world so full of violence – because human pride, human arrogance, rulers drunk with power have shattered our unity, divided the nations and brought chaos and confusion.

Would you argue with that? Look at the last century. The First World War and nations drunk with pride. Hitler and his Reich that would last 1000 years. America in Vietnam. The Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The ghastly chaos caused by the invasion of Iraq. One dictator after another, Stalin, Mao, Saddam Hussein, Mobutu, Mugabe, Kim Il-sung. The results as ever -pride, violence, destruction, the human race divided. And when their time passes they still they leave their pathetic moments behind, the Nuremburg stadium, the triumphal arches, the statues. Just like the Ziggurats in Babylon.

The story of Babel speaks of a divided human race and a world full of confusion and violence. And were it to stand alone in the Bible, we could do more than sadly accept it. But there are no loose ends in the Bible. God is about the redemption of the world. So there is another story to put alongside Babel and that is Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost people from across the world gather in one place, are filled with the Spirit, and rediscover a universal language.

We read "At this sound a crowd of them gathered, and ... in astonishment exclaimed "Surely these people who are speaking are all Galileans! How is it that each of us can hear them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia ... visitors from Rome .. Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

What indeed? It means that the curse of Babel has been abolished. That because Christ has died and rose for all there is now a unity which binds us together. It means:

"In Christ there is no east nor west  
In him no South or North  
But one great brotherhood of love  
Across the whole wide earth".

It means "There is no such thing as Greek or Jew, slave and freeman, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". Pentecost is the promise that human beings can come together. Into a divided violent world comes a uniting spirit and a common language of love and praise.

Now this has been lived out very imperfectly I know. In Ireland, in former Yugoslavia and other places Christians have sometimes disgraced themselves by the way they live. But despite everything you can see the evidence of how Christ unites.

Firstly, to be Christian is to be part of a world-wide fellowship of churches. Today we tend to be patronising towards the missionaries who took the gospel around the world. We say they took their western culture and often went hand in hand with empire. Of course that is true. In India I went once to the oldest church in Delhi, St James, built by Colonel James Skinner, the founder of Skinners horse. What hymnbook were they using? The English hymnal. The sounds of Vaughan Williams still echoing by the Kashmir gate.

Of course British missionaries took British culture. But I think we criticize too easily. When you visit the churches they founded my experience is they not seem in doubt as to the value of what they did. I went for example to Taiwan to visit the Presbyterian Church there. Taiwan was never a British colony. There they showed me the statue of James Maxwell who formed the first Presbyterian Church there in 1865.

When I went to Ghana we went to Cape Coast where the first five Methodist missionaries landed on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1835. They are still there buried under the pulpit in the cathedral. Six of the sixteen who followed them in the next eight years also died. They showed us the graves, talked with pride.

Or in the Oasis café have you seen the pictures of ships on the walls? They are all named after John Williams who went to the South Seas with the London Missionary Society. He was marooned on the island of Rarotonga. With local materials and help he built a vessel 60 feet long and sailed on. Much of his work was done in Samoa. In 1839 he was killed by cannibals in the New Hebrides and converts from Samoa came and took what was left back for burial. When the LMS built ships to continue the work they named them after him.

Their heritage is that today the Christian Church is a world-wide fellowship. In this congregation we are part of by the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the world Council of Churches, the Council for World Mission, and the Methodist Missionary Society. We are twinned with Wesley Cathedral in Ghana. Across the world we share in Christ a common language– the language of prayer and praise. The old hymn is literally correct.

As o'er each continent and island  
The dawn leads on another day  
The voice of prayer is never silent  
Nor dies the sound of praise away.

But then secondly it's not merely world-wide it's also local. Here in this congregation we now have something over 20 nationalities. On Sunday afternoon we have a service

in Korean led by Rev Shin. Let me be frank. I'm English. It's true my ancestors were French but that was a very long time ago and I prefer to forget it. I might have been "A Roossian, a French or Turk, Or Prossian. Or perhaps Italian" but I am very English. I am happy to be a member of the country that gave cricket to the world.

So it's been a learning experience for me. One of my first memories of being here was going to a post-baptism party at Clement and Angela Collison's. For most of the time Margaret and I were the only white people there. And I thought now I know how black people sometimes feel in white churches!

I think I've learnt two since I've been here. Firstly the differences between us are real. Our cultures are different. Our histories are different. Being a Korean is different from being English; being Chinese is not like being Ghanaian, being Nigerian is not like being Zimbabwean. Americans may speak English but they certainly aren't. I should have known this. Being English after all is different from being Scots or Welsh or Irish. Gordon Brown is certainly not an Englishman, he has dour son of the Scottish Kirk written all across him. Part of what makes us who we are is our culture, our history. We are different and we should take pride in our differences.

But then secondly the Spirit unites. 20 nationalities we may be. But we are one. The other week there were two Bible readers. One's family originated in Ghana, the other was in origin a white South African. And I thought – that's it. That's what the gospel does. You may have noticed when we elected our Deacons 2 of them were African in origin – Sheila from Ghana, Angela from Benin in Nigeria, only one from England – June Vincent.

There is no doubt there is still racial prejudice in this country. On the train going up to London this week the ticket collector was West African. When he asked someone for their ticket the man abused him and told him that people him would be thrown out of the country. Not long ago a member of this congregation was told at a bus stop they were "A bloody foreign cow". By contrast in this congregation "all are welcome in this place".

The Gospel is that in Christ we are one. The Gospel is that God has made of one blood all peoples. The Gospel is that God loves and values every soul and therefore we must do the same. Yes "In Christ there is no east nor west, in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth".

From Babel to Pentecost is a very long journey, about 900 pages in my Bible. Yet it can be accomplished in the twinkling of an eye. When the spirit comes we are one. The gap has been closed for ever by Christ. One Lord, One Faith, one baptism, grace enough for all.

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