

The Feast of Pentecost (Year C)

Genesis 11:1-9 & Acts 2:1-21

The power of language

Once upon a time, before history started, the whole earth had only one language. But human beings got above themselves and decided to become famous by building a great tower – so high that it could reach the heavens. But God took one look and said, ‘One people, one language; why, this is only a first step. No telling what they’ll come up with next — they’ll stop at nothing! Come, we’ll go down and garble their speech, so they won’t understand each other.’ Then God scattered them from there all over the world, and they had to quit building the city. That’s how it came to be called Babel, because it was there God turned their language into ‘babble’ (which is what ‘Babel’ means).

That old story is a way of talking about how the human race came to be how it is now – scattered across the earth with different languages – and why people are hostile to each other and don’t understand each other. We know how it is – people talking past each other – unwilling to listen and understand one another.

Language is a very powerful thing. It’s at the heart of a people’s identity. As Māori testify, the re-emergence of te reo is a vital element in the renaissance of their cultural identity. Language binds and unifies. In first Century Jerusalem, something else happened with language. It was as if the curse of Babel was reversed, and people were united as together they understood what God was doing.

When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly... all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability... and the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Here’s Peter, and all the others, suddenly spouting off different languages. The disciples aren’t scared or self-conscious – they’re confident and passionate. They’re telling the crowd how God is calling everyone to a new life – a life full of the Spirit of God. It’s a picture of how the Spirit makes it possible for people to hear the good news in their own language.

Two things to ponder. First, the disciples had been gathered together in a house when God poured out the Spirit upon them. It was a wonderful experience. What do they do next? They don’t stay inside. They go out and share the good news with others. God doesn’t bless us so that we can keep the blessing for ourselves. It’s given to us to share. The love and grace we receive in this house of God isn’t for us to keep to ourselves, but to share.

Second, the people gathered for the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem were Jews and they would’ve probably been able to understand Greek or Aramaic – or at least enough to get by on. So, Peter and his friends could’ve used these common languages. But instead, they used the people’s first languages. The Spirit came and made it easy for them to understand and respond. God doesn’t require that people first learn to speak a special religious language before they can hear about the life and love offered. They hear about it in their first language.

That was Pentecost 1 AD in Jerusalem. What about Pentecost 2025 in Napier? You may have noticed that we’re rather short of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and Mesopotamians. Even so, we’re called to be a community of faith that’s open to all. Our task is to leave this house and communicate with others in their own language – to make it easy for people to understand and respond to God.

What languages do you struggle to understand? Perhaps it's those of another generation. Or maybe technical languages. When I hear a computer techie speaking, I feel as if we're on a different planets. Then there may be those from another culture or even another part of town – people whose values, social and cultural background is different from our own. And let's not forget, that for those who haven't grown up in the life of the church, we who have, are the ones who are often speaking the foreign language. Words and imagery used, for example in hymns and liturgies, are alien to the vast majority of the population (50% of whom identify as 'non-religious'). So, we're faced with a challenge – to learn how to communicate in people's first language.

Are we willing to let God's Spirit translate *us* into other languages, so that we can bring God's presence to others? Very often we start this sharing of the good news not by words, but by the nature of our relationships – relationships of acceptance and inclusion. As it's been said, share the good news, and when necessary, use words. I wonder... what might that mean for you?

When we're willing to do this, we're letting Pentecost happen in Napier today. Our faith is personal, because it's rooted in a unique relationship with God, but personal doesn't mean private. It's to be shared, lived out, and yes, even talked about. That may be a new thing for some of us. God doesn't seem to fit into a conversation as well as the weather, or how the Black Caps are performing. But just this week, a parishioner illustrated for me how they did this in a very simple way. They never talked about being lucky, but about being blessed by God. It may be, that if we mention God, we may be afraid that it will all come out funny – or that the other person might think we're odd. But like learning any language, we need to be prepared to practise and allow our faith to be part of our conversation, and over time it becomes easier. Practise with one another – try it today over morning tea. Share with another person what spoke to you this morning. Then you might branch out with family members or a friend. The first person to openly talk about their faith with me was my grandmother. She died over 60 years ago, yet some of those conversations remain with me. Some of the most stimulating chats I've had about faith and spirituality have been at the hairdresser's, at the gym, or while I've been sitting in the fish 'n chip shop.

At the first Pentecost, God was at work, filling the disciples with the Spirit. Then they went outside and began to speak in different languages, sharing what God was doing. They were filled with a new confidence and power. It wasn't a one-off event. The Spirit of Jesus was given to us at our baptism so that we might tell God's transforming love and glory. I wonder what might happen if we took the plunge and allowed the Spirit to speak through us.

Living God,
eternal Holy Spirit,
let your bright intoxicating energy
which fired those first disciples
fall on us
to turn the world again.

*Alister Hendery
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