

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Pentecost (Year C) 5th June 2022

The story of the first Pentecost Day, which we read this morning, inevitably reminds us of the story of the tower of Babel. There are similarities, but also differences, and these tell us a great deal.

The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 9.1-11) looks to a time when all people speak the same language. They decide to build a tower that will be so tall it takes them up to the heavens, in order to 'make a name for ourselves'. Well, they certainly managed that! God sees what they are doing, destroys the tower, and confuses the people by making them all speak different languages. This particular vanity project will not now be possible – how could it be if they all speak different languages and no longer understand each other? It is a story about the destructive and divisive power of pride and vanity.

The story from today's first reading also includes a crowd of people who are all speaking different languages, but there is a radical difference. The Babel crowd are all jabbering different things in different tongues, and the result is that no-one understands anything and no-one achieves anything. The Pentecost story is about a group of people speaking, unexpectedly, different languages which the crowds, to their astonishment, find they can understand. Babel is about unexpected confusion, Pentecost is about unexpected clarity and communication. The difference is that at Pentecost the languages may be different, but the message is, in every case, the same. They are saying the same thing, they are all telling the story of the marvels of God. It is a familiar story: pride, vanity and seeking to 'make a name for yourself' divide and confuse; faith and trust in God clarify and unite.

When we pray in the psalm today that the face of the earth might be renewed, we are asking for a new Pentecost. We are asking that all the different voices clamouring and shouting and seeking attention might be silenced so that a single message can be proclaimed – albeit in every tongue and for every nation. The marvels worked by the God of love are not just for Jerusalem, they are for every race and every nation. The Church is born today, and it is for all people. But while the languages spoken are many, the message spoken is always the same. It is the tale of the marvellous things that God has done, is doing, and will do until the end of time. The Holy Spirit is poured out in a joyful flood on the first gathering of the Church. It is poured out to console, to delight and to refresh; to comfort, cool and bring solace; to heal, renew and cleanse; to bend, to melt and to guide. The Spirit is sent on that first gathering of the Church, and on every gathering of the Church since, small or large, to enrich the lives of its members. But this is not done simply so that they feel happy and content – it is so that they have the power and the knowledge and the understanding they need to spread the good news of the marvels of God. The Church exists in order to speak out loudly and clearly telling all the world about the marvels of God. The Spirit's gifts are not given for the private benefit of the recipient, but to equip and enable him or her to speak and act for the benefit of all the world.

If we wanted an example of this, albeit a unique one, we need look no further than the Rite for the Coronation of Her Majesty The Queen, which has been so much on our minds this weekend.

After the Archbishop had anointed her with oil on the hands, the breast, and the crown of her head he called down upon her the blessing of the Holy Spirit so that:

*'by the assistance of his heavenly grace
you may govern and preserve
the Peoples committed to your charge
in wealth, peace, and godliness'.*

The Holy Spirit was given to her that day not for her own comfort, or her own amusement, least of all for her own self-aggrandisement or self-promotion. It was given to her so that she may serve her people better. Her people needed her to receive those gifts and to use them in their service. She has more than amply achieved that. The Spirit is given to priests to make them better servants of the people of God, not to make them more important or more powerful and certainly not more comfortable. The Spirit is given to the Church on this its birthday so that the world might hear the Good News more clearly; and hearing it more clearly may believe it more truly; and believing it more truly may act on it more surely; and acting on it more surely may build up the Kingdom of truth and grace, of justice, love and peace.

St Paul writes to the Corinthians that there are various gifts, but only one Spirit; and that there are all sorts of service, but always the same Lord. From the very start the Gift of the Spirit has been received entirely for service, nothing else. The world needs the gifts of the Spirit, but above all it needs those of us who recognise them, treasure them and seek them to receive them gratefully and use them wisely. The wise use of gifts in the service of the people; that is the theme of this Pentecost weekend; strangely (or perhaps not so strangely after all) it is also the theme of the jubilee weekend.