

“THE GREAT REVERSAL”
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2

There were a couple of brothers at the church in which I was brought up – the sons of a previous pastor of the church and good friends of my parents. Their names were David and John Bendor-Samuel and they were both directors in the mission agency *Wycliffe Bible Translators* – both of them very gifted linguists. What I read about their work in the prayer letters they sent to my parents and what I heard from them when they came to visit or to preach contributed to an interest that I have always had, something that is really a love of my life – languages. I love looking at, listening to, playing with, using words. The education that I was very privileged to have included the classics – Latin and Greek – which are both great aids to looking at language, especially European ones.

And so one of the things I used to enjoy doing when I lived in London – and which is becoming increasingly possible here in Lichfield – is listening to the conversations of people around and trying to work out what language they are speaking. When I very first came to this area, I remember stopping off at a newsagents in Burntwood to buy a newspaper and being unable to work out what the people in the shop were saying. It turned out to be just the local accent! But with more and more people living here who come from other nations, I have fun trying to work out whether they’re Polish or Romanian or Portuguese or whatever. Language is fundamental to our humanity. The ability to hold a conversation, to say things that are not dictated by our need for food, drink or reproduction, is something that no other animal has. It is part of our being.

But I know I’m not the only person with such interests in the congregation here. I wonder if any of you can identify this language. [Shown on screen. *“Kaj kiam venis la Pentekosta tago, ili cxiuj estis unuanime en unu loko. Kaj subite venis el la cxielo sono kvazaux blovego de forta vento, kaj gxi plenigis la tutan domon, kie ili sidis. Kaj al ili aperis disirantaj langoj kvazaux el fajro, kaj sidigxis sur cxiun el ili. Kaj cxiuj plenigxis de la Sankta Spirito, kaj komencis paroli aliajn lingvojn, kiel la Spirito donis al ili parolpovon”. (La Agoj de la Apostoloj 2:1-4)] It’s the first few verses of our second reading this morning and they’re in Esperanto. (Believe it or not, I actually have a copy of the New Testament in Esperanto!)*

Esperanto is a made-up language. It was conceived around 1880 by a Pole, Ludovic Zamenhof, with the idea of creating a universal language. It was intended to be easy to learn, straightforward to speak and understood by people of all nations, the idea being that it should lead to better relations between peoples and, therefore, a more peaceable world. Although it’s reckoned that there are between one and two million speakers of Esperanto around the world today, it hasn’t really caught on, has it?

But it’s not the first universal language. We’ve read this morning from *Genesis 11* – the story of an early civilisation and their attempts to work together using a common language. *Genesis 11:1* tells us that these nomadic people had “*one language and a common speech*”. (Just a quick aside to those of you who have glanced back at chapter 10 and noticed that there’s stuff there about “*clans and languages*” in vv5,20,31. Some of these early chapters of *Genesis* are not in chronological order.) We’re going to have

a look at this story this morning and see what happened to these people, at the problems they encountered and the ways in which that's reflected in the human condition with which we all struggle. Then we're going to look at the story of Pentecost in *Acts 2* and see how that mirrors this story in many ways and points to a solution to those problems. It's really all about "The Great Reversal", the way in which God, in his infinite grace and compassion, reverses the effects, the consequences of human pride and sin. The first reading is about language and sin, the second about language and salvation. Stick with me and I'll try to explain.

1. STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

I'm not intending to go into the history of all this in any detail this morning. Suffice it to say that when the writer talks here about "*the whole world*", he is referring to the survivors of the flood and their descendants. They all shared a common language and therefore had no difficulty at all communicating with each other. (Another quick aside, if you'll forgive me. Linguists are pretty sure that most Indo-European languages all have a common root and that common root was spoken by a people who lived thousands of years ago in the area of Asia referred to here. In other words, this story would seem to confirm some of the theories about the origins of languages in Asia, Europe and North Africa.) We read here that they "*moved eastward*", which, when you stop and think about it, is a pretty ominous sign in the Bible – particularly in *Genesis*. Adam and Eve were sent out of Eden to the east. Cain went off and lived east of Eden when he'd murdered his brother. When Abram and Lot split up, Lot chose to go off east towards Sodom and Gomorrah. The threats to Israel and Judah always came from the east. Babylon was to the east. Isaiah writes in *Isaiah 2:6* about "*superstitions from the east*". Going east is a convention a bit like those big red buttons you see in old films that say "Do Not Touch" on them – you just know they mean trouble.

And trouble certainly comes to these people as they go off to the east. They firstly discover a new technology – they can make bricks and stick them together with bitumen. It means buildings that are a bit more robust than the tents they've been used to, so they start to build a city. And whenever you have a city, you need a big, impressive building somewhere in the middle of it, so they decide to build a tower. It's not just any tower, though, this is to be a stairway to heaven (v4). They want this to be something special that will bring them glory and something that will give them a sense of unity. They want to get up to heaven, to God.

You may remember from school, if you did any kind of ancient history, the pictures of ziggurats, those great stepped pyramids which dominated the towns of early communities in the Middle East. This was going to be something really big, something that would be a focus of their shared existence, something that would prove that they could make it big (in every sense of that phrase). The tower was to be called "Babel", which meant in their language (Akkadian) "Gateway to God". These people were going to reach up to God, to make themselves seem as great as him.

And even as they toil to build this pre-historic skyscraper, this edifice that is to be so huge, so great, so impressive, God comes down to look at it. That's a real touch of humour there from the writer: this

building, the greatest that had ever been built, is actually so small that God has to come down to see it. God leaves heaven and stoops to see this puny example of humanity's overreaching itself. Far from reaching up to heaven, it's so small that it can't even be seen from heaven.

And God decides to respond to their pride and hubris by ensuring that such a project will never be repeated. The method he uses is not to smite them or to punish them in any kind of physical way. He simply mixes up their languages. He confuses what they have to say to each other. They start talking but cannot understand what each other is saying. And from then on humanity becomes divided, disunited, and distinctions and suspicions start to creep into relations between people and between peoples. All the certainties are gone – the security they shared when they all knew and understood each other. Ever since that point, language has become a marker – be it in terms of actual vocabulary and grammar, or in terms of dialect, or in terms of accent (the problem I had in the Burntwood newsagents). There's a great little story in *Judges 12* where the Gileadites manage to identify their enemies the Ephraimites by asking them to say "*Shibboleth*". Anyone who says "*Sibboleth*" is identified as the enemy and killed. Peter is identified by his accent as he follows Jesus into the High Priest's courtyard. If you want to have fun with a French person, get them to say "*Crisps*" – they can't do it!

Anyway, all the people who speak one language have to get together as they can understand each other, and they go off in a different direction from those who speak another language which they can't understand and in the end they are "*scattered over the face of the whole earth*" (v9), quite the opposite of what they intended in the beginning (v4). And the place called "Babel" actually becomes the place of confusion, the Hebrew word for which is "Balal". It is, appropriately, a play on words – "Babel? More like Balal if you ask me!" Their pride in trying to get to heaven under their own steam has disastrous consequences.

2. DAZED AND CONFUSED

And, as so often in the stories we read in the Bible, this episode serves as a kind of metaphor for our own experience. From this big picture of humanity's communication breakdown, we focus in on our personal situation. We all have, somewhere in our being, the desire to get to heaven, to be in control of our own destiny. That's our main aspiration. And we try to build our own towers, our own edifices to achieve that.

All of us are working hard to improve ourselves and many of us believe that, if we just work hard enough and behave well enough, we'll get there in the end, our aspirations will be fulfilled and we'll make it to heaven – or whatever we expect to be there in its place. Many of us want to start experiencing that here and now, but all of us want to believe that after this life is over there will be something worth waiting for.

And then, as we make our way through life, we discover that it doesn't quite work like that. It all gets a bit confused. We have to make decisions which are difficult – and even the easy ones often turn out to have consequences we weren't expecting. Life doesn't go as we'd like it to. It is as frustrating as trying to build the world's largest tower with a bunch of blokes who are all speaking different languages: *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, with knobs on.

But it's not just frustrating – it can also be painful, depressing, a debilitating struggle. It isn't merely a question of finding things difficult, being unable to reach the goal we've set for ourselves – it ends up leaving us deeply dissatisfied and feeling totally unfulfilled. Everything is incoherent and fragmented, and that spills over into our relationships with others and our sense of connectedness with the world around. We lose our integrity, our sense of unity with the world, with each other – even with ourselves. Of course, that's not the way God really intended it to be: we were created to lead lives of fulfilment and satisfaction, lives that were at one with the universe and with God himself. That's what we are really hankering after, but the effect of sin within and upon our lives has ruined that and we are left trying to get back to it under our own steam, with our own effort, trying to create our own “Gateway to Heaven”, continuing that desperate struggle of all humanity to get back to God and make our own way into his presence. And, just like those construction workers in the Plain of Shinar trying to build their way back to heaven, we fail miserably. Just as *Babel* turned to *Babal*, so for us aspiration has turned to desperation.

3. STAIRWAY FROM HEAVEN

As we've just said, that's not the way God wanted it. His plan for the world – and for humanity within it – was that we should be connected with one another and connected with him. He wants the people he has made to share eternity with him, but they're never going to do it by building towers. So, having come down to see the puny nature of our own efforts to get to him, he comes down again. And for that we have to turn to the New Testament.

God comes down to earth again in the person of Jesus Christ. To respond to the men who wanted to become gods as they built their tower from the bricks of the Middle East, God becomes man and appears on earth amongst the cities and towns of the Middle East. And, interestingly, people come *from* the East to see him. The trouble started when the nomads of the world moved east. The solution begins to become apparent as the Magi travel west. Here is Jesus, God in human form, come down from heaven to make a difference, to restore the relationship between God and his creation through his death and resurrection.

And Jesus lives on in this world through his Holy Spirit, who so dramatically came into the world at Pentecost. I'd often thought about ways in which Pentecost mirrored the story of the Tower of Babel, but it wasn't until I started reading these two stories in preparation for today that I noticed just how powerful the parallels are – or rather, the opposites. Pentecost is The Great Reversal of that bizarre episode from *Genesis 11*. We've already mentioned the movement of people to and from the East. But look at some of the other contrasts. In the story of Babel, humanity tries to climb up to God. At Pentecost, through his Holy Spirit, God comes down to us. In *Genesis* God scatters the people all over the earth (*11:8*), but at Pentecost Luke tells us that in Jerusalem people had come together “*from every nation under heaven*” (*2:5*). Even given that Luke's geographical knowledge was severely limited, that's a remarkable claim. The men of Babel are confused and frustrated in their plans because they cannot understand due to the multiplicity of languages. The festival-goers in Jerusalem for Pentecost are confused – “*amazed and perplexed*” Luke says in *2:12* – precisely because they **can** understand what is being said through the various languages being spoken. The Holy Spirit has given the followers of Jesus this gift, this ability to

speak in other languages, not as a punishment or sanction, not to confuse people, but so that everyone can understand this amazing message of hope and salvation, so that there is the possibility of uniting men and women through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So Peter has to get up and explain to them all what is going on. What they are witnessing is a sign of God's re-creation. Through the Holy Spirit, through what Jesus has done on the cross of Golgotha, God is reversing the destructive effect of humanity's sin and pride. No longer will there be the frustration and confusion as humanity tries to reach up to God. He has reached down to us and offered us a way of overcoming that deep-seated frustration and desperation at the very heart of the human condition. He can overcome the power and the effects of sin!

4. WHOLE LOTTA LOVE

Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost comes to a climax as he responds to the desperate question of his listeners, "*What shall we do?*" (2:37). "*Repent and be baptised,*" he tells them – give up your old way of life and demonstrate your commitment to Jesus Christ. If you do that, then God has promised that you can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, you can know this renewed relationship with God, a fulfilled life now and the certainty of an eternity in his presence.

Suddenly there's a way to move out of our confused state and to begin to make sense of things. Suddenly there's the possibility of re-creating, re-forming lives that are fragmented and incoherent. Suddenly we can begin to see and to experience and to enjoy life as God intended. It's an offer that is available to everyone, a promise that God made, according to Peter, "*for you and your children and all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.*" Is he calling you this morning? Do you begin to see that there is hope, there is the promise of a brighter future that will stretch on into eternity?

What this means is that we can be raised up to heaven by God, not by dint of our own efforts, our own pride. The idea that we can fulfil our destiny, that we can "*make a name for ourselves*" (11:4) by building our own towers, making our own roads to God has been discredited in every possible way during the thousands of years since those first people tried to build their tower to heaven. Every single attempt to do that, to unify and subdue our world – be it through philosophy, through science, through politics, through military might, through economic muscle, through just being nice to each other – has failed miserably and definitively. Every single attempt to redeem our own lives – be it through self-sacrifice, through psychology, through hedonism, through asceticism, through education, through religion – has failed miserably and definitively. And that frustrating, fruitless attempt to reach God will go on and on until we acknowledge our own inability and accept God's help.

This morning, Pentecost Sunday, welcome the Holy Spirit as he comes to you – not you to him – as you receive the promised gift of God the Creator and Redeemer. Recognise that God reverses the effects and consequences of human sin and pride – of your sin and pride – and take what he offers. Pray that he will touch your life this morning and that you might begin to enjoy life in a world which makes sense and which can be infinitely and ultimately fulfilling.

Discussion notes on next page

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The people decide to build a tower – a stairway to heaven (v4). They want this to be something special that will bring them glory and something that will give them a sense of unity. They want to get up to heaven, to God, to make themselves seem as great as him. God decides to respond to their pride and hubris by ensuring that such a project will never be repeated. He mixes up their languages. From then on humanity becomes divided, disunited, and distinctions and suspicions start to creep into relations between people and between peoples. *Babel* becomes *Babal*.

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Questions for discussion

1. Have you ever tried to learn another language? How did you get on?
2. In what ways can the ideas behind the Tower of Babel project be seen in our world today?
3. What kinds of "towers" do we try to build in our own lives? Why can that lead to so much frustration?
4. In what ways does the coming of Jesus begin to reverse the effects of sin and selfishness?
5. This was "*a sign of God's re-creation*". Re-creating what?
6. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in all this?