

Pentecost

Have you ever heard about the Tower of Babel? If not, it was a giant tower reaching right up into the heavens because man presumed he could be equal with God. You can read all about it Genesis, chapter 11. Giant tower I hear you say? What is Fr John babbling on about this morning? What on earth does this have to do with Pentecost? Well, if you will just bear with me, quite a lot really.

We all familiar with the word babble - which I used deliberately - meaning to talk foolishly and excessively, but we might not know that the English word derives from the Biblical episode known as the Tower of Babel. The Genesis account starts: "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words." It goes on to describe the Lord's displeasure at the presumption of man trying to put himself on an equal footing with God, and describes his punishment. Genesis continues: "And the Lord said: Come let us go down, and confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth." And as we shall see in a moment it was the breaking down of lack of understanding between different peoples and races which was a key feature of the Pentecost story.

As I look out on a veritable sea of red I can say "Happy Birthday", for today is the Birthday of the Church, not Easter as some people might think, or even Christmas. Today is the day in which we celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the first disciples of Jesus, tongues of fire as they have been described, symbolised for us today by the red vestments and drapery - and my red socks. From that day the church, led by those first apostles, and empowered by those symbolic tongues of fire, began to reach out around the world; those Apostles went from being timid and afraid in their testimony to Christ to being bold and courageous in their witness; they went from being inward looking to being outward looking, from seeking to save themselves, to being ones who had a passion for showing others where healing is to be found.

Something unique happened on that day of Pentecost, for the Spirit overcame the confusion that had been upon the face of the earth since the days when the Tower of Babel had been destroyed. But on the day of Pentecost God removed that confusion between people of different tongues by making it possible for the disciples to communicate with every person - regardless of differences of race, colour, or language, in their own language - bringing order out of chaos, understanding out of confusion, unity out of diversity.

One of the manifestations of the outpouring of the Spirit was the gift of speaking in tongues, and several years ago I was privileged to witness speaking in tongues for the first time. It wasn't a huge event as described in Acts; in fact, it was a rather quiet event. The person speaking was a fellow priest. We were praying together at a simple service of Holy Communion in the chapel at the San hospital for a dying parishioner, and all of a sudden that other priest was speaking in words I didn't recognise. The words were very beautiful and I felt no fear just wonder. I have to admit I stopped praying myself, because I was listening to the words he was praying so quietly. I also have to admit I didn't understand them, but the sound of the words,

the way each syllable was pronounced was beautiful- it was like music. I knew these words spoken on behalf of that dying man were wondrous words of prayer.

The event I just described is one way that speaking in tongues occurs, but I had another exposure to it which wasn't so edifying. I was asked to chair an ecumenical meeting of some charismatic Christians in Ballarat on one occasion, and during the meeting was asked to lead the group in prayer by speaking in tongues. I apologised saying that was not a gift that I had, whereupon the leader of the group solemnly pronounced to all, much to my embarrassment, that if I could not speak in tongues, then I was not a Christian.

Fortunately the great St. Paul came to my rescue and I was able to quote his well known words from 1 Corinthians: "Now there are a variety of gifts, but only the one spirit; there are a variety of services and activities. To one is given the spirit of wisdom, to another the utterance of knowledge; to another gifts of healing; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another the discernment of spirits; to another various kinds of speaking in tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who gives to each one individually, as the Spirit chooses." Nevertheless I don't think my accuser was impressed.

On the other hand in this world there are many who doubt the gift of speaking in tongues altogether, and understandably so. Every day there are people on television, particularly in America, who profess to pray in tongues or speak in tongues. Tele-evangelists they're called, and they stand and pray out loud and claim they are praying in tongues to God, and can teach you how to do the same. All you have to do is send them - yes, you guessed it - all you have to do is send them money, and they can teach you this gift. No money, no gift. In other words, the gifts of God are not free, but are available at a price on Ebay.

But please do not let these charlatans cloud the importance of this gift, please do not let peoples' greed cause us to misunderstand the importance of today and how this gift was used on this particular day nearly 2000 years ago.

On this birthday of the church there were, of course, no pews, no cathedral spires, no organs and prayer books, no gold or silver chalices or collection plates. There was only a group of timid, nervous disciples gathered in one place waiting for the presence of the one Jesus promised, from whom they would receive power from God. On this day these disciples received that power, power to go and tell people about God.

What an incredible day that must have been? Here are the disciples. They don't know what to expect. They can't know what to expect. Suddenly, they realise there is a presence with them - there is a sound of rushing wind, something like fire appeared among them and rested on each of them. The Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to speak.

The room couldn't contain them, and they burst out of it into the crowds in the streets of Jerusalem, teeming with people who had arrived from all over for the Jewish festival of Pentecost celebrating the giving of the Law at Sinai, now to become the

giving of the Spirit to the first Apostles. They burst out among them and the story of God's redemptive work and great deeds through Jesus the long awaited Messiah came bubbling out. For each of the disciples speaking, someone was present who could understand them. The people on the streets could understand the words spoken. They heard about the love, the wonder, and the power of God, each in their own language.

This is the day, therefore, when God tells us that the news of Jesus of Nazareth is for everyone to hear. God is not just the God of one group of people; he is the God of all creation. The love of God is not to be spoken of just in quiet rooms by a cloistered group of believers, but shared openly with everyone. All races, all conditions of humanity are to hear the Gospel, all people are invited to hear the story, all people are welcome to share in the incredible love of God. Pentecost is a powerful day; it is the day when the church understands its purpose, that is, to share the Gospel story.

So, now we see another purpose for speaking in tongues. On this day, the disciples were given the gift so as they could share the story with all of the different people gathered. It was given not to lift the disciples up in the eyes of the hearers, but to share the story of God with the hearers. God had a purpose and that purpose was to build the body of Christ, and it was the Apostles who were entrusted and empowered to set that purpose in train.

What about today? Why doesn't the Holy Spirit come among us here and empower us to go out of these doors and tell people about the Gospel? Why don't we exhibit this ability to speak to others so they can understand?

But we have received the power of the Holy Spirit. We have been empowered to share the story of Jesus and the love of God since the day we were baptised. We have been given the abilities we need to share the Gospel. We might not speak in tongues. We might not have other gifts like prophecy or wisdom. Yet, each of us has been given gifts through the power of the Holy Spirit. Those gifts have been given to each one of us to build up the body of Christ. We do not need to burst from this building today speaking in fifty different dialects. What purpose would that serve here in Gordon - we'd probably get put away for our troubles?

Nevertheless we are called to go out of this building and share the Gospel with the gifts we have. We are called to share the love of God to the people of this community at this time. Now, I know we might be fearful. We have all grown up in a society that has taught us there are three things we are never to discuss in public, politics, sex and religion. Well, I don't agree with that saying. I learned it as a child but if we are going to call ourselves Christians; if we are going to say we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, then we cannot simply come to church on Sunday and warm the pews. We have received a call and some gifts from God, a call to go out into our community and share the story of Jesus of Nazareth with the gifts we have been given, therefore each of us has to ask ourselves what particular gifts have I been given that I can use.

Today, this day, this incredibly wonderful day, we are reminded of that call. We are reminded that we are the disciples of today. We are reminded that we are the ones

empowered by the Spirit of the living God. We are reminded that God through the power of the Spirit will be with us. We are not alone, and never have been. God is here - through the presence of the Holy Spirit God is here in this church of St. John's today. Let us find our way of making his presence known to those outside these walls.