

Team Eucharist Pentecost 2012



Dear Friends,

It was great to worship together at Pentecost. It really was an inspiring experience with the church packed. Dean Jeffrey John's sermon had just the right blend of humour and depth, the choirs sang together and made a wonderful sound and the children made an amazing banner as well as individual streamers, and each Church took a special Pentecost candle to remind us of our unity.



Thank you all for making it such a wonderful and Spirit filled celebration and staying to chat and build up friendships over a glass of wine, or juice, and cakes. We look forward to worshipping together again and the clergy Team are already looking at this for All Saints Sunday 2013 with the Bishop of Hertford!

I am delighted to say that a total of £416 was raised from the collection and this will go to the Street Pastors.

Love
Jo

Sermon preached by Dr John

Speaking foreign languages is a dangerous thing. You can make terrible mistakes. Shortly after the 2nd World War, Winston Churchill was invited to address the French Senate in Paris, and he was rash enough to deliver his speech in French. In his opening sentence, he meant to say, "Gentlemen, when I consider my past, I see it is divided into two parts". Unfortunately he used the wrong word for 'past'. Instead of saying 'Quand je considère mon PASSE' he said 'quand je considère ma DERRIERE, 'When I consider my BEHIND, I see it is divided into two parts'.

It brought the house down, but not in the intended way!

According to the Book of Genesis the fact that there are so many different languages was a punishment from God on human pride. The story of the Tower of Babel was written during the Jewish exile in Babylon. It was probably inspired by the Ziggurat, the huge Babylonian temple in the middle of the city. According to the legend, all humanity was originally united and spoke one language, but when they became so arrogant as to try to build a tower to reach heaven, God divided them and made them unable to understand one another, so that all their different languages just sounded like a babble.



Of course the story is a legend, written by the exiled Jews as a way of mocking their Babylonian overlords. But it does preserve an important truth.

Which is, that although having different languages is certainly part of the communication problem between humans,

there is an even more fundamental problem - the human pride, arrogance and ego that lock us up in ourselves and divide us from one another.

We know this is true from experience. If we don't like someone and can't get on with them, we often say "we don't speak the same language" - even though in fact we do. The real problem is that we don't want to understand each other. If we have a row at home, what tends to happen, when we've stopped throwing the saucepans, is that we refuse to talk. After a bit we might even forget what the row was about, but by then not communicating itself has become a matter of pride. We actually say, 'I'm not going to climb down', as if we were literally up our own little Tower of Babel.

In the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* there is a wonderful fish called the Babel fish, which you stick into your ear and you can understand every language in the universe. But the Babel fish still doesn't bring peace and harmony; in fact it makes things worse because people can understand all the nasty things other people are saying about them as well.



St Luke's story of Pentecost in Acts is the story of Babel in reverse. At the end of it everybody in the world can understand each other. I say everybody in the world because that list of all the different people - Elamites and Cappadocians and Phrygians and so on - is actually a list of all the regions of the known world at the time. What was divided at Babel, St Luke is saying, is now going to be reunited by the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit is infinitely more effective than the Babel fish. This isn't just about

language; the Spirit works on the root of the problem, in the heart - because only the Spirit can heal the pride and arrogance and ego of human beings that led to the divisions in the first place.

It's not an accident that Babel was reversed on the Feast of Pentecost. Pentecost of course was originally, and still is, a Jewish feast, the feast that celebrates the giving of the Law. In Hebrew it's called Shavuot, The Feast of Weeks, and Jews are celebrating Shavuot this weekend. Pentecost means 'fifty', and it was called the Feast of Fifty Days or the Feast of Weeks, because according to the book of Exodus it was fifty days or seven weeks after the Israelites escaped from Egypt that the Law was given to Moses on Sinai.

And you remember how the Law was given. The Old Testament says God came down on Sinai in a fire, and there was an earthquake and the mountain shook. And in some of the later Jewish versions of the story in the Talmud, it also says that when Moses received the Law he was surrounded by seventy tongues of flame, and a great voice proclaimed the Law in seventy different languages, corresponding to each of the nations of the world.



So the similarities between the Jewish tradition of Pentecost and St Luke's Pentecost story are obvious. The pattern of the new covenant is exactly the same as the old. Jesus' death and resurrection at Easter is the new, Christian Passover. And now, fifty days later, there's also a new, Christian Pentecost. Only this time it wasn't the law that was given, but the completion of the law, the presence of God on the inside of us, through the Holy Spirit sent into our hearts.

Of course, if you knew your scripture, this was only to be expected. The prophets of Israel promised that one day God would do this.

Jeremiah said:

In the days to come, says the Lord, I will make a new covenant with my people. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts ... My spirit shall be in them, and I shall be their God, and they shall be my people.

Pentecost is the day when that promise comes true; The Giving of the Law is fulfilled by the coming of the Spirit; and the old religion of rules turns into a new religion of relationship.



And it is relationship that's the point. The Spirit of God IS relationship; it's the love that binds the Father and the Son together in the Holy Trinity, and it's the same Spirit that spills over from them to us. As St Paul says, 'The Spirit sheds the love of God abroad in our hearts'. That's why the Spirit is the fulfilling of the Law. The Spirit enables us to love God, and when love God we automatically WANT to do God's will, we don't have to be nagged or blackmailed or frightened into it by a set of rules.



But as well as uniting us to God the Spirit is the only way we can be properly united with one another too. The Spirit is love, AGAPE - love, the kind of love that is the

opposite of ego. The Spirit's kind of love is what can actually make us care more about other peoples good than our own, It's what enables us to experience that there really is more joy in giving than getting, and that it is only by giving ourselves away that we find our true selves. And that's why the Spirit reverses Babel - not just by overcoming language differences and communication problems, but by healing the pride and arrogance and egotism that are at the root of all our problems and all our divisions.

The Spirit is the Love that unites the Holy Trinity, and that constantly reaches out to unite all humanity in the same eternal love. There is nothing that is more important. There is nothing that we need more. There is nothing more worth praying for.

So let's mean it when we sing:

*Come down O Love divine
seek thou this soul of mine
and visit it with thine own ardour
glowing.*

*Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire
And lighten with celestial fire.*

*Spirit of the living God,
fall afresh on me.*

