

Sermon 20/5/2018 Nick Thomas

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts do honour and glory to you, Oh God. *Amen.*

When I was a student I worked in a very small, quiet winebar that was popular with visiting foreign academics, and from my commanding standpoint among the bottles and glasses I was often privileged, indeed obliged, to overhear fascinating conversations among groups of these erudite folk, conducted in English, the only tongue they had in common, but spoken with accents from every corner of the earth. And it struck me then that this was like some bizarre inversion of Pentecost, in which I had somehow been blessed with a passive comprehension of voices from all over the world talking together in one little room. Forty years later, I get the same feeling whenever I attend a meeting of Consistory, because our little group of Elders, like this Congregation, is nothing if not international. But it is our faith in Christ that binds us together, not the accidents of history that have brought us to worship

together in English, here at the centre of the Dutch-speaking world.

And I said 'an inversion' of Pentecost, because of course we are not told that the Apostles suddenly understood all the languages native to the crowd that gathered around them, but that members of that crowd heard their own languages being spoken by the Galileans, and somewhat confusingly at that, because if you count up the languages Luke mentions in this account, you find that they outnumber the men who were speaking them.

But more puzzling still is the fact that in order to fulfil their commission from the Holy Spirit, and spread the word of Christ beyond Palestine and all across the near-eastern Roman Empire, the Apostles did not need to be multilingual. The Romans themselves had seen to that, because in the process of conquering the Greek world and absorbing Greek culture and mythology, they had also allowed a much-simplified, easy-to-use form of classical Greek to become the common language of the empire. This koine, or common Greek is the language in which the whole New Testament is written, and all those devout Jews, and others, visiting Jerusalem, all those

Parthians and Medes and Lybians and so on, undoubtedly spoke it too. So what's going on?

Well, one possible explanation lies partly in the contempt in which rural, hick Galilee and Galileans were held in Palestine. Indeed Jesus's Nazarene origin is all of a piece with his having been born in a stable, the lowliest of the low who becomes Lord of all. It makes the superscription on the Cross, INRI, standing for Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, yet more insultingly ironic. So perhaps all those Cappadocians and Pamphylians and Cretans were just amazed to hear these dumb Galileans speaking Greek, maybe in a variety of accents, instead of their local Aramaic. It's a theory.

But why stop there? The Bible is full of figurative stories that are not literally, historically true. Our other reading this morning is Ezekial's description of a vision, and the Lord himself provides the commentary that explains what it means, and I'll come back to that later on. The tragedy of the Tower of Babel, which it is often said Pentecost heals, is a story that illustrates the dangers of megalomaniac ambition. Jesus himself made up stories, the parables, to make his meaning clear, so why

shouldn't Luke employ a few dramatic strokes to get his point across? Luke is a great story-teller, and, faced with the puzzle of Pentecost, it's tempting to conclude that the mighty wind, and the flickering tongues of flame and this unheard-of outbreak of xenoglossia, of speaking in foreign tongues, are all just artistic licence to ram home the message that the Apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit as they embarked on their great evangelical mission.

Of course it's tempting. It's always tempting to explain away the supernatural, and it has been especially so over the last fifty years here in western Europe, as many Christian preachers and writers have responded to falling church attendance and the rise of secularism by teasing the mystery out of Christian faith, to make it less scary, more comfortable, less challenging, more mundane and in tune with the regular rhythms of everyday life, hoping that this will draw people back to their pews. And they wonder why it doesn't work.

I saw it happening as a student in Oxford all those years ago, I sometimes heard it from across the bar from those foreign academics and their British hosts. But of course it didn't start in my lifetime. As though to prepare us for the dreary, wearying battle against

rational scepticism in which we've been engaged ever since, it started on that day Luke describes so vividly and which we can imagine so well, within minutes of the Church's foundation, when some members of that crowd just couldn't cope with being amazed and scared and challenged, shuffled and hid behind a nervous grin, and said 'They must be drunk.'

Well, Peter certainly rises to the occasion. He begins with the argument from reason: Of course they're not drunk, it's only 9 in the morning --- though I have to say that that observation would have been considered a trifle naive in Oxford in 1980.

But then he moves on, with the argument from authority, quoting the prophet Joel, and instead of trying to play down what's just been happening he puts it in context, effectively saying 'If you think this is scary, you ain't seen nothin' yet'. Our reading ends there, but he then proceeds to preach the gospel, holding back nothing because that's not his style any more, because he'll never get over the shame of his denial of Christ, so here he is, really going for it, reminding his audience of their collective guilt and hammering them with King David. It's quite a performance, and it's a good job it was only 9 in the morning, because Peter and the Eleven must have

spent every remaining minute of that day baptising their new converts, 3000 of them, according to Luke. It was a great and extraordinary start, but that's the kind of thing that happens when the Holy Spirit suddenly intervenes with commotion and miracle in a human day. So is the story of our faith extraordinary, or not?

Instead of trying to neutralise the supernatural, let's ask a useful question. If all the Apostles needed for their mission was the common Greek they already spoke (and remember Peter must have made his great speech to all those people in that language, as it's reported by Luke, which emphasises the point), why did the Apostles start praising God in all those different tongues, to the astonishment of the crowd? Well certainly it got their attention, and demonstrated that the Holy Spirit was in their midst. But I also want to dip, again, a little into the history of the times, to give it an extra bit of context. The Romans, of course, were the one and only power all around the Mediterranean and beyond for centuries, not just because they had the best military hardware, discipline and strategy, but also because they were great administrators, and very good at settling the lands they conquered. And their approach to religion

is one illustration of this. Because they learnt, from the Greeks, a kind of religious diplomacy, which basically consisted of saying not 'Abandon your god and worship Jupiter, or else.' but saying instead 'Your god is Jupiter by another name, so all you have to do is accept that, put up a statue vaguely in the Greco-Roman style, and we'll get along just fine.' And it worked. Except with the Jews.

The Jews said 'Sorry, we don't do statues, because it's a blasphemy, and Jahweh is the one living God and we are his people, whereas Jupiter is a profane fairy tale.' - the attitude that has made Jews and, from Pentecost onwards, Christians, a thorn in the side of every tyranny and empire and ideology that has tried to whip them into line. Nonetheless, to get along under Roman rule these Jews had to speak the language of the empire, they had to subsume their own local and personal identity in that of a foreign power, while their worship was conducted in Hebrew, of which they might have had only a rudimentary or downright parroted grasp. So when they heard these Galileans praising God in their mother tongues it spoke directly to their hearts, they could sense that they were in at the start of a new relationship with God, that their individual and family

identity could be freed in faith, liberated in a kingdom that transcended the cycle of conquest and uprising and subjection that had been Jewish history for so long.

Well, that's my take, and for our mission today, preaching to people in their own language just means telling the truth the way it is, like Peter, without compromise, straight from and to the heart. But to some, and we've already touched on this, it means addressing the rise of secularism and the fall in church attendance not just by explaining away the mysterious, but by talking down and dumbing down, even in liturgy and music, and it's easy to forget how blessed we are here to have so many fine musicians among us, and to be part of a church that celebrates the beauty of worship. I have to say that my mother church, the Church of England, has been particularly culpable in ruining liturgy, whereas when the Church of Scotland undertook a rewriting exercise about thirty years ago it was informed to a refreshing extent by a sense of poetry and dignity that made it still a pleasure to read. But when it comes to music, I'm afraid all the Christian denominations are guilty to some extent, and sanction the drab and the mundane, as though in the belief that when people stop their

ears to beauty, we must win them back with ugliness. And I don't buy it.

Because we *are* talking about people stopping their ears, like those giggling wags who said the Apostles were drunk, deliberately rejecting a message they're scared to come to terms with, and we can't tell them there's nothing scary about it because that's just not true. All we can do is tell it like it is, and pray for their strength, their courage to rise and embrace the truth. There is another line from the New Testament that is vitally relevant when we look at Pentecost in the context of our own mission: 'Those who have ears to hear, let them hear', and if you're trying to place it, it occurs six times in the Gospels, three times in Matthew, once in Mark and twice in Luke's own gospel, as Jesus concludes a parable by emphasising that his meaning is clear and his grace available to anyone who opens up and believes in him.

I said I'd come back to Ezekial and his vision of the valley of dry bones, and I'm doing it now because there is a reason why it's paired so prescriptively with Acts 2 in the lectionary from which we take our readings. As the text makes clear, this is about the restoration of Israel, its land, its fortunes, its very

identity, all wiped out by the Babylonian captivity, reduced to an open and neglected mass grave, not just a tragedy, but an abomination of impiety. For us it has a different significance, for we are facing an abomination of our own, a multitude of dry skeletons whose living faith and identity in Christ have been taken from them by the cruel and callous empire of the material and the secular. Prophesying to them, getting the life back into all those folk who used to go to church as children but can't remember why, is our mission.

And if we're going to get through to these people with Christ's message, we don't talk down, they have to listen up and hear the truth, because although they might have subsumed their identity in the secular world we are all obliged to inhabit, the truth of God's love is still their native language, they can still hear and understand it as surely as they can hear and be moved by great music and stirring poetry, if they'll only give themselves the chance. Coming to this church just to hear the music might be, for them, the first step back up. But first, we have to reach out, speak up, and tell it like it is. Amen.