

Sunday 30th September 2018 - Tower of Babel - Genesis 11:1-9

In days lost in the mists of time and myth, the people of the world got above themselves, overreached themselves, and attempted to scale the heights that, we're told, were the domain of the Almighty.

Their God was angry with them; furious at their wicked ambitions, and raged against their Tower that attempted to pierce the very fabric of his heavenly dwelling.

So.... he brought them crashing to the ground and muddled and confused their language, so that they couldn't communicate with each other. Now, instead of unity, there was a Babel of voices.

This is one way of reading the Old Testament from the story in Genesis we have heard this morning.

The story of the Tower of Babel was probably first written down around 3000 years ago. But its origin goes much further back. To a time when in Mesopotamia towers were built with bricks.

It's a cleverly crafted story...it includes a pun on the AKKADIAN name BABEL from which we get the word Babylon & the Hebrew word for mix up = 'babal.'

But let me offer *another* way of reading the story in the context of the other bible stories around it.

Once upon a time God created human beings to multiply and spread out through all the earth and be responsible for its care... things got into a bit of a mess.

But one day, at a time when everyone still spoke the same language, some migrant people thought the better of this and decided to avoid being scattered all over the earth by building a unified city with a tall tower. God knew that would lead to problems, so God came down and mixed up their language so they couldn't understand each other.

They gave up building Babble-Town and that's how they spread out and diversified, bring a potential for good, for peace and for compassion.

I think it is fair to say that the ancients who heard the first version of this story, or the revised version of this story or a later edition of the revised story we have in our Old Testament will not have heard the story in the same way as us. Yet, nevertheless it is a poignant story for us today.

Today with the political see sawing that goes back and forth prior to an election and closer to home right now one of the major issues still before us is Brexit and the issues of closed/open border migrants /refugees. *Yet, when this story was written was the world that different?*

The story was written to explain the different languages and diversity of humanity.

Each religion, each culture has its own stories that offer timely truths. What is important is how each religion and culture discern what is true and what is false.

False truth is something that we seem to be flooded with in our newspapers/social media –
What to believe,what not to believe.....Much of it built upon scaremongering and fear and
false facts.

Yet one of the delights of the story of the Tower of Babel is that the different languages, different
cultures with different traditions are ways of being are seen as a gift to be embraced
and not a curse!!!

The gift is the richness of diversity of language and culture; it is a blessing because it liberates
individuals from homogeneous ways of thinking, acting, behaving.

The story of Babel reveals to us that in diversity of culture and language there is a potential
goodness. *Good for humanity, *good for the earth that we are called to care for.

And I say potential goodness because history tells us that diversity of language is no guarantee of
peace or care for creation. Each society has to create & nurture peace for themselves.

Largely, we live in communities which continue to strive to understand and embrace diversity and
difference – but it can be challenging. And it is important we work towards good, strong
relationships with our neighbours.

For me, the babble, of Babel – was a story that was recorded and retold for generations for 2 purposes – both of which are very pertinent to us today.

Firstly, the gift of this story is found in the celebration of diversity and the gifts that it offers to a healthy society that is not afraid to embrace difference.

Secondly, it was a warning shot to people – a warning shot to individuals not to become so arrogant that they set themselves up as God through a drive for personal ambition at the cost of the good of the society they lived in. Instead, they were to recall the covenant of love and justice for the good of ALL members of their society. Or if you prefer in the words of the prophet Micah *what God requires of us:– to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.*

God's Spirit still speaks through faithful people today when they are acting justly and mercifully and walking humbly with God.

As Desmond Tutu reminds us in the word abuntu – we are bound together as one people in a common humanity where rich & poor, strong & vulnerable can care for one another and form the society God calls us to live in.

It calls us from separation into community; from selfish individualism into fellowship with everyone. Or in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu *-my humanity is bound up in yours for we can only be human together.*

At Pentecost, God reversed the disaster of Babel which divided and confused the unity of the human family. They spoke of a new language - the language of love and co-operation: a language all peoples of good will understand. Here we have a group of people who came together, ordinary people with little faith in their own abilities, but great faith in God. They set out to build a tower of a different kind. This tower was not of bricks and mortar like the tower of Babel, ...nor of expensive marble that the world would stand back in awe and revere, but instead took the form of a new community: a spiritual stairway to heaven, building a route towards peace and justice, hope and love, understanding and the first foundations were laid and we are in charge with building upon those foundations.

We assemble today as part of that workforce entrusted by God so long ago. From Genesis to Revelation we find ourselves not behind walls of self-made isolation or self-sufficiency or narrow identity, but in the risk of scattering, the risk of being sent forth into a diverse world. And in the realising we're all made in the likeness and image of God.

We are entrusted to be builders of this tower today and see anew the fresh work of the scattering of the children of God. And like the scattering of every seed – the seeds that fall on the fertile soil or trust – not fear – those seeds will bear much fruit. So don't be scared.....let's do some scattering!

Amen.