

God puts broken communities back together again

Rev's Peter Balabanski

Pentecost: Acts 2 1-21

Acts 2.¹² *All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'* ¹³ *But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'*

Paul Gallico was someone who wrote wonderful stories. My favourite is called *The man who was magic*. It's about a man called Adam, who wanted to be admitted to the Guild of Master Magicians. To do so, he had to perform a worthy trick in front of a large audience. Everybody else performed their vanishing lady acts and their handkerchief acts and their fire breathing acts. Then Adam took his turn. He scrambled an egg, then he unscrambled it. Slowly and surely, the scrambled egg changed back into an unscrambled egg and then got back into its shell.

Everyone was dumbfounded. They wanted to know how he did it, but he could only, truthfully reply that it was magic – the usual kind. Some people got angry at this; many of them felt threatened. They didn't appreciate someone who could actually *do* something that they made a living *pretending* to do. The world becomes a strange and dangerous place when people start defending their illusions with threats and slander. But perhaps you'd better read the book if you want to find out what happens.

The opposition Adam met felt like the criticism the disciples suffered in today's story from the book of Acts. But I'll get back to that later.

Today is the Spirit's day; the day Holy Spirit brought the

Church to birth through wind and fire. Jesus had ascended to God's right hand. But without his physical presence, could the movement he had founded continue? Just before today's story, we see the disciples choose a successor to Judas. So there was some sort of future planning; but we don't know what they had in mind?

Today, we see the Holy Spirit intervene, and what might have faded away and died is abruptly born anew.

A rush of violent wind – *divided tongues*, as of fire rest on each of them and they begin to speak in *foreign tongues* – and yes, the word for languages and tongues is the same in Greek too – and they go outside and in Gallico's language, they begin to unscramble an egg. What egg? Do you remember the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 – the whole earth had one language. It was a unified whole, like an egg. Then humankind embarked on a course of action designed to make God redundant.

We built a tower to reach up to the heavens; we sought to make a Name for ourselves – replace God's Name with ours. This was the last in a series of misguided actions that began in the Garden of Eden – people trying to break down the distinction between human and divine. Let's make a Name for ourselves so we can call on our own name instead of God's! We've still got that voice with us proclaiming that destiny; saying human ingenuity can replace the need for God.

God responded decisively to the tower of Babel; God scrambled our language, and scattered us over the earth. Our quest for equality with God alienated us again – just as it had in Eden – alienated us from God and from each other. Our tongues were divided; we couldn't understand each other.

Today, at the first Christian Pentecost, we read how all those divided tongues came back together to reside among God's gathered people. Jewish people from all over the known world

had come to celebrate Shavu'ot – the feast we Christians call Pentecost. In the Jewish faith, Shavu'ot is the spring festival which celebrates God's gift of the Law to Moses.

Shavu'ot is being celebrated tomorrow in Synagogues all over the world. But until the first century, Jewish people travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival. And that's where we find them this morning when Jesus's disciples burst out amongst them – tongues of fire on their heads, and a burning message in dozens of languages on their tongues.

Today, we see the moment when the scrambled egg begins to be unscrambled. Faithful Jews and proselytes were gathered in Jerusalem from all the known earth. Through the Spirit's work, their divided languages were all given over to the one message; a message for all the world to hear about God's deeds of power.

Peter recognised the work of the Spirit in this; he remembered how the prophets had said this would happen – that God would pour out the Spirit on all flesh. The message came in every language to show that it was a blessing offered to the whole Earth. That day, the first Christian Pentecost, the blessing God gave to Abraham, that all families of the earth would receive God's blessing, that ancient blessing came true, uniting these gathered people.

Jesus had told his disciples that the Spirit of truth would come and declare to us the things that are to come. Peter understood that this had now happened, and he declared it that day in Jerusalem. The whole Earth could consciously encounter God at work as life-giver, indwelling Spirit, creator.

What this says to us is that God who created diversity loves diversity. God's response to Babel wasn't punishment, but playful, creative diversity. And this diversity was re-affirmed at the first Christian Pentecost. This makes me believe that where we try to standardise our faith, we oppose

the heart of God, and we give up the birthright which we inherited at that Pentecost. Christian unity does not mean standardised conformity (Thanks Jamie). And God puts broken people back together; God puts broken communities back together. (Unscrambled eggs) God not only *can* do that; God *wills* that we do it. And that is a desperately needed message.

That's the Good News of Pentecost – the end of the seasons of Easter and Ascension – that a broken and dead body can live again. Ours is to call for the Spirit; to welcome the Spirit; and inspired by the Spirit, to proclaim God's mighty deeds – the sanctity of diversity and community, and above and in all, the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus; to whom be Glory and Praise forever, Amen