God loves diversity

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In the story from Acts 2, we heard the story of the first Christian Pentecost; the birthday of the Church. And we saw that the distinguishing mark of both the Judaism of the time, and of the Church at its birth was diversity. *There were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. At [the sound of the disciples speaking in the various languages] the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each*.

I'm struck by the fact that it was this diversity that the Holy Spirit chose to highlight as our inheritance from Judaism on the day she brought the Church to birth. It speaks to me – like forests and people do – of the special delight God takes in diversity. The Psalm set for this morning says it too. *"Lord, how various are your works … you rejoice in [them]"*. [Ps 104.26, 33]

But in all the diversity of this first Pentecost, one unified message went out. Everyone heard about God's deeds of power. Everyone heard this message in their own language. They were hearing of the power of the God of all nations.

This passage from Acts reminds us of a story from the OT where there were also a lot of languages – the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. That's the story of a time when the people of the earth all had one language. They gathered and decided to build a tower with its top in the heavens in order to make a name for themselves – to take God's place. God stopped this, confusing their language and scattering them abroad. Some people call this the story of the curse of Babel.

And they say that in today's story from Acts, the curse of Babel is reversed.

I want to suggest something different. Certainly there *was* a gathering for the Jewish festival of Pentecost – a gathering that reverses at least the scattering that happened at Babel. But in the Acts story, the languages remain diverse, don't they. The Holy Spirit didn't give the gift of a single language that everyone could use at the birthday of the Church. No; she publicly affirmed diversity by giving those Galileans the gift of many languages. So what happened at Babel wasn't reversed at Pentecost; I'd say it was healed. And this healing preserved the diversity. There is no spiritual gift of uniformity – of sameness – to be found in the Bible.

What are the implications of that for us? What does it mean that God started us off as a multi-cultural body? It means God doesn't mind our differences in the worldwide Church, or the differences between churches in our area. God nowhere demands that we standardise our language, our liturgy or our cultural values.

Our story tells us that the God of love created diversity; that our God loves diversity. Nature tells us the same thing. Whenever we standardise or 'rationalise' as we say these days, I believe we oppose the very heart of God; we shun the birthright we inherited at the first Christian Pentecost. The Church as a body is far more diverse that we imagine, and God loves that diversity.

In this combined week of prayer for Christian unity and prayer for reconciliation, let's make a couple of resolutions.

Firstly, let's resolve to accept that what we might not experience or wish for in our own midst is nevertheless experienced as God-given and life-giving among people of other churches.

Secondly, let's resolve that each year at Pentecost – starting

this year – we will ask the Spirit what new things she might wish to bring to birth amongst us – and commit to nurture that new life.

And as you and I grow in Christian maturity, let’s wonder what gift God might give us that we could offer in the Church for the common good? Amen