

I'm going to read you three short passages about Babel.

Now the whole land had one language and the same language ... so the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth and they left off building the city. Therefore, it was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. (Genesis 11: 1, 8-9)

They were passing through hyperspace. *'The Babel fish,'* said The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy quietly, *'is small, yellow and leech-like, and probably the oddest thing in the Universe.... It absorbs all unconscious mental frequencies from brainwave energy to nourish itself with. The practical upshot of all this is that if you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language.'* (*The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* pp. 49-50)

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:3-4)

At one level Pentecost, the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on the first Christians, is a dramatic sign that God's punishment for the sin of human pride in trying to build a tower up to God, has been reversed. The Jews from different parts of the civilised world, who had gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost, were amazed to find they could each understand what the Galilean apostles were saying to them! It was as if each had been given a Babel fish, so memorably described by Douglas Adams in his *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

There has long been a dream that if we could all speak the same language then misunderstandings, rivalry, wars, squabbles, racism, sexism and so on would all disappear. It would be like the time before the tower of Babel, a time of cooperation and harmony. The 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Gottlieb Leibnitz held this optimistic view and inspired the Polish doctor, Ludwik Zamenhof in 1887 to create a new language called Esperanto. Esperanto means 'one who hopes' and although it has not caught on as much as Dr Zamenhof had hoped, in recent years popes such as Pope Benedict XVI have added Esperanto to their multi-lingual blessings as a sign of Pentecost hope.

But of course, as useful as it would be for all of us to speak one language, it is not really language as words which Pentecost is all about. The true language of Pentecost is that of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth, which will guide us along our way in life. As Jesus said to Philip, the Spirit whom he will send after his resurrection, is the one who stands alongside us as a helper and advocate, just as Jesus had been in his earthly life. The Holy Spirit is not like Douglas Adam's Babel fish; it is not a clever means of translating God's voice, but the creative, guiding presence of God, who would otherwise be beyond our comprehension.

So, if Pentecost is the reversal of Babel, why is the world still so divided? The answer comes in Peter's sermon in which he begins with those memorable words, 'Indeed, these [men] are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only 9 o'clock in the morning' (Acts 2:15)! It seems that

the words spoken by the apostles were not actually proper languages, but what is known as glossolalia, 'speaking with tongues' – a babble of sounds considered to be a sign of the Holy Spirit. The Jewish critics just thought they were drunk on 'new wine' as the sounds they uttered made no sense.

Perhaps some of you have heard people speaking in or with tongues or have spoken in tongues yourself. In some charismatic churches speaking with tongues is considered one of the essential signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit. St Paul appears to have had the gift of glossolalia, but he warned the congregation at Corinth:

For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 14:2)

But the other reason Peter gives why the world has not been fully restored at Pentecost is that the work of the Spirit is not yet completed. Peter quotes from the prophet Joel when he says that it will only be towards the end of time that God will pour out His 'Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy' (Joel 2:28).

Undoubtedly the Holy Spirit of Pentecost speaks to us often in unexpected ways and not always as we would wish. That is because the Spirit is always a *gift*. Those who have had a more intense experience of the Spirit often hope to have it repeated and at times which would suit them, but we cannot demand a gift, and that is not what receiving the Holy Spirit means. When I was at school, I prayed earnestly for the Holy Spirit to speak to me, as members of the Christian Union said he would, if I was to be a true believer.

But nothing happened. Or so I thought.

What actually happened was much more subtle: no speaking with tongues, no prophecies, no dramatic moments, but a gentle nudging in particular directions and moments of clarity. Sometimes a piece of music has come alive in a profound way which has spoken to me at a deep spiritual level; other times a particular conversation with a friend has brought me into the presence of the Spirit. I didn't need a Babel fish to translate actual words because the Spirit doesn't speak in that literal sense.

It wasn't until the day before my ordination at evening prayer that I became – at last - *very* aware of the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit confirming me, as it were, in my role as priest.

I now understand why in the Queen's otherwise very public coronation, the most significant and sacred part of the ceremony- her anointing with oil by the archbishop- was not broadcast. For her anointing symbolised the presence of the Holy Spirit in her God-chosen role as monarch to be a servant to the nation. It is a role she has carried out for 70 years in good times and bad with complete faith in the continuing guidance of the Spirit. She is indeed a model of Christian Spirit-led discipleship to us all.

The world is not a perfect place and having a single language would not make it so, but we do have the gift of the Holy Spirit, so let us each pray to have discerning hearts and minds so

as to become more receptive to the Spirit in whatever ways he chooses to make himself known to us and to walk hopefully and faithfully in his ways.

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