

**PENTECOST 31-05-2020** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Acts 2.1-21; Ps 104.26-36; 1 Corinthians 12.1-13; John 20.19-23

Today begins the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation, and so I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather today, the Whadjuk Noongar people. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Bonjour; bon giorno; kaya; guten tag; hola.....

Do you know how to say 'hello' in another language?

We have so many languages in our world; apparently there are about 6,500 spoken languages in the world today. It is thought there were around 400 Aboriginal languages spoken when the first Europeans arrived in Australia.

The Bible has a tradition explaining why people speak different languages, the story of the Tower of Babel, found in the book of Genesis. According to this story, everyone spoke the same language until some people had ambitions to build a great city with a tower to reach into heaven.

God didn't approve of what these uppity humans were doing and scattered them abroad and 'confused their language' so that they couldn't gang up together anymore because they wouldn't understand each other.

So the story of the day of Pentecost that we read in the Acts of the Apostles is a kind of reversal of the babel story. Where once, people could not understand each other's languages, the Holy Spirit made it possible for them to hear and understand the gospel.

The writer, who is assumed to be the same person who wrote Luke's gospel, fills his telling of the Pentecost event with imagery. His readers, who knew their Old Testament, would have recognised the images straight away: tongues of fire would remind them of Moses and the bush that was burning but not consumed; the sound of the rushing wind would remind them of the Creation story, when the wind moved across the face of the waters. And the Hebrew word for 'wind' also means Spirit, or breath.

Wind and fire were associated with God's presence throughout the Hebrew Bible, and we are meant to make the connections. This was God doing something powerful in the world, beginning something new, giving the disciples the gifts and energy and desire and enthusiasm they needed to go out to the world and tell people about Jesus.

Christians have sometimes confused this Pentecost phenomenon with the gift of speaking in tongues, which Paul talks about.

But as Paul describes it, and as many Christians experience it, the gift of tongues is the ability to speak in a prayer language to God. It is not a language others can understand.

What happened at Pentecost was the opposite: the disciples spoke in other languages that were understood by people who spoke those languages.

The theologian Marcus Borg says, "Pentecost is about the reversal of Babel. For the author of Luke-Acts, the coming of Jesus and the continuation of his presence in the power of the Spirit inaugurated a new age in which the fragmentation of humanity was overcome. Or, in words attributed to Paul, through Christ and the Spirit, the breaking down of "the dividing wall of separation" and the creation of "one new humanity" had begun (Ephesians 2:14-15)."

Over the last few weeks, since Easter, we have been listening to John's gospel and Jesus reassuring his friends that he would not leave them alone. He told them that he would send them another comforter, another advocate; he told them that they would do even greater things than he had done because the Holy Spirit would empower them.

So, fifty days after the Passover, when many Jewish people from all over the place were in Jerusalem celebrating the end of the spring harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses, the disciples were all together again and the Spirit came upon them.

Then there was no stopping them; the Jesus movement really took off, as they travelled far and wide. Churches began to spring up; and so here we are, more than 2,000 years later, celebrating this birthday of the church.

The promise of the Spirit was for us and not only those who knew Jesus when he lived on earth. The Holy Spirit empowers and strengthens us, teaches us how to pray when we don't have the words, fills us with energy and life, gives us the courage to do things we could never have imagined ourselves doing; the Holy Spirit, God with us, helps us to change the world.

The work of the Spirit is to break down the dividing walls of separation to create a new humanity, and we need the Spirit to break down the walls of prejudice and fear, suspicion and hatred- all that divides humans from each other.

This week in particular we pray for the First Peoples of Australia; for all who have come here from other lands as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; for LGBTIQ+ people; and all who still suffer discrimination and prejudice. We ask the Spirit to work in our hearts and minds, to make us one people.

So today as we celebrate, let us thank God for blessing us with the Spirit, and pray that she will teach us how to be people of the kingdom in everything we do and say.

The Lord be with you.