

## **Pentecost**

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey on Sunday 23 May 2021

*Readings: Acts 2 vv 1-21 and John 15 vv 26-27 and 16 vv 4b-15*

Not very long after I came to Guernsey, I was invited to take the funeral service of an elderly lady who lived in St Saviour. Her next of kin, who shared a home with her, was her sister, just a few years different in age. As we talked, I struggled a little to understand her, until all became clear. English was not her first language. Growing up in St Pierre du Bois, Guernesiaise was their native language, which the sisters had still used in talking to each other. Thinking about this took me back to my childhood. Growing up in the north west of England, our holidays were in north Wales. One year, we stayed in a caravan on a farm above Llyn Tegid, Lake Bala. The farmer was an elderly man; or at least he seemed so to me. I was puzzled that he couldn't understand me, not I him, until my parents explained to me that he spoke Welsh. Even in the 1960s, he knew no English, relying on his wife to act as the interpreter. His whole life, from farm to chapel to market, was lived in Welsh language and culture. This was probably my first encounter with another language, and certainly the first time that I had met a person who didn't speak my language.

Despite the prevalence of English as a global language, spoken and understood by people throughout the world, as anyone listening to the results coming in from around Europe in yesterday evening's Eurovision song contest will have noticed, language is still a precious mark of identity, of who a person really is. Language is an expression of culture and family, which has a remarkable ability to survive, as we see from the tenacity of some of the minority European languages.

Last week, I read an article about the Livonian language, spoken by fewer than 200 people in Latvia. Livonian has a complex grammar: there are 17 cases; nouns have no gender; and there is no future tense. But it is precious because the language is inextricably linked to the inherited culture of the people.

The same story could be told of so many languages, almost extinct, but as precious in holding a community together as are landscapes and historic buildings, music and food.

In Genesis chapter 11, we find a compact and self-contained story about the tower of Babel. The story is, at one level, an explanation of why the human population, which had originally shared the same language, came to be divided by the development of many languages, which prevented their mutual comprehension and so hindered cooperation; and also how they came to be dispersed throughout the world. But the story has another point: it is account of the danger of human ambition, rather like the story of Adam and Eve gaining knowledge through the eating of the forbidden fruit and so trying to grasp for themselves power and knowledge properly restricted to God. Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and the people who built the tower of Babel were, in these ancient theological texts, trying to get above themselves and challenge God – and disaster followed.

There may be no historical evidence for the story, but the reality of different languages is all too self-evident. Language is good in that it binds a community together for self-preservation, but it has also been the cause of conflict and strife over the centuries.

Language is central to the story of Pentecost. After weeks of preparation, the disciples were together 'in one place'. The promise of Jesus was fulfilled, as they found themselves filled and empowered with the Holy Spirit. And the most obvious manifestation of this was the reversal of what happened in the story of the tower of Babel. Everyone in Jerusalem, regardless of the language they spoke, could be in no doubt about what was happening. 'How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'

This was a reversal of the usual experience of not understanding. Some in the crowd sneered and assumed that 'they are filled with new wine'; in other words, drunk. But, as we have heard, Peter - timid, cautious, Peter - challenges this. What the people have witnessed is God at work in his world, concerned with all, regardless of age and gender and social class. More is to come, as the disciples travel throughout the known world, as defined by the language groups represented in the crowd. All have been present at the beginning. The journeys and encounters that we will find in the Acts of the Apostles unfold the story of God's engagement with his world.

No longer is humanity divided by language and culture. Regardless of who we are, how we speak, where we come from, all people are invited to allow the overarching language of God's love to prevail. All are invited to claim that promise at the end of the readings from Acts: 'Then everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'