

Fifty days ago, at Easter, we heard the story of Jesus coming to Mary Magdalene in the garden at dawn – a story which deliberately recalls another garden, from the story in Genesis. In that story, in that garden, as darkness fell, the human creature heard the voice of God, and turned away, and hid. In this new story, Mary hears the voice of her beloved teacher speaking her name, and she turns towards him. And all creation begins again in that moment, redeemed, renewed, broken open to new possibilities. It is morning for all the cosmos. It is a chance for us all to turn, and turn again, and reach out towards new life.

It is an individual story, two people in a garden, one person's choice in faith to turn, to trust, to step forward. Today, at Pentecost, the conclusion and climax of the Easter season, we see something like the same story – but different, as well, for this is a story about a community.

Pentecost, too, recalls a story from Genesis – the story of the tower of Babel, the confusion of tongues, the original failure of human community through pride and ambition. Babel – where the early mythic human society tries to build a tower to heaven, a project which not only, predictably, fails, but collapses into a complete breakdown of that society, a splintering of the group so that they can only speak mutually incomprehensible languages. This is really a sort of alternate story of the fall, a story of how we came to be the difficult wounded creatures that we are.

I have seen countries, in wars or civil wars, where shared language is deliberately denied or destroyed, where people who had once spoken together refuse, quite literally, to understand each other, refuse to the point of murder. And even in peacetime, even when we mean well, when there is no hostility, all human speech – all human communication – is an approximation at best, across impossible gulfs of experience and history. Whether word or sign or music or picture or gesture or touch, it is the struggle to share between human solitudes some fragment of truth. Even in our most intimate relationships, that attempt will fail more often than not. Between larger human communities, it is astonishing that it sometimes succeeds even a bit, that we do sometimes manage to talk to each other.

And for most of our history, tragically, the message we have taken from the story of Babel is that it is the diversity itself which is the flaw, the thing which must be overcome. We have tried to fight our way back to one language, one culture, one human truth, as we have tried to fight our way back to the imaginary innocence of Eden. Our church created institutions where Indigenous children were brutally punished for speaking their own languages. The powerholders of our society – and the church with them – spent generations trying to impose an essentially white, middle-class, straight and cisgendered monoculture upon the world, forcibly assimilating, marginalizing or destroying anyone who gets in the way. We still most often demand that people with disabilities, with trauma, people who have been profoundly marginalized, must behave before they can belong. And now governments, following the lead of the US government, are stripping away what little progress had been made, and turning the word diversity, like the word empathy, into a slur.

But Pentecost does something amazing. Pentecost redeems the division of tongues. And it doesn't happen by making all languages the same, it doesn't happen by imposing one master speech, making everyone alike again. No – like the story of Mary Magdalene in the garden, it isn't a return to an imaginary infant Eden, but the reclaiming, the making holy, of all our complications. Flames – divided flames, not a single flame – rest on the disciples, and everyone understands. What had been the flaw, the fall, becomes in itself the redemption. And all languages and cultures are there, and they are all real and honoured. All the Phrygians and the Pamphylians, the Cretans and Arabs and Mesopotamians, all that is foreign or frightening, all that is despised or unknown. None of the history which has led to this moment goes away. It is taken up in a greater community, a greater understanding – diverse, confusing,

strange, but all encompassed in God's intention, in the plan for the redemption of all things; the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

For that day, beyond and outside of history but known in part within it, is a day in which nothing will be lost, nothing will be left out. All the divisions, all the broken histories we have lived through, all of our pains and our failures of communication and our frustrated longings, are to be redeemed. All the hurt and traumatized children will be heard. All the voices of the excluded, the unwanted, all the unwanted failures, all the voices will be understood. Not denied, not erased, but made part of God's story, part of God's life, in ways we can barely comprehend. We will speak in our own strange tongues, and all our divided speech will be part of the Word. For God's speech, God's Word, the Word which was made flesh and which is God's self, will speak in us.

The elements of Pentecost can be terrifying. When T.S. Eliot, in his great poem "Little Gidding" wrote, "The dove descending breaks the air/with flame of incandescent terror", he meant to evoke the dove at Jesus' baptism and the flame of Pentecost, both terrifying as divine and wonderful things may be – but also the firebombs of the Blitz, which were falling even as he wrote. Wind and water and flame are great dangers, and under the pressure of human greed, we have driven these pentecostal powers into vast destruction, our generation's rush to Babel. Wildfires, floods and hurricanes are fearful realities for all of us, as real as the bombs of the Blitz were for Eliot.

And yet we must, in these times, be that shape of wind and water and flame which can heal.

We are living in a time in which the forces of power are ranging themselves against Pentecost. It is more pronounced in the United States, but it is happening everywhere – political parties explicitly promising a restoration of white European monoculture, both legal and violently physical attacks on trans people, threats to equal marriage, people with disabilities edged towards assisted death or simply stripped of everything they need to survive, the clearing of encampments and the criminalizing of the unhoused, attacks on all that seems different or strange or troubling. And so many good people are paralyzed, terrified for good reasons, beaten down by illness and financial struggles, hopeless, unable to believe that any action of theirs can matter.

Has the church learned enough from our bad history that we can make other choices, that we can stand as a real counterweight against power, protect the Pentecostal vision? To become a place of safety and a voice of protest? This is our time, and we must rise to this moment, and seek our allies in all those places in the world where the Spirit moves.

We will know the work of the Holy Spirit in one way, and one way only – it will be about following that one great commandment of love. It will be carried out through improbable people who have found themselves chosen by love, compelled to the tasks of love. Out on Pandora, here. In hospitals, in food banks, working the phones of a crisis line in the middle of night. All these different, difficult people, called by the Spirit to the work of God.

Love, then, in all the danger. Open yourself to the Spirit which blesses us in all our difference, all our strange languages and vocations. Speak love in places which have forgotten what love might sound like. And listen to the voice of love in the unfamiliar tongues of the world.