

Sunday 23 May: Pentecost

Pentecost

Readings: Acts 2.1-18; John 20.19-23

On Pentecost morning, people are amazed because, they hear the apostles addressing them in their own languages. And so really today I ought to be able to preach to you in Chinese as well as English. All that I can vaguely remember from trips to China is 'Ping Pa Ho'. Or Ping An in Taiwan.

It is very dangerous to try to say something in another language. You can easily make a fool of yourself. When I first went to Latin America, before I learned much Spanish, a bishop in the Amazon made a speech of welcome. He made the terrible mistake of thinking that I was Irish. Someone immediately corrected him, much to his confusion. And so I stood up and said 'El Obispo esta embarazado', thinking that it meant 'The Bishop is embarrassed'. Alas, it meant 'The bishop is pregnant', which he was not. And when I first went to Manila, I had to address the faculty of our University there. I was extremely jetlagged and instead of saying 'Maybuhay', 'Greetings' I said, Mabahu, which means 'What a terrible smell.'

When the disciples spoke in other languages, it was more than just an amazing linguistic feat. The Holy Spirit is the mutual love of the Father and the Son. And it is part of loving someone that you try to speak their language, however badly. You reach across the boundaries that divide you. You enter their world. We are liberated from self-absorption. Once a finikity logician was staying at Blackfriars. There was a phone call for him, and he was tracked down in the kitchen. 'There you are', said our brother. 'No,' replied the logician, 'Here I am; there you are.'

800 hundred years ago, St Dominic was travelling with Brother Bertrand to Paris and they came across a group of German pilgrims. Dominic was frustrated that he was unable to preach to them because he did not speak German. And so he said to Bertrand, let us pray that we may understand them so that we may share the good news with them. It is interesting that Dominic does not pray that the Germans may understand him, but that he may understand them.

Entering someone else's world is risky. You are leaving behind your own secure territory, and venturing into a new place for which you do not know the map. Hence a mother's advice to her daughter: 'Never go anywhere that you have not been before.'

This is why it is the strong who make others speak their language. This, alas, has been the case with us English. It was a sign of our Imperialism that we expected everyone to speak English. If you shout loud enough at foreigners, then they will understand. And it is a sign of the rising power of China that so many people are now learning Mandarin.

It is not just a question of national languages. Think of the cultural languages that divide us. In all our churches there is tension between progressives and conservatives. Each has their own vocabulary. Progressives ask if someone is open-minded; conservatives whether they are sound. If you venture across the division and try to enter the mental world of another, then will your convictions stand up? Will you find yourself undermined? Will you be able to hang on to your identity?

And think of the class divisions in Britain. All the endless mulling over David Cameron's precise degree of poshness shows that class is alive and well in modern Britain. Do we, like

Eliza Doolittle only want to creep up the greasy pole, or do we dare take the risk of finding ourselves in a world with less prestige. Or think of the ways in which the young and the old speak different languages. In Japan some older people call the young ‘aliens.’

In Jesus, the Word of God took the risk of entering our world. He became a first century Palestinian Jew. Inevitably he was misunderstood. He was seen as a glutton and drunkard, a sinner, impious breaker of the law, impure, a revolutionary, a zealot, lax, ignorant. Just about everything except what he was, pure love! And so they killed him. In the Resurrection all that hatred and prejudice and division was defeated. And now the Risen Lord pours his Spirit upon us all, and so we can take the risk of talking with strangers and learning their tongues.

Often the journey to the Kingdom is impelled advances by unexpected conversations with strangers. Abraham welcomes three strangers and is promised an heir. Jacob wrestles with a stranger at the ford of Jabbok and receives a new name, Israel. The disciples walking to Emmaus meet a stranger on the way who makes their hearts burn within them. The patron of this church, St Martin of Tours, meets a stranger and shares his cloak with him.

The meeting with the stranger transforms who I am. In Italy I became a slightly different person. I start waving my arms around! Dominique Pire was a Belgian Dominican who received the Nobel Peace prize after the Second World War. He wrote: ‘One must be ready to fill oneself with the other.’¹ Every deep friendship stretches my identity, and makes me someone whom I was not before. That is the risk and that is the joy.

When I was staying in Cairo, the Prior, Jean-Jacques, who is French, took me to visit the mosque of the most famous Islamic University in the world, Al Azhar. At the end of the evening prayers a number of students gathered around us and began to speak in Arabic, with the Prior translating for me. One spoke good English and so naturally I talked more to him. He was intrigued by meeting us and so accepted Jean-Jacques’ invitation to come and visit our priory and library. He got as far as the door, but he was afraid to go in. He had heard that Christians lure innocent Muslims into their buildings and then force them to become Christians. And so he returned home. But he is a big chap, more than 6ft 4inches, and so he went back the next day and asked for Jean-Jacques. He left instructions with friends that if he was not back within three hours, then they must phone the police. All went well, until JJ invited him to go down into the library stacks. This was the moment he dreaded!

Think of his courage in coming to us. He has become a friend and a brother. Twice he has come to stay in our priory in Oxford. He and JJ tour Egypt together to talk in schools about dialogue between our faiths. They each present the beauties of the other’s religion. This astonishes the students. How can a Christian love Islam and vice versa?

St Paul says that the Kingdom of God is ‘joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 14.7). It is joy that reaches across the boundaries. It is joy that puts us in touch even when we can hardly speak a word of each other’s language. I am told that in Inuit there is no word for joy. The nearest is for the dogs’ tail wagging when they get back home. And so one person translated Jesus Bible as saying that there will be more tail wagging in heaven over the one sinner who repents than over the 99 who do not need to!

So may the Holy Spirit give us the courage to speak to people in their own languages, and the joy to breakthrough all boundaries when we are lost for words.

¹ *Preaching Justice* p.141