



Sermon: 4th June 2017

Divided by a Common Language

Acts 2: 1 – 21; John 20: 19 – 23

It is often said that the United Kingdom and the United States of America are two nations divided by a single language. This has more truth in it than you might think and misunderstandings, not to mention embarrassments, abound because of the different meanings we give to words which sound the same.

At the General Assembly last week, a young minister got up to speak. He was from the United States and had come over to Scotland in 2004 to be a youth worker in a church in Glasgow where there was a job to which he had been appointed. Indeed, he had been headhunted for this job and persuaded, kind of against his better judgement, to come over to Scotland. Part of his reluctance was due to the fact that, sadly, the job didn't pay him any money! This was a particular pity as he didn't have much money. As he told the Assembly, "I arrived in Scotland with a backpack containing a toothbrush, a couple of shirts, and a spare pair of pants, eh, I mean trousers!" That is one of the more innocent confusions that arise through our different uses of our shared language. A shared language is not always a good thing.

Sometimes a shared language can be a symbol of oppression. Over the last several years there has been a renaissance of the Gaelic language but we all know from history, it was all but eradicated from the north of Scotland, and this was quite deliberately with the aim of suppressing a Scottish identity in order to squash rebellious uprisings. When a community loses its language it also loses something of its sense of itself, its identity, and this was the aim behind the suppression of Gaelic.

There are similar examples in the Bible. In the story of the Tower of Babel told in the book of Genesis, we are told that the whole world spoke in one language, was "of one speech". However, although God punished the people by confusing their language, and ensuring that they did not understand one another's speech, he was in fact simply returning them to a state in which they had previously existed. Earlier in the book of Genesis we hear of the existence of many nations with different languages. Then in the 9th century BC the Assyrian Empire imposed one language upon every nation within its power. One language

was a symbol of oppression. When only one language can be spoken, as the Scots and English aristocrats discovered in the Highlands of Scotland between the 14th and the 18th centuries, the greatest power belongs to those whose native language it is. The greatest power belongs to those who impose the language. The greatest power belongs to those who, through this shared language, have the capacity to control and manipulate the spread of information, and therefore to control and manipulate people.

A recent and topical example of this would be the campaign for Brexit and the presidential campaign in the United States. All the opinion polls in advance of polling day, in both nations, indicated that the vote would be a win for the Remain campaign, and a win for Hillary Clinton. Up until the last minute these are the results which were expected. The actual result came as a bit of a shock, I think, actually, even to those who won! It is widely believed that these results were achieved by the efforts of a company called Cambridge Analytica which was involved in both election campaigns. This is a company whose tagline on their website is, “using data to change audience behaviour”. They use the Internet, social media sites, and the manipulation of data to achieve the results for which they are paid. If you have enough money, you can indeed buy anything, even an election result. The implication is that our politics are not any longer in the hands of the people but are in the hands of one or two who have the financial ability to pay for the services of this company. Our thought processes are being manipulated and we don't even know it. This company exploits a new shared language – the Internet - to use and manipulate data to make us think what they want us to think, while making us believe we are thinking independently. As we approach the general election this week there are an increasing number of debates about the accuracy of the polls. A shared language is not always a good thing.

To return to today's reading and the story from the book of Acts, all were gathered together in one place. At that time, during the expansion of the Roman Empire, Latin and Greek were both prevalent, and in what we now know as the Middle East, Greek was commonly spoken. However, a common language was not a symbol of freedom, as we have noted, but rather a symbol of domination. Those who did not speak the common language were excluded from any hope of exerting influence or of gaining power or of being in leadership. Those who did not speak the common language were limited in their opportunities, in their abilities, to work, to trade, to travel. A shared language is not always a good thing.

Into this setting, a gathering of motley worshippers, rejoicing in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, but still fearful for their lives, still living under Roman oppression, still unsure and uncertain about the future, into this setting God sent the Holy Spirit. This gift of the Holy Spirit brought with it the gift of tongues. Doesn't that strike you as odd? Why would God give his fledgling church the gift of tongues? Might there not have been something more useful he could have given them? There are echoes here of the story of the Tower of Babel, when God returned many languages to the people. In the story of Babel this is portrayed as a punishment, and to begin with it may well have seemed so. But this tells us something about the punishment of God. If God, "punishes" us, or disciplines us as the apostle Paul has it, it is never meaningless. It is actually a gift, even although it may seem to begin with that it is a punishment.

In the same way, to the assembled worshippers gathered on that Pentecost Sunday, the Holy Spirit was a gift of freedom. It was poured out upon everyone; men, women and children. The rich, the poor, leaders and followers, people of different colour, people of different race. In one sense, all these diverse people were united, united in the spirit. Yet in giving them the gift of tongues, the coming of the Holy Spirit accentuated their difference. The gift of the Holy Spirit was a gift of unity in diversity. We are not all the same, we are not all meant to be the same. We are each of us wonderfully unique, an imaginative creation of an infinitely imaginative and creative God. But our differences are there to be celebrated not to divide us. It takes this wonderfully rich tapestry of humanity to begin, and it is only a beginning, to represent the unfathomable nature of God.

And today, it is important to celebrate our differences. It is important to understand our uniqueness. And by accepting and celebrating that uniqueness, to stand up against oppression. To stand up to those who want to take away our ability to think for ourselves. To communicate with one another through the rich variety of language, and opinions, and hopes and aspirations and dreams and visions. To create a community of unity in diversity where all people matter, not just the rich and powerful.

The gift of the Holy Spirit was a gift to unite us, but not by making us all the same. It was a gift of peace to enable us to live with one another in spite of our differences. When we know that we are accepted by God, secure in his love, we do not have to hate, or fear those who are different. The events in London last night, just as the events in Manchester ten days ago, were born out of hatred. The shared language which gave birth to those atrocities is anger and fear.

During the General Assembly, as part of the report of the Ecumenical Relations committee, his Royal Highness Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan was invited to speak. Prince Ghazi is the Personal Envoy and Special Advisor on Religious and Cultural Affairs to King Abdullah II. He commented, "the whole universe is teeming with life – except our own hearts!" He believes that in the years to come there will be continued Islamisation of radicals and criminals and that angry young people will use Islam to express their rage. We have seen examples of that in these last few days. He urged us to keep our faith, our prayers and our principles. The answer to hate is not more hate, but love. Of ourselves, in our own strength, we cannot offer that love.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is Peace and Love. It is only in the strength of that Spirit that we can respond to these acts of terrorism with the love of God. As the psalmist says, how good and how pleasant it is when the brothers live together in unity. As we open ourselves up to the gift of the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost Sunday, we can all live together in the harmony which the Spirit brings. Unity in diversity. A living embodiment of the fact that in the Kingdom of God, there is room for everyone and everyone is welcome.