

Pentecost Sunday (Year B)

May 23, 2021

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Dear brothers and sisters.

Today we are celebrating Pentecost. It is the 50th day after Easter Sunday and this celebration marks the end of Easter. We're invited to this solemnity to remember how Mary, the apostles, and the other disciples gathered together at the Cenacle and were filled with the Holy Spirit and to live anew by receiving the breath of the Holy Spirit once again (Acts 2:1-11).

Jesus resurrected, ascended into heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit to the Church so that we Christians can share in the same life of God and be witnesses in the world. Jesus visits us in history, overcoming the wilderness, opening our hearts to hope, and encouraging our inner maturity toward God and our neighbors.

Today, I would like to meditate with you from the first reading for Pentecost Sunday at the Vigil Mass (Genesis 11:1-9). It is the story of the Tower of Babel. Luke completes this story with the event of Pentecost (Acts 2:11). So it would be appropriate at this time to read the story of the Tower of Babel again. We don't usually read this passage because most of us attend the Mass during the Day on Sunday.

The Story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9)

"The whole world had the same language and the same words. When they were migrating from the east, they came to a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, 'Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.' They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.' The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built. Then the Lord said: If now, while they are one people and all have the same language, they have started to do this, nothing they presume to do will be out of their

reach. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that no one will understand the speech of another. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the speech of all the world. From there the Lord scattered them over all the earth.”

The Real Message of the Tower of Babel: Learning to Coexist in Multiculture

We need to take a more realistic reading from this passage, because the failure of the construction of the tower makes it seem as if God's plan also failed. Such a conclusion is far from the intention of the author of Genesis. Besides, this episode depicts the reality that we humans, created by God, are living. Especially in the present time, we are more aware that humanity is made up of thousands of races, peoples, cultures, languages.... And it is a miracle that, in spite of so many wars, we can still continue to live together on the same planet earth, which is the only common home we can inhabit. Even the big cities of modern society has an environment like the Tower of Babel where people try to exclude others with different languages, cultures, ideas, lifestyles and opinions without understanding among the people living on this earth. How can we coexist and understand one another in our many differences?

This situation is especially serious in developed countries where large cities have to accept a variety of people coming to them. Immigrants from agricultural areas, provincial areas and other prefectures leave everything they have behind and come to cities for work, shelter, a better cost of living and a better quality of life.

The migration of masses of people caused by climate change and war is nothing new, but the problems and challenges have become greater in recent years. In desperation, people are abandoning their countries and knocking on the doors of developed countries, and it is happening every day. Even if they recognize the journey by boat is dangerous, they don't give up on the illusion that they will make it to the other side.... And when they get there and are allowed to enter the country as immigrants, or in some cases as refugees, that is when the real Calvary (the Way of the Cross) begins until they get a real life of dignity and reach the level of living of those who live there. Our world is going to be like the Tower of Babel all over again. This word "Babel" means the door of the gods. This was the name given to the city as a symbol of humanity and a pioneer of urban culture: it involved a city surrounding a tower, one single language and one single project, going up to the heavens to invade the sacred area. People wanted to be like the gods, so they came together to get it (uniformity).

It was not about unity with differences, but about making everyone the same.

But the project was a failure. God, jealous from the beginning of human progress, confused the language and closed the door of the gods. Perhaps that uniformed world never existed. Maybe it was the temptation of the human desire to have power. After God's punishment, language differences became the biggest hindrance to communal living, and it became the source of humanity's dispersion.

The author who wrote this story did not consider the richness of diversity and interpreted God's ways as punishment. But what is written there is that God considered diversity from the beginning and scattered the people of the earth because of language differences.

The Story of the Descent of the Holy Spirit

Six centuries after the Book of Genesis was written, another story comes through the Acts of the Apostles. It describes what happened after the coming of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the festival of the harvest, when the Jews remember the covenant made between God and his people at Mount Sinai "fifty days" (which the Greek term "Pentecost" means) after leaving Egypt, the disciples were gathered together. It was also the 50th day after the resurrection of the Master who would harvest the seed that had been sown. The coming of the Holy Spirit is described with events, as tangible "phenomena": a noise like a strong driving wind and tongues as of fire that consumes or burns. This is the way Luke chose to express the inexpressible. The coming of the Holy Spirit would free them from fear and make them proclaim freely the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's why they received the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages. They began to speak in "different tongues." We don't have any other data to explain the meaning of this phenomenon. It is not so important, though. What is important is that this movement of Jesus was born open to the world and to all people. What God wants is diversity, not uniformity; dialogue, not confrontation; to declare that a new era has begun when we all can be brothers and sisters. A new era has begun, not because we have no choice, but thanks to our differences. We can now overcome the differences that hinder communication and understand one another.

This is the Spirit of God, for he is not a spirit of monotony or uniformity. He is the spirit of cooperation made up of many different tongues and sounds. He unites people of different

views. If there had been more languages at Babel, as on the day of Pentecost, there would not have been confusion. "... yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." God has made miracles of understanding possible.

Thus began the new Babel that God had wanted. It is diverse and yet harmonious, away from standardization in a negative sense. May we reproduce this in our lives. My hope is that we do not build walls between the rich and the poor, and among developed countries, developing countries, and even countries that have not yet reached that stage.

The coming of the Holy Spirit was the end of fear for that small handful of disciples. The doors of community opened. A community that burns like fire was born as a human example. Paul says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). And where freedom and autonomy are, diversity and individualism are encouraged as a path to unity. The truth shines through, because the Spirit is truth and leads us to the essence of truth, to life, as John wrote in his Gospel (John 16:13).

We long for a new Pentecost in our world. The world needs a new Pentecost to end the wave of intolerance and intransigence sweeping over us. May all religious groups work together for the realization of world peace through our prayers and embrace of those who come from other countries in search of a better life.

Prayer

- May the Spirit of Pentecost be poured out on all people in the Church today, and may we be a leaven and catalyst of all the transformations that the Holy Spirit will bring about in all men and women, races and religions.
- May the Spirit of God working in all peoples lead us to reconciliation and peace where there are wars and civil strifes in today's society, just as He got people through the confusion of the Tower of Babel.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE).