

Pentecost 2021 “Babel and Pentecost”

Fr. Frank Schuster

I remember reading an article about scientists who claim they can trace the languages of Europe and Asia to a common language that was spoken 10,000 years ago. I found that very interesting. Genesis also speaks of an ancient kingdom of people who spoke the same language. However, this kingdom made a fateful mistake. The government of this kingdom built a tower high into the sky so that they could symbolically claim superiority over God. You remember the story. Or as one of my favorite poems goes, “Their tower's impressive statistics pleased architects, boosters and mystics. But their excess of pride caused the Lord to decide it was time that they studied linguistics.” The great city at the heart of this kingdom of course was Babel. Babel is where we get the word “babbling” from. It is a story about original sin, about how egotism can get in the way of our relationship with God and with others.

My friends, when I talk to people who have suffered broken relationships, either with parents, children, or spouses, they all share a similar experience. When communication breaks down, when communication turns into babbling, relationships break down quickly. We can see this happen at home, between spouses or between a parent and a child, or between siblings. We can also see this happen at work, between coworkers or with an employer and employee. We can see this happen in school between kids on the playground, or in the classroom with a teacher and student. We never see communication breakdowns in our country's politics right? You see, when communication breaks down between people, even if all parties are speaking the same language and with perfect grammar; we are nevertheless reduced to babbling: everyone talking at each other with no body understanding a single word. How often have we experienced that phenomenon in our world around us: of everyone speaking at each other and no one understanding a thing?

What is the answer to the curse of Babel? The answer to Babel is the feast we celebrate today, Pentecost! On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples like fire. On Pentecost, all present were able to speak in hundreds of different languages, mirroring Babel, but with one important difference, they could understand each other. You know, for me, a fitting way of appreciating the miracle of Pentecost is attending a mass in another country and in a different language. You don't have to know the language to understand the meaning of all the prayers. It is truly remarkable.

What this means for me personally is, if stories in the bible like the Tower of Babel give descriptions of humanity's fall, then the celebration of Pentecost is a fitting way to celebrate the birthday of the Church. No matter which country we live in or language we speak we are nevertheless one Body of Christ. As a side note: if you ever wonder why the United States Bishops are supportive of immigrants regardless of their documentation status, that's why. The Body of Christ doesn't have borders.

Getting back to my homily: we can ask ourselves this week, when was the last time we experienced a relationship reduced to babbling? Was at home, at work, was it with a friend, or perhaps on a cable news channel, we have never seen that right? When was the last time you experienced a relationship in your life reduced to babbling? Pentecost is the antidote to Babel. Can we name one thing we could be doing this week to open our ears and hearts more fully to the Holy Spirit? Can we name one thing we could be doing this week to open our ears and hearts so to mend a broken relationship? The more we realize life isn't about "me," or even "we", but about Jesus can we truly welcome the Holy Spirit more fully into our lives and then watch him renew the face of the earth.