

Pentecost “The Antidote to Babel”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Genesis tells us a story of how the whole world spoke the same language, once upon a time, using the same words and vocabulary. Interestingly enough, there are 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. The people of the kingdom mentioned in the bible, however, made a fateful mistake by deciding they no longer wanted to be subjugated under God. The bible tells us that this culture was no longer content with being mere creatures. They wanted to be greater than the Creator. The government of this kingdom, to achieve this ambition, 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 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 the teacher and student. We never see communication breakdown in the United States Congress, right? And sometimes we can with sadness see this dynamic even between leaders in the Church at times when they have epic disagreements. 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 single word?

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 who were 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 during a vacation, or in St. Peter’s Square perhaps for a canonization say or even for a World Youth Day mass or something similar. At these epic celebrations, you might have a dozen or more languages represented among the people present for the liturgy and yet everyone somehow understands the meaning behind all the prayers together.

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. The Church welcomes home every person with open arms regardless of which nation they come from or what language they speak. This is in large part what the word "Church" means. The word Church comes from the word "ecclesia". Ecclesia literally means "Assembly". The Church is the People of God regardless of which country you were born in or what your present zip code happens to be. Meanwhile, no matter which Catholic church we ever find ourselves in throughout the planet on any given Sunday in our travels, we will always understand what is being prayed together at that mass because the Church is our spiritual home. And, no matter where you are at, you will always somehow understand what is happening in the liturgy around you because you belong to a community that is bigger than you.

My friends, left to our own devices, left to our own ego that wills to make ourselves more important than others, we will always run the risk of our relationships collapsing into babbling. If we, however, allow ourselves to belong to a larger community, like the Church Jesus entrusted to us today on Pentecost, if we allow the Holy Spirit to descend upon our relationships so that we view the people around us with compassion and love instead of like commodities, all of the sudden we appreciate that the world doesn't revolve around "me", does it? It revolves around Jesus. It is when we realize that our lives are not about "me" or even about "we" but rather about Jesus, that we can exchange the vocabulary of the ego with the language of the Spirit and vocabulary of the heart. I think this is a good message for everyone today, even for those preaching from the pulpits to those worshipping faithfully from the pews.

My friends, when was the last time you 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 our relationships reduced to babbling? Pentecost is the antidote to Babel. Notice that Jesus, in the Gospel, gives the apostles the gift of peace before he sends them out to evangelize. I think this is a perfect way to conclude. You see, I believe a mark of someone who lives in the life of the Holy Spirit is a person of peace. It feels like the lyrics of one of my favorite Church hymns, you will recognize it, "No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I am clinging. Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" That is the kind of peace Jesus is referring to in our Gospel reading. You see, it is in that place of peace, rather than ego, where real communication with the Lord and with others can happen. It is that place of peace, rather than ego, where the Holy Spirit can repair our souls and renew the Church. This peace can transform the face of the earth, one relationship at a time.