

Pentecost: Speaking in Tongues

Pentecost commemorates a number of events. Principally, it marks the coming of the Holy Spirit after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. A frightened group of bereft disciples are suddenly empowered by the spirit, resulting in the birth of the Church. Luke, the writer of the book of *Acts*, begins his work by describing the phenomena, the spirit settling on disciples like 'tongues of fire'. The disciples become apostles, sealed by the spirit.

The use of the word 'tongue' is important here, for what follows in the book of *Acts* provides a narrative link. From tongues of fire, we move to speaking in tongues. According to Luke, the disciples are able to stand before a vast and cosmopolitan crowd, and address each person in their own language. Suddenly, the apostles become multi-lingual, with the gospel being preached in Latin, Greek and the like.

Like me, you may have problems with the story, as well as the general phenomenon of speaking in tongues. And you are not alone. Although Pentecostalism and Revivalism claim to practice the art, the origin, use and interpretation of speaking in tongues requires more careful explication.

A preliminary observation to note here is that the account in the book of *Acts* can be read analogically. In the Old Testament (*Genesis*, chapter 11), the story of the Tower at Shinar tells of how all the different languages in the world came to be. Once upon a time, all nations spoke with one voice. But then people got ideas above their station, and decided to build a tower to heaven, in order to get on God's level. God, who liked his privacy and primacy, sowed dissension amongst the ranks of builders by inventing new languages that hampered the construction. Shinar became Babel, from which we derive the word the English word 'babble'. Not for the last time, an ambitious building project is scuppered through poor communication.

The account in *Acts* is probably an attempt to redeem and reconfigure this fable. The message is this. In the church - a construction of the Spirit - all languages are recognised and spoken. The spirit is universal, not local: the gospel is for all people. So, the first act of the spirit is to reverse the tragedy of Babel: God now speaks to everyone; and can also *hear* everyone, and the church becomes a global lingua. The language is that of the Spirit.

It is important not to take the account in *Acts* too literally. When early Pentecostal missionaries thought they had received the gift of tongues at the turn of the century, they often assumed they were beginning to speak a new language that would enable them to preach the gospel in some far-flung corner of the globe. At the end of the century, more sober scholarship and reflection has drawn back from this.

On the matter of complete languages being spoken by people who have never learned them, most Pentecostal scholars now agree that there is no hard evidence of anyone miraculously receiving Arabic, French or Spanish directly from the spirit, as the book of Acts implies. (Which is just as well, or Linguaphone would be out of business). Academics in the field of consciousness studies also point out that you could not confidently speak a language you had never learned. Otherwise, how would you know you were saying 'Jesus is Lord' instead of 'Haddock and Chips, please.'

I don't mean to mock. The more common tradition of speaking in tongues is that which Paul describes as 'sighs and sounds too deep for words'. But most linguists and psychologists agree that whatever these 'tongues' are, they do not add up to a language. It is more like an ecstatic utterance, a kind of 'sound salad' that is full of feeling and meaning, but with no vocabulary, grammar or anything else that could enable it to be translated. It is the articulation of the unutterable.

A teacher of mine who specialised in primal religion (Nuer, Dinka, etc), and spoke the language of the people he studied, would sometimes spend his sabbaticals visiting charismatic churches in South Africa. When the time came to prophesy, he would often chip in, and speak one of the primal languages he knew so well. Congregations were invariably impressed, and without fail, his words were usually interpreted by someone 'led by the spirit' - as a prophecy for the church, or a word of encouragement. 'Ah', they would say, 'our brother has a word in tongues', and then proceed to boldly translate: 'Thus says the Lord...'. But in actual fact, he was simply repeating a recipe for a type of corn porridge, made out of goat stock.

But in interpreting tongues for our own time, what are we to say about deep and mystical experiences that seem to defy description – let alone clarification or understanding? I speak from personal experience, as one who, only recently, found myself experiencing an intense spiritual epiphany at the shrine of St. Frideswyde a mere few months ago.

Granted, I can make some sense of that experience. I was baptized at one of the very few churches dedicated to her shortly before my first birthday. The graphic spiritual experience seemed to centre on the relationship between the water of baptism and the healing water she once drew from a well. But I cannot, I'm afraid, communicate in words anything of the intense, compelling and deep nature of what I felt on that afternoon that reduced me to my knees and rooted me to the spot. It just happened: undeniable.

So, what might tongues and Pentecost mean for us? I'd like to make a couple of brief observations to help us, finally, in our reflections. First, and as I have already implied, I do not consider the gift of tongues to be a 'language', but rather a kind of 'overflow' of praise; a release of the heart and mind when words will no longer do. As the French sociologist Danielle Hervieu-Leger puts it:

'One could ask whether the search for...non-verbal forms of emotive communication does not also express a protest against the stereotype nature of approved religious language, something about the diminished quality of articulate religious quality in modern culture. The place taken in these groups by the gift of tongues raises the questions directly...tongues, defined by scholars as "phonologically structured human expression without meaning, which the speaker takes to be a real language but which in fact bears no resemblance to any language, living or dead", is not a vehicle for communication but for *expression*. The content is of little importance: tongues find [their] meaning not in what is said but in the very fact of speaking and responding, in this form, to an immediate experience of great emotional intensity. In the emotive response there is a general sensation of the presence of the divine, profound joy, and inward well-being which finds the means of expressing itself' (2000, p.59).

Second, the gift of tongues reminds us that God – who was and is incarnate in Christ – remains radically available in our contexts and language: we *hear* the gospel in a tongue we can understand. And we *hear* culture too - what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

This is important, for we can appreciate how easy it is to exclude all kinds of 'minority interests' in the church. Black, lesbian, gay, feminist and other kinds of theology or Christian expression, for example, can be narrated as substandard or even offensive 'dialects', marginalizing them as 'bad language' or 'bad tongues' over and against the suspect claim that the church has one true language. Moreover (and perhaps tellingly for the Anglican Communion), the biblical text suggests that although the Apostles spoke to their international audience 'each in their own tongue', it doesn't follow that the Apostles necessarily understood one another at the same time. In fact, the message of Pentecost is that there are many tongues of fire. And because much is lost in translation, the hermeneutical task of the church – what Lucien Richards memorably describes as 'reaching across distances' – becomes even more urgent. We need to hear. The Caribbean theologian Kortright Davis expresses it simply enough:

'Western theologians are [now] attempting to educate themselves about the new theological surges emanating from the Third World. They have finally realized that there is no universal theology; that theological norms arise out of the context in which one is called to live out one's faith; that theology is therefore not culture free; that the foundations on which theological structures are built are actually not transferable from one context to another. Thus, although the Gospel remains the same from place to place, the means by which the Gospel is understood and articulated will differ considerably through circumstances no less valid and no less authentic...' (1990, p. 70).

Quite so. Put another way, we might say that the lesson from Pentecost is that theology (or Christianity) is always spoken in tongues, so that each can understand in their own language (but, by the way, not necessarily hear one another). So Pentecost is about listening to foreign

tongues and not just rejoicing in newly-found native tongues. There is no Christianity that “lacks a local accent”; there is no one, singular ‘pure’ version. Theology and faith is always contextual, but that does not suggest any capitulation to eventual relativism.

On the contrary. The Pentecost experience can set the soul alight, so that the tongues produced themselves become mystical vehicles that produce harmony, unity and creativity. But we have to work on translation and interpretation in the meantime. In short, tongues of fire, flickering in the Babel of modernity, (making sounds of significance in a world where mere words are losing their power), point us forward. These are the signs and groans that are too deep for words. This is God’s jazz: composition and improvisation blended together in dynamic spiritual overflow and praise. Text, music and tradition combine as the Spirit blows where it wills. We wait for the birth of an age to come: where all shall eventually see, speak, listen and understand - face to face, each in our own tongues.

Martyn Percy, June 2010