

From Babel to Pentecost

People often think of a church as a building which is built and set aside for the worship of God. A place people go on Sunday mornings. A place to hear the gospel, to pray and to sing hymns.

The equivalent in New Testament times was the Jewish synagogue – a building within each community that was set aside for the worship and study of God. Jesus himself in his early ministry taught in the synagogues in Galilee and Nazareth – until he was either unwelcome, or the crowds that came to hear him were too big.

Originally, the church met in people's homes, then they moved on to simple places of worship. Over time, as the power and wealth of the organised church grew, church buildings became grander and adorned. They became monuments to God – and a way for popes and bishops and the aristocracy to both honour God and to demonstrate the power and glory of God to the people.

Since ancient times, the Great Pyramid had been the tallest structure in the world – originally 146.5m tall, but from the middle ages onward, cathedrals were built which challenged the record.

In around 1300 Old St Pauls in London reached 149m. 150 years later, Lincoln cathedral was 159.7m tall.

It wasn't until 1901 – last century that that was topped: by Ulm Minster in Germany at 161.5 metres.

But in 1889, Gustav Eiffel's tower was completed – and was 324m tall. Masonry had given way to steel and the grandeur of God to the wonders of technology.

Of course, skyscrapers arrived in the first part of the 20th century, and the Eiffel tower lost top spot to the Empire State Building (381m) in 1931. Now, what were once the tallest building in cities across the world – the cathedrals – have been overshadowed by skyscrapers.

In recent times the focus of what we think of as 'church' has been on the people. You probably know the song: "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together."

And even when we regard church as a group of people, what group do we mean? Our congregations, our denominations, some "universal church". Well, the next line of that song points us in the right direction: "All who follow Jesus, all around the world. Yes, we're the church together".

But even that "following" bit is a little weak, I think, because while we do follow Jesus, we don't follow him as we would a football team. Following Jesus is not just about having an interest in Jesus, or thinking that Jesus is a bit better than the alternatives. As the great hymn that we sang here a few weeks ago reminds us: "The church's one foundation is Jesus

Christ her Lord". Everything about the church is built on Jesus. Without faith and hope and trust in Jesus there is simply no church.

Another way we typically look at the church is to say that it is the body of Christ. Not the body of people who are interested IN Christ. But the body OF Christ.

Christ is the foundation. Or as Peter writes, Christ is the cornerstone.

Today's two readings, from Genesis and Acts teach us about the relationship of people with God and the church.

At the beginning of the story of the Tower of Babel, we read that all the people had a common language. They could understand each other. There was no hindrance to their communication.

That's pretty much an ideal situation. If you've ever spent time somewhere where you don't understand the language, you'll know it can be tough going. Wherever you go, people speak in a way that you, as an outsider, simply cannot understand. It can be frustrating. In fact, it excludes you from the rest of society in which you are trying to live. It puts up barriers between us and them. Even if you can get by with a combination of hand gestures, smiles and nodding, it is inefficient and frustrating.

But the tower builders at Babel had no such problem. They spoke the same language, they were on the same page. And not only that, they had the technology too – it opened up new opportunities and people became proud. Their ambitions went literally sky-high. They felt so confident about what they could achieve together that they decided to build a tower that reached the heavens.

I think in a way, the tower of Babel was a kind of temple. Not a temple to God, but a temple to the power of humanity. The people wanted to reach the heavens on their own. It wasn't even made of natural materials – but man-made materials: baked bricks rather than stone, and tar rather than lime mortar. They believed in their technology, and they believed in themselves. They could do anything. Nothing was impossible for them. Or so they thought.

That attitude and those ambitions have never really changed — today, we see those ideas everywhere, even stronger than before. Human communication across languages and cultures is becoming more and more common. Social media effectively creates a culture that's not limited by geography. Wikipedia has the declared intention of being the sum of all human knowledge – and exists in 300 languages. Today, people – whether they realise it or intend it or not – are in many ways building a new tower of Babel. How many problems are solved by realising 'There's an app for that?' How many questions are answered by 'just Google it'? What can't we do? We wonder.

But we read in the Genesis account of the tower of Babel that God came down disrupted the communication and the unity of the people by "confusing their language." God created

confusion and misunderstanding between them. And as a result, people broke up. They dispersed. And their common effort to reach the heavens was abandoned. It was a failure.

Now I don't think if people are building a modern tower of Babel today God will intervene – and I think our experience is that God doesn't need to, because those divisions that are highlighted in the story of Babel still exist, and still do a pretty good job of undermining progress.

But set against that background of ancient Babel, we've also heard the story of Pentecost. Sometimes people call it the birthday of the Christian Church: the one holy, apostolic and universal church of Jesus Christ. We celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on that first group of Jesus' disciples. When we wear red and orange and yellow and sing songs about the Holy Spirit.

But before that first Christian Pentecost, Pentecost was a Jewish festival: The feast of Pentecost was held at the end of the wheat harvest, fifty days after the Passover. And it was also for the nation of Israel a commemoration of the giving of the law, fifty days after the Exodus. And that's why there were so many Jewish believers gathered in Jerusalem.

John the Baptist had prophesied that Jesus would baptise “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (The word for Spirit, wind and breath is one and the same in the Hebrew language, as it is in Greek.) That same three: fire, wind and words are also found at the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai (Hebrews 12:18-19).

But in the face of the wind, the tongues of fire, and the words of the disciples on that Pentecost, there were those who chose to mock the disciples for what was happening. The accusation of drunkenness was just that. In fact, far from being incoherent, these men were completely understandable to those who listened. Anyway, as Peter would pronounce in their defence, it was only 9a.m. (Acts 2:15)!

And far from drunken babbling, something remarkable was happening – something truly world-changing:

At Pentecost, God reversed the process that God had initiated in Babel.

In Babel people tried to reach to the heavens—a project that was doomed to fail. But here, at Pentecost, God reached down to earth.

Not for the first time, though. He had done that before: On Christmas, in Jesus, God became one of us, to live among us and to die for our salvation, and then to ascend to glory.

But at Pentecost, God came down in the form of the Holy Spirit to stay.

Those who try to reach the heavens by their own human efforts are driven by arrogance and pride. But God comes down to those who are poor in Spirit, meek, and humble; to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

God who created heaven and earth, and who lived and died and rose again, pours out his Holy Spirit into our lives and hearts. It is a gift from God, not something that is innately within us, and not something that we've earned.

We can receive God's Spirit only in and through faith—that relationship where we put our trust in God, and where God shows his own faithfulness to us through the gift of saving grace. But only as we empty ourselves of our self-righteousness and our pride – our tower-building pride – can God fill us with the Holy Spirit.

And rather than dividing people as happened at Babel, here at Pentecost, God united his people.

When people from all over the world heard Galileans speaking in their mother tongue or dialect, it immediately created a bond. "Hey! They speak my language!"

That is why it is so important to have the Word of God or the Gospel in your heart language. And that is why thousands of missionaries have spend lifetimes in remote regions of the world to translate the Bible into so many different languages.

And at a simpler level, that's why we use a modern translation of the bible in our worship here at St Ives. It's in the language that we use day to day. The 'thees and thous' of the King James Version are historical, and certainly have their place – but it's generally easier to follow the meaning in our NIVs or NRSV or Good News translations. If you prefer an older translation though, if that older language speaks to your heart better, then please bring it and read it.

On the day of Pentecost, God bridged the communication gap that had existed since the time of Babel through a special gift of the Spirit—the gift of tongues, as we sometimes call it. We read that everybody heard the proclamation of the great wonders of God in their own language, even though the Galileans who were speaking, couldn't speak them at all.

On that first Pentecost, God inspired his people. What is most important in the story of Pentecost is not just that people heard the Galileans speak in their heart languages. What matters more is what they heard the disciples say in those languages: The Holy Spirit inspired the believers to praise God.

And as the gathering in Jerusalem went on, we see yet another level of inspiration. The sermon that Peter gives—his first sermon ever, as far as we know—shows a level of insight that Peter could not have had from his own. Don't forget that he was a common fisherman not that long before.

Sometime earlier, Jesus had warned his disciples that they were going to be asked to witness to him under difficult circumstance - and he had encouraged them by saying: "Don't worry beforehand about what to say, for the Holy Spirit will give you the words to speak when you need them." (Luke 12:12) It is not Peter who touches the hearts of thousands of people that day. It is the Holy Spirit.

Peter's sermon showed that this was the fulfilment of prophecy, and that God's spirit had been poured out and that all who call upon the name of the Lord (Jesus) shall be saved. And if we read ahead to verse 41, we find that about 3000 people called on the name of Jesus that day and were baptised and became part of the church.

And from that first Pentecost on, we see the church grow.

In that, we see the church as we should always see the church, not as a building, not as a monument, and not even as a group of people. But the very body of Christ, learning from the Apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, sharing in fellowship, sharing in the breaking of bread, and in prayer (Acts 2:42).

Today, we may not hear the rush of the wind, or see the tongues of flame, or speak in other languages, but as the followers of Jesus, we have received the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who dwells within us, who inspires and encourages us, who empowers us to share the good news of Jesus, and who assures us that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Amen.