

Pentecost Sunday, May 31st, 2020

Readings: Acts 2:1-11, Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b, John 20:19-23

Becoming Christian and Human: Language as a Means to Hospitality rather than Security and Isolation

Introduction

As everything else language sits within a human, cultural, social and political context. Language not only enables us to express ourselves, but also serves as a means to establishing who we. To that extent, language also serves as an indicator of our acceptability, whether we fit.

Let me share two stories with you which may help you understand what I am getting at.

In 2017, I was visiting South America and caught a taxi in Central Santiago, Chile's capital. Upon alighting the vehicle, I noted that the driver was in all likelihood from the mining town of Lota, some eight hours south. I had worked in that region for some years and was familiar with the accent. On the journey, I asked him if he was from Lota, and he peered at me through the rear vision mirror perplexed. "You are a gringo. How do you know? I explained my history briefly and he relaxed. In fact, so relaxed did he become, that we pulled over at a *cafetón*, a small cafeteria on the street, and spent the next two hours talking of his life. What struck me about his story – and this was not unusual – was that once the coal mines of Lota had closed, he had retrained, but could find no meaningful work in the southern region, and so had come to Santiago to drive taxis. When I asked, why Santiago – after all it was a long way away – he confided that it was the only place that he could become invisible and pretty much unheard. He continued, "my accent, my mining town accent, excludes me from finding work anywhere else".

Let's turn the page, to some years later in North America. While living in Boston, and working part-time in a small parish, while at the university, Gilda and I formed a close relationship with a dear parishioner, called Pat. Pat very kindly helped us with the children and became a *de facto* granny. As I listened to her story, she shared with me her early years, explaining that she had been born and bred in Charlotte, North Carolina. When I mentioned that she bore not a wit of a southern accent, she said, she had intentionally discarded it. "It was a hard process, losing that accent, but it was the best decision I ever made. People in the north began to look at me differently". What was amusing was that Pat had the broadest Bostonian accent, I had ever heard. She has if anything over-compensated.

If ever I needed to be reminded, these stories, confirmed that language is an indicator of our acceptability or otherwise.

Language Understood More Broadly

But let us step back a little and think about language more broadly.

Firstly, language is the primary means to identity. Most ancient and all modern European nation states have grown around a dominant, exclusive language, for it is understood that nothing quite binds or distinguishes as much as language. Homogeneity *of* or sameness *in* language has been understood to be the glue that appears to hold people together: hence German for the Germans, French for the French, English for English and so on.

Second, nation-states have often considered alternative language, especially minority, ethnic or foreign languages with suspicion, a threat to national and cultural identity. Clear examples of this stand out even today in Spain where the Basque territories to the north, have always been considered under suspicion, what with their particular language which is quite unrelated to Castilian, the ruling dialect within Spain. Indeed, during the extended rule of the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, from 1939 to 1975, periodic persecution existed for those who dared utter a word of Euskara, the Basque language. Certainly, the Spanish have not been the only ones to seek to repress alternative languages, fearful of what they may mean for political and social dissidence. The British sought to do so in the ongoing messy conflict with Ireland. For more than six centuries, British policy in Ireland aimed at the destruction of Irish Gaelic. In the US and Canada there are unambiguous histories of repression of indigenous languages as a means to killing alternative identities. In Australia, the picture has been little different, although we hear little about it.

Pentecost and Language: Peace as Hospitality Not Security

Now to Luke and Pentecost: in this narrative, what stands out as extraordinary *is the valuation of language, better said languages*. Many of the hearers, well-educated Jews of Jerusalem, would have spoken several languages: Latin, Greek and Aramaic to name just a few. Each would clearly have had an original language, a mother-tongue, and it most certainly would not have been the power-language of the day, Latin. The issue in the narrative is this: that each hears the Good News of God about Jesus *in their own native, mother tongues*, no matter how marginal they were. In other words, the Spirit speaks through the range of vernaculars. The conclusion is this: God has no official language, no favourite. For Luke as he tells the story of Pentecost in Acts, the Spirit at Pentecost is the *great leveller*.

But there is more to the story than this alone. The other part of the message is that *Pentecost carries within its own experience a world-view that is dynamite*, a world-view that is an indictment of the usual myopia of power. In human affairs, power is typically held by one group or an alliance of groups over and against others. Because of this, peace is usually interpreted as security; security over those who are deemed to be a threat. Peace is about, as the Romans called it, the *vae victis* – the way of victory – over the *massa damnata*, the damned majorities or masses.

But and this is the point: Pentecost, sees things very differently, Pentecost has a very different world view. All languages are permissible and equal, none can be used to dominate or oppress, none should be marginalized rejected, banned. Accordingly, for the Christian, peace is not primarily about security, a security built upon domination, upon a model of insiders who benefit at the expense of outsiders who do not; of victors and victims.

I sometimes return to my taxi trip in Santiago. At times I return to my relationship with Pat, the girl from Charlotte, North Carolina. I sometimes wonder how a Pentecost world would have changed things for them.