

Sermon, Union Chapel

Graham White

Pentecost, 15 May 2005

Readings Gen 11:1–9

Acts 2:1–21

Jn 15:26–16:15

...it is in your interest that I am leaving you
If I do not go, the advocate will not come
whereas if I go, I will send him to you

Jn 16:6

There are, it seems, few stories to be told about the Holy Spirit. None such as we know how to tell, anyway. There is a strong hint to this effect in our call to worship, in the verses from Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth
the earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the
Spirit moved over the face of the waters

Gen 1: 1f.

Here we are being told here about the creation of all things, about the beginning of time, before which there are no stories: and, stubbornly, before this, we get a mention of the Holy Spirit hovering moving the face of the waters. No stories about that, then.

And we see this again, at the end of Jesus' time with his disciples: he is talking about his departure, and saying that "you are plunged in grief at what I have told you". (Jn 16:6) And one of the reasons for the grief, surely, is that before Jesus leaves the disciples had had a comprehensible, day to day, order of events: Jesus had been with them, he was with them almost all of the time, and events followed, day to day, a meaningful succession. But now he is departing: now they will be in the hands of the Holy Spirit, and

the Spirit, as we also find in John's gospel, blows where it wants: we do not know where it comes from, or where it is going. And without the before and after, there are precious few stories to be told. And – apart from the obvious hardships that the disciples endured – this is probably a major reason for their grieving: that they were moving into a new life where the old stories, the old habits, would not apply any more. And we all have stories.

So much for the bad news. But there is, of course, good news as well: the readings today are full of it. And what happens to the disciples today is certainly good news: all that they have experienced before bears fruit, they are able to communicate what has happened to them, and they make contact with all sorts of people. And they break down barriers: not just the barriers between themselves and others, but also the barriers between different races, and the barriers between people and God. They were telling God's story, the story of freedom.

Which brings us to the story of Babel. It is not just a story about different languages – about, maybe, French and German and Arabic and Urdu and Hausa and all the other languages: it is also a story about how people get scattered from one another. We build buildings, but we also build lives for ourselves, and the lives we build for ourselves shut others out. We speak different languages, but we also use these languages to tell stories about each other: and these stories exclude others, they tell the world of our lives but not about the lives of others. And so life becomes a contest: we want to build a taller tower than everyone else, we want to tell a story that proclaims our lives and excludes the lives of others. And, of course, all of this shuts out God: all of this adds to the story we tell about ourselves, that there is nothing we cannot do, the story and the delusion that our towers will reach to heaven.

There is another factor in this: as well as our relationship to each other, there is our relationship to the world. As well as trying to deny each others' stories, we are also busy trying to deny what the created world is telling us: trying to pretend that we can build our towers that reach to heaven and everything will be fine, that we can continue damaging the world to our hearts' content, that so long as we are satisfied it does not matter how much we destroy the world. And – as well as being unwise – this behaviour also neglects God, who, after all, created the world.

So the more we tell these lying stories, the more cut off from the world we feel, and the more difficulty we have in communicating with each other: the more we feel at a loss for words. We end up scattered, dispersed, cut off from the world and from each other. We confine ourselves inside our own stories and lose our freedom.

So when the Spirit comes, these barriers break down. The story of Pentecost (of course) has the disciples miraculously talking in tongues: it has the disciples miraculously able to communicate. What is important here (of course) is the communication: the main point isn't the speaking of foreign languages – that doesn't take a miracle, but hard work – but the fact that the disciples could now get through to each other. For don't we all know that even if we speak the same language, we can still remain strangely split off from each other? Don't we all know that, even if we are with someone, we may still be strangely unable to be aware of them? Even if we know them?

So the Spirit breaks down barriers, the Spirit makes connections. This is what the Spirit does: the Spirit which blows where it wants to, which allows us to communicate with each other, despite the lives we lead and the prejudices we have, despite the stories that we barricade ourselves in with. And, of course, we find this Spirit, when it comes, when it makes itself known to us, rather difficult to understand: because it breaks down the prejudices that we have about each other. Because the Spirit is a spirit of truth, which does not speak its own authority but tells what it hears, it does not puff itself up and it does not make us puff ourselves up.

The Spirit is also a Spirit of freedom: a Spirit which blows where it wants, and which leads us into freedom. It is too easy to think that, after we encounter the Spirit, everything will make sense: that we will be able to keep on telling stories just as readily as we did before. But things are not so tidy as that: not everything is going to make sense immediately. We have to become open to the truth that will set us free, and so there is a good deal of unlearning to do, a good deal of forgetting these lying stories that we tell about ourselves. And in the meantime we will have glimpses of how things are, glimpses that allow us to see the new lives that we are called to, glimpses that allow us to tell – it may be in a fragmentary way – our own stories about God, and God's story about us and the freedom that the Spirit leads us to.