



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, May 20, 2018

*Day of Pentecost*

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Acts 2:1-21 | Psalm 104:25-35, 37b | Romans 8:22-27 | John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the regrets in my life (and mercifully there are not that many) is that I've never made the time nor devoted the energy to mastering another language. Being understood in English is enough of a struggle for me. Yet that has not stopped me from, at one time or another, dabbling in French, Italian, German, Spanish, among others, usually motivated by songs I wanted sing. Portuguese was the language that convinced me it wasn't going to happen. How they get those sound from those combinations of letters is beyond comprehension.

If I practice before a trip, I can generally accomplish the rudiments of a saying 'hello' and 'thank you,' navigating a restaurant menu, and asking for directions to a restroom. What more do you really need? But language still fascinates me, and I am in awe of people who can move from one to another making themselves understood no matter where they are or who they are with.

According to the writer of Genesis, for many years after the Flood, "the whole earth had one language and the same words" (11:1) That linguistically united people took it upon themselves to build a great city with a tower in its center "with its top in the heavens"...so that they could "make a name for" themselves. (11:4) This did not please the Lord who came down from heaven to inspect the humans' handiwork, and reacted by saying, "This is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come...let us confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (11:6-7), and apparently, with that Divine pre-emptive strike to keep humanity from getting the upper hand, a multitude of languages were born. After which, the building project was abandoned and the human race scattered across the face of the earth. The site of the unfinished city came to be known as Babel.

Whether you see this story as an attempt by an ancient nomadic people to explain the origins of the different societies who were their neighbors, or if you see in it some kernel of ancient Mesopotamian history, what can be taken from this story is that things that enrich our world like language, cul-

ture, technology and innovation can also serve to separate the peoples of the world. Differences, when exploited, create an imbalance of power. One group will dominate another. One culture will have an outsized influence over all the others, for a time, until the deck is reshuffled for the next round of the game of human struggle, while misunderstanding continues to play out across the globe.

The biblical story of the origins of language is traditionally seen as the unfortunate consequence of human pride run amok. But there is more to this story than the conflict and divisions that the "confusion" of human speech created. Even though people had difficulty understanding each other, even though the nations each went their separate ways, our humanity remained intact, we are all still members of the family of God. That message became very real for me a little over a week ago.

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella culminates at the grand cathedral of that city in northwestern Spain when pilgrims from all over the world who have walked some portion of one of the many Camino trails gather for the daily pilgrim's mass. The service is conducted largely in Spanish with some attempt to incorporate a few sentences in the languages of the pilgrims present on that day. So for about an hour, unless you understand Spanish, one has to rely on their knowledge of the shape of the liturgy to understand what's going on. It's just guesswork what is actually being said, until the moment arrives that is universal for all believers when we pray the Lord's Prayer. In a great united shout the Cathedral is filled with voices praying in a multitude of languages.

After a long journey there was a bond among us that went beyond language and culture and all the other things that separate people. It was more than just blisters and smelly clothes and a sense of exhausted accomplishment that united us. We all had a common experience and desire to connect to the Divine Spirit within each of us individually that brought us to that place where we found it together. What we shared was the love of God as we each knew it and the longing to express it. And something as simple and overwhelming as a prayer brought us to our knees in gratitude and joy. It is Pentecost moment I will never forget, complete with fire and wind, but

I'll tell you that story another time.

At the first Pentecost the effects of Babel were reversed. Instead of language dividing people it was a way for the Spirit to reveal God to those who searched for God. Some people were amazed and rejoiced in their ability to understand. Others sneered and dismissed it all as a drunken stunt. But then, understanding is always a two-way street.

In a sense that's what Pentecost is. We can turn one way, our own way, and return to Babel and the divisions it creates. That has been a familiar pattern for millennia. Or we can turn another way, the way that leads to God through the guidance of the Spirit. But what is it that the Spirit wants us to understand? Those at the first Pentecost understood it to be the fulfillment of a vision seen by a prophet from 400 years before. Joel who longed for what he called the "Day of the Lord" saw a time when God's spirit would enliven the young and the old, men and women, foreigners – in other words, everyone. No one would be able to claim to speak for God because God, through the Spirit, would speak through everyone who called on God. There would be no divisions, no conflict, just complete understanding. According to the Book of Acts that's indeed what happened, for a while. In time the old divisions crept back in.

But what allowed for that brief Day of the Lord to become a reality? I think it was when they heard God speak they actually listened. That doesn't happen very often in our world. The confusion of language has left us humans with an overall poorly developed sense of listening to anyone, even when we speak the same language. How can we possibly hope to hear God?

Yet God will not be deterred. The Spirit continues to speak, not to some small band of seekers, not to those in one place or another, not even to the Church. God speaks to the world, to the entire human family, simply, in the hope that we will understand. To think anyone has the sole rights to that voice, that message, is to be as foolish as those who sought to build a tower to heaven.

If our divisions are ever to be done away with and reconciled we must learn to listen to God, to each other and unite in a common purpose of mutual understanding as members of God's family. It's not an impossible task; the Day of the Lord can be a reality. It has been done before. But do we have it within our selves to seek another such day? I'm quite certain God hopes that we do.