

# WHAT LANGUAGE DOES GOD SPEAK?

Genesis 11: 1-9; Acts 2: 1-21

A few years ago, The New York Times published an essay by world renowned neurologist and best-selling author – Oliver Sacks. Sacks had just found out that he had terminal cancer. Up to that point, he had been in top health for an 81-yr-old. He swam a mile a day and continued to lecture and write. But he was writing this essay knowing he had, perhaps, months to live. What is fascinating about the essay is Sacks' attitude about it all. He's not a religious man. He doesn't mention God anywhere. But he has an amazing clarity, gratitude and acceptance about it all. Let me quote the last part of his essay:

*"I feel a sudden clear focus and perspective. There is no time for anything inessential... I have been increasingly conscious, for the last 10 years or so, of deaths among my contemporaries. My generation is on the way out, and each death I have felt as an abruption, a tearing away of a part of myself. There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else, ever. When people die they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is the fate – the genetic and neural fate – of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death..."*

*I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and travelled and thought and written. I have had an intercourse with the world, the special intercourse of writers and readers.*

*Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure."*

Well, when I am going to die, I would love to be able to express myself in this language – not so much the words or the style, but the spirit. There is a groundedness, a gratitude and a peace. Despite the fear, the honesty and the grief of having lost loved ones, there is a groundedness, gratitude and peace. Here is a man ready to die even as he has loved life.

But how can we explain him as Christians? Is there something we recognize in his language because we are Christians? Is there room in our faith for people like Sacks who may not talk the talk of God but walk the walk in some way?

This, my friends, is exactly what the story of Pentecost is all about. Pentecost starts something new, and I believe we are on the cusp of witnessing new manifestations of Pentecost in our own time also. How so? Let's dig into our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom.

Our reading from Genesis is a confusing one at first. We're told that at one point in ancient times, the inhabited world was smaller and everyone spoke the same language. We're also told that they decided to build a tower "with its top in the heavens." Probably this would have been an ancient Mesopotamian Ziggurat. But what

we also know from ancient records is that building such a tower would require vast amounts of labour. This means slave labour. Speaking one language means speaking the language of those who rule. It's no fun being a minority or a slave in a dominant culture that speaks one language. It's no picnic having to fit into the requirements of those with power who impose their will and way with force and violence when necessary.

So then, if we understand this background, we can see this story as having a hidden message. Even if it appears that God causes confusion in language so that people don't understand each other, the hidden message may be that the multiplication of languages gives people the freedom to get away from the dominant culture and the dominant language. Why is it that so many immigrants and refugees feel so grateful to be in Canada? A big reason is that they are free to be completely Canadian without having to give up the language and culture from which they have come. Canada is like Babel in a way. But the question becomes – what unites us? Is there any basis for unity?

This is where our second reading challenges us. The early Christians are gathered in one place. The Holy Spirit comes upon them, and the external signs are wind and fire. Jews and converts from all over the world have gathered for the religious festival of Pentecost, second only to Passover. They hear these Christians praying enthusiastically and they gather to see what's going on. And what do they hear? They hear a message of salvation, hope and love, but they hear it in their own language!

Pentecost is a reversal of Babel, but with a big twist. The multiplicity of languages doesn't change. There is no going back to one language. Rather, there is one message spoken in different languages at once. The unity is in the message, in the faith, hope and love revealed, not the language. It's a message that's big enough and wide enough to be spoken into every language and every culture.

And what's the message? The message is that God's love is big enough and powerful enough to overcome any barrier or obstacle to relationship and communion. Language and culture represent our distinctiveness and diversity. God's love respects the distinctiveness without the distinctiveness having to be a barrier to greater unity. As human beings made out of love and for love by a God who is love, our distinctiveness is a gift. We love others in all their distinctive particularity if we truly love them. But it is this same love that also unites us as human beings because that's what love does. Love brings us together in unity while cherishing all that makes us distinct, unique and different.

And this barrier-crossing, reconciliation-inspiring, communion-establishing love is what the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ is all about. Whenever and wherever we witness such love communicated, expressed and lived, we should hear the Spirit speaking to us because we know the identity of this Spirit as those who follow Jesus.

It is no surprise, then, that Peter goes on to quote scripture to all those gathered who represent the many languages and cultures of the world: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy."

Up to this point in the history of the people of Israel, Prophecy under the Spirit's inspiration, is the preserve of a high spiritual office – that of prophet. It is the preserve of an Elijah, an Isaiah, a Jeremiah or a Joel. But what happens at Pentecost is an experience of the diffusion of the Spirit. Wisdom, praise, insight, direction, the call of Love... God speaks through a much wider means than ever before. Not only in Hebrew or Aramaic, but in every language and culture. Not only to those who hold the power, but to youth who still have little knowledge, experience or power, or old people who can easily feel past experiencing any new visions and dreams. Not only men who hold the power, but women also will be recipients and communicators of the Spirit's word and wisdom. And finally, not only those who are free, but slaves also, men and women and those in between like eunuchs who were often the slaves... they will all have an equal share of the Spirit. God's will and way of love, God's specific word to the world... it will cross all barriers that we humans create, in order to reach everyone and create communion. God's love is the unifying power. It is the unifying substance. It is the message. But the specific means and pathway will be as diverse and multiple as all the diversity and multiplicity of humanity.

Sadly, though, human civilization has never understood this power and wisdom of God. To have an equal measure of the Spirit fall on everyone is a threat to those who want to gather power and build towers for themselves. They need to have the Spirit for themselves. They need the authority for themselves. And so the church became Christendom, a vast institution with the power of the keys to the eternal kingdom. Heaven or hell were fates awaiting everyone and only the hierarchy of the church held the power to determine a person's fate. The Spirit was the church's to control.

But then came the Protestant Reformation. And for all its flaws, one of the core, revolutionary teachings of the Reformation was the 'priesthood of all believers.' This meant that God spoke not only through ordained priests who were also only celibate males in the church. No. God spoke through every believer and God spoke into the hearts, consciences and minds of every believer.

And Pentecost continues to the present day. It's only in the last few hundred years that slavery has been banned in parts of the world. It's only in the last 50 years that we have ordained women in our churches. We have yet to fully embrace every person no matter their sexuality or gender identity. And even as we are open to other denominations today, some of us are still hesitant when it comes to other faiths? Can the Spirit of Christ speak through them too? And what about people who have no specific faith? Can the Spirit of Christ speak through them? This is where Oliver Sacks would fit in.

I believe the only barriers to the Spirit today are the same barriers that existed around believers on that first Pentecost. It is the fundamentalist spirit that restricts what the Spirit says and through whom. Fundamentalists exist in Christianity, in other faiths, or in atheists who refuse any possibility for the existence of something beyond. But to all those who are open to transcendent mystery, through beauty, love and God... through

compassion and openness, listening, respect and humility... In this spirit, the Holy Spirit of wind and fire can speak powerfully...

Wherever people are moved to acceptance and grace... wherever people are convicted to repent and to forgive... Whenever reconciliation takes place, new understanding and empathy for others, new ways of relating to others out of a deeper respect and appreciation for who they are in all their distinctiveness... Whenever and wherever this happens, the Spirit of the risen Christ is alive and working.

And this is especially relevant in this time of Covid-19. This is a time where things are shaken up, systems are shaken up, ways of doing things are shaken up, we are shaken up. This means it is also a time for dreams and visions. What Pentecost challenges us to believe is that love embodied is capable of changing the world. However it is expressed and lived out in our individual choices, talents and gifts, the vision of such love is about building bridges of reconciliation past differences that are competitive and conflictive, bridges of understanding where we actually care about who others are and desire to listen and learn from them rather than teach and dominate them. The Spirit is about a love that is expansive not closed in on a select few we build walls of protection and safety around and keep the rest of the world out. It is about building communion not just with those who agree with us or feed our needs, but communion with creation itself by preparing ourselves to change our lifestyles in meaningful ways to make room for the care of our planet.

This is the time for new dreams and new visions. As we ponder our present and future in our isolation... as we begin to experiment with easing back into the world of plurality, as we get back to encountering others who are different than us and a world of diverse needs and beauty... may we experience the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit anew.

Let us pray: Breathe on us, breathe of God... fill us with your love... May we see the beauty in all that is unique and distinctive in each other... May we build bridges with each other... may we find unity and common ground within a larger love that embraces all of us; Amen.