

Sermon Archive 587

Sunday 24 May, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for the Day of Pentecost

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reading: Acts 2: 1-21

I came into this world as one crying - suddenly having needed to gasp for breath, and having found that breath, expelling it with a cry - just a primal cry "I am alive". Every child, things going well, does the same. Our first language has no words - just a great cry of first-breath life.

Fairly soon, it's augmented with other sounds - the chuckle, the sigh, the squeal - nothing very structured - just sounds from having seen the mother's face, or experiencing hunger, or the soiling of self. New sounds from the immediate experience of the closest world.

Then the self hears the sounds of others. Mother says to father "did you remember the butter?" "Are you OK?" "You do know, don't you, that I love you?" And swaddled in such sounds, the crying one picks up a more refined way of expressing itself, refining its language, connecting with others whose words it's heard.

Gathering language, the new-speaking creature, goes beyond its most basic connections, into the big wide world - listening, comprehending, using what it hears to say what it says. It moves into speaking among other speaking creatures - exploring how we all fit together. I, in my experience of life and self, risk expressing it to you, in your risky deep experience of life and self. Sometimes there is an effective meeting - from which comes love and soul - we both understand - and in the understanding, we grow! But other times . . . not so much. I find myself expressing myself, but knowing that these words are not connecting with you. You don't know who I am, how the world is touching me, what I want to bring. And you, you express yourself, and feel that I'm not hearing you, because I'm too . . . too caught up in my own stuff. You speak from black and I speak from white. You speak from female, and I speak from male. You speak from younger, and I speak from older. You speak from straight and I speak from gay. We each speak from who we are.

And sometimes we wonder whether . . . whether we're describing worlds that can't be understood from without. Is the art of speaking towards community broken?

There was an old story about a people building a tower - so they could be tall enough to touch the heavens. God intervened of course, knocked over the tower and imposed the problem of languages. "If the people can't communicate" thought God, "then that'd keep them in their place". The tower of Babel, (yeah, yeah". It was a primitive origins story taken to account for how languages came into being. But maybe it sought to describe something deeper than the existence of different languages. Maybe it was gesturing towards how understanding between people is broken. I speak from my experience, but am not heard. You speak to me from your experience, but are not heard. Is speaking broken?

On the surface - Arabic. Hebrew. English. Arabic. Russian. Russian with a different accent. English. El Español de Cuba, donde no es gaolina. Deeper though, beneath the languages, human beings unable to connect. Cultures, subcultures, politics. We name our own worlds in our own languages - but can they touch? In times of geopolitical stress, we talk about social cohesion . . . Babel says it's broken.

Rumour has it that people of many languages were gathered in one place. What a wondrous opportunity for confusion! The straight white rich men next to the gay black poor women. Whose language is going to prevail? Because surely one language needs to win!

Yet no - you people of God; God's welcome, God's love, God's victory over the misunderstanding that divides . . . what God wants to say is heard by all. At Pentecost, some Spirit-deed of wind and flame brings to all languages God's love for the world in Christ. Everyone in the place hears the gospel as if in the language they most deeply know.

Does my language need to become yours? Does yours need to become mine? Do any of us need to relinquish the way we build on our first primal cries? No. Who we are, how we speak of how we came to be who we are, find a place in God's giving of the Spirit. God gives the Spirit, and for the first time ever, **all** find a place.

I came into this world as one crying - no words, brand new. I hear a story of God enabling a great, profound understanding - embracing our language

- filling it with life, equipping us to bridge the differences from within which we see and speak . . . Pentecost!

1 Corinthians 12: 3b-13

The posh church is up the hill a bit, near the New South Wales House of Parliament. It's a sandstone building outside - inside, lots of wood panelling, towering organ pipes and stained glass. In one of the windows is a family crest - a hissing cat and the motto "touch not a cat without a glove". Good advice? Probably, if the cat is hissing. So, let's step away for a while.

Further down the hill, a less posh church is eagerly pursuing its celebration of many languages, and no one being compelled to speak from anything other than the language that is true for them. They have rainbow flags and soup kitchens, celebrations and literacy programmes. AND, on a wall to the right as one faces the pulpit, there is a big granite memorial. It's to Mr David Jones, after whom is named a chain of department stores. Mr Jones did well for himself. He made bags of money. The memorial describes him as follows: "loved by his family, respected by his community, **useful** to his church". The Spirit came upon the community of the believers with wind and fire, and some of them became "useful". Does that feel a bit cold / utilitarian? - not properly touched by the flame that glows and warms?

-ooOoo-

In the hope that the hissing cat has calmed down a bit, back up the hill we go. In the blue corner, we find the immensely professionally developed private school principal. In honour of her contribution to education, she has a Queen's honour. By being confident about the vision for her school, she ran a very high-achieving outfit. Out of her corner she comes. Does she come with wind and flame?

In the red corner, an immensely well-read person whose professional success in business quietly inhabits his tweed jacket, leather elbow patches, and gentleman's hat. No one's able quite to describe what his work has been, but it's involved a Star Trek-like "make it so" vibe. He speaks, and his word is followed. He's not bossy; but he's used to making decisions and having his instructions followed. Out of the red corner he comes. Does he come with wind and flame?

In the yellow corner - hang on; yellow corner? There's only meant to be two corners for this kind of metaphor - unless its turned from a properly monitored match into a street brawl. OK then; from the yellow corner, orange corner, from the purple corner, lilac corner and shocking pink corners, emerge countless other very gifted people, each determined to "bless" the church until it conforms to their image. Something called "self", or "drivenness", or "private agenda" makes of these many gifts a great and heaving violence. It's good for Pentecost to have many languages, and for there to be energy - many gifts. But O, would that there were a David Jones utility - something to make the gifts become useful. There is no lack of talent in the church of the hissing cat - but there is a need for the Spirit who orders the gifts - to make them useful.

-ooOoo-

Paul's vision of the Spirit at work in community affirms that there are varieties of gifts, varieties of service, varieties of activities, but one Spirit who makes of it all something exquisitely creative and whole. The gifts are not given for disorder or tension or personal advantage. They are given for one baptism, one life, the drinking together of the one Spirit.

If *that* is the vision, then maybe a priority for the community becomes a humility (or a relinquishing) with respect to how we offer our gifts. Perhaps a priority becomes meditation on what is meant to happen to the gifted people when wind and fire enter the room. When each one of us, in our God-given particularity hears the gospel in our perfect language, how then do we live together - towards a common good, just as the Spirit chooses?

A Song to the Holy Spirit:

Holy Spirit, gift bestower
breathe into our hearts today;
flowing water, dove that hovers,
Holy Spirit, guide our way.
Love inspirer, joy releaser,
Spirit, take our fears away.
Reconciler, peace restorer,
move among us as we pray.

A moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.