

Sermon on Genesis 11: 1-9 The Tower of Babel

How many times can one preach about the Pentecost story in Acts 2? How many years one after another? And how many times can you do it in a foreign language... where you so easily run out of words, expressions, verbal alternatives?

I don't dare to try and answer these questions, because I still have some 20 odd years to serve as a minister; and there may be the occasion on which I have to repeat myself. But not here, and not today.

I preached on the actual Pentecost reading - which you've just heard in Fanti - some years ago.

And I am preaching on its biblical opposite today. You've just heard it. The story of the tower of Babel was read to you in Suaheli.

One story starts with one language and ends with many. The other one starts with many languages and ends with the mutual understanding of people. This is clear.

But let us start right at the beginning.

Let us start at the beginning of the Bible, in the OT, at the time, when we suppose the story of the tower of Babel was told for the very first time.

Two and a half thousand years ago the Babylonians invaded the land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, where the people of Israel lived.

They captured the capital, Jerusalem, and destroyed it.

They knocked everything down, or burned it, and smashed God's temple to pieces.

They boasted that their god Marduk had beaten the God of Israel.

The Israelites said their God had created the world and had looked after them down the years.

But the Babylonian soldiers said, 'Well, he's not looking after you now, is he!'

They forced many of the people to walk hundreds of miles into exile in Babylon.

Perhaps the person who composed our story was one of those people.

It was certainly an Israelite who had seen Babylon in all its splendor and beauty, with all its power and wealth, and its proud and arrogant people.

Our anonymous storyteller from Israel was not proud of Babylon at all. To him it was a symbol of tyranny and the brutality of war.

He decided he would tell his own story about it.

Parts of the story were quite funny, but it summed up so much that was wrong with human beings that it was a fitting story to put after the story of the Great Flood.

And that's how Babylon, or Babel, as the Israelites called it, got into the series of stories about the beginnings of the world.

Let me briefly retell the story the great storyteller told...

AGES AND AGES AGO, near the beginning of time, all human beings on the earth spoke one language. God had told them to go and live in every part of the earth. But some didn't listen. Instead they decided to settle in one place, beside the river Euphrates. There they

learned how to make bricks. The bricks gave them ideas. They dreamed of building a great city, with thick walls, and a huge temple inside the walls with its roots down deeper than the earth, and its top as high as heaven. So they started to build. As the walls grew thicker, and the temple grew higher, they became more and more proud of themselves. We can do anything, they thought. We're as great as God himself, if not greater. His plan for us to scatter all over the earth is stupid. We'll stay here and become famous.

God looked at their fine city and their tall temple. To him they looked tiny, but he knew what the builders were thinking. Before long the whole earth would be ruined again. He could see that. He had to put a stop to them.

God smiled to himself as he put his plan into action.

"Pass me another brick", one of the builders said one day, and his workmate replied, "Yes, isn't it a lovely day!"

'The view is fantastic from up here!' another one exclaimed, and his friend scowled at him and said: 'Stop saying rude things about my nose!'

'We must be near heaven by now,' a third one said, and the woman next to him cried, 'What do you mean, my husband looks like a toad?'

God was making them speak different languages. They couldn't understand one another! Fights broke out, and things got so serious they had to stop building. In the end they had to give up living in the city altogether. They went off in groups to different parts of the world, according to the different languages they spoke.

God's plan had worked. Human beings were scattered over the whole earth now, as he had wished.

But how could the world become what he really wanted it to be? How could the earth and everything in it become beautiful again, and very good, as it was at the beginning?

(Trevor Dennis)

As we can easily see, the composers of the OT did a fascinating job, putting carefully together what was their perspective of the beginning. The beginning of the world as well as the beginning of God's story with his people. And God begins not just once. He begins several times. He begins again with his people as often as they need it. Adam and Eve, Noah and his family, Abraham and Sara, and so many more stories of changing one's ways and of new beginnings.

But back to the old story of building a tower.

What has it got to do with Pentecost and the celebrating of the holy Spirit that connects people, helps them build relationships and find courage? Isn't the story of the tower building project just the opposite of all that: the end of community, people scattered abroad and divided?

A sad story? Is it?

How can we get from the story of the tower with its obvious failures and divisions to the story of Pentecost with its uniting and community building?

Well, let's walk some exegetical steps together.

Let's look at the OT very closely and let us discover some unusual bits and pieces to put together...

In the first half of the tower-building story we read about the deeds of humankind.

No word about God.

The people are nameless, they only appear as a crowd.

And what connects them is what they do...

Their will, their striving for civilization is what they have in common.

This in itself seems alright to me – but there is a shadow hanging over it...
 These people are not the first people.
 They don't start at ground zero.
 One chapter before we find huge lists of names, of nations and descendants
 talking about a colourful, diverse multitude of families and relatives.

And this is exactly what the tower-building project puts at risk.
 Diversity is going to change into uniformity.
 Having one language and the same words means no more and no less than:
 everybody is going to be the same, no variety, no diversity, no differences, no
 misunderstandings... just all the same.
 One expression for everything, one meaning to everything, ...
 a very reduced, standardised, mass-produced life – in a dangerously negative
 way...
 One tongue, one language...in itself a fascinating idea.
 Having the same words... is the basis of communicating about the plans to build
 the city and the tower.
 If we all spoke the same language, could we achieve much more? What
 tremendous towers and unforgettable cities would we build?

The OT author of our story sees a great & threatening danger in all this:
 towers, cities, power, conformity... all these cannot only be boring, they can be
 worrying, frightening and fatal.
 Besides all the fascination about one language – especially here among us at
 Peace Church – the Bible wants to warn us with this story:
 Danger is ahead!

Conforming in everything isn't godlike at all.
 If everybody is the same, thinks the same, understands the same, does the
 same... If everybody was content with all being the same, where would there be
 space for dreams and visions? Where would there be space for prophets and
 reformers, for philosophers and storytellers?

The usual interpretation of our text is to consider the “confusion of tongues”, a
 fall from “the one language”. And these are understood as divine punishment for
 the human act of arrogance.
 I don't think this view pays the right attention to our story.
 Just look at it with me: the people in the story “settle” and carry out a “project”
 on which they have agreed.
 This project is characterized by three elements: building a city; building a tower;
 making a name for ourselves.
 All three express the arrogance of an empire that strives for universal
 domination, as the Ghanaian theology professor Solomon Avotri writes in his
 essay on this passage.
 All three elements, he suggests, are signs of empires that want to rule over the
 whole earth. And then he names some of those empires who've done so through
 the history of humankind, and you can guess yourselves which countries and
 what kind of economic systems he blames at present...

So looking at our story through the eyes of the theology of liberation, it becomes clear that the purpose of our story is not to explain where different languages come from, but to defeat false unity and the misuse of power.

Remember the people of Israel in Babylon?

They suffer from false unity and having one language forced upon them – these stand for the oppressor Babylon.

And God's actions then mean two things:

he destroys the arrogant project of false unity **and** he liberates all those who possessed their own places, languages and families – before they became captives in Babylon.

The punishment of “imperial” Babylon – they had not only conquered and oppressed the Israelites, but countless numbers of small people and nations – is at the same time the liberation of all those oppressed little nations.

God actually went down to earth twice; one time “to see”, and a second time to “act”. And then all the peoples can return to their own nations, places and languages! A story of absolute liberation!

A story of how God meant it all to be.

God's intention is a diverse humanity that can find its unity not in the domination of one over the other, but in the blessing for all the families of the earth.

And that comes in the OT with Abraham and Sara just one chapter later.

These ideas expressed by scholars from West Africa and Latin America do not only question the so-called first world countries. They clearly put us into the position of Babel with its attempt to make everybody the same and by doing so to become more and more powerful.

Western standards, western rules, western dominion, western languages, western clothing... have already caused so much damage within other countries. So much has been lost: men, women and children killed; populations drastically reduced, languages, original crafts and skills lost...

Imperial Babel stands for all the colonialist harm done in the past and present. The liberation of the oppressed peoples and the restoration of their own nation, place and language mean independence, recovery of self-confidence and pride, freedom from western rule and regulations:

it means rediscovery of their own values, traditions & life styles, and a future in peace and justice of their own... independent from, but not abandoned, by the rest of the world!

The world will never become a better place, by us all becoming the same. The world will only change for the better when we all start to accept and appreciate our differences and see each other's existence as an enrichment and not as a threat.

Nobody's got to dominate anybody else.

We are all equal – and the richness of our equality lies in our diversity.

That is what the story of the tower of Babel wants us to learn and understand. What a beautiful message on Peace Church's 23rd birthday, don't you agree?

Back to chapter 11 in Genesis.

Here the OT stories of the so-called "beginning" come to an end.

And God starts anew. All over again.

This time with just two people: another small beginning in Abraham and Sara.

Another small attempt to make the world the place, God had always wanted it to be.

God calls two people away from the country where towers are built, and promises them a new name, a new land, a blessing, and the guidance through his spirit.

He sends those two – and much much later his own son – into a diverse, interesting and manifold world full of very different people... his people.

And what they all discover is: diversity needs communication.

We need to talk to each other, to tell each other our stories. We need to listen to each other, to learn from each other.

Diversity needs listening, understanding and interpretation. We need to ask each other questions, to argue at times. We need to build communities of trust and allow fair & equitable relationships to grow.

The diversity of this world, the diversity of this church even, needs careful listening, reading between the lines, walking in each others' shoes, and learning foreign languages - in more than one sense...

When we walk with each other, argue with and learn from each other, when we care for each other, then we can discover more gifts and talents than we'd ever think we could.

Diversity makes us rich.

Thus the story of God's actions at Babel is not only a story of liberation, but also a story of enrichment.

And here, last but not least, we land in the midst of what happened at Pentecost: mutual understanding and living together in an interesting, colourful, diverse culture where people understand each other in spite of all differences – something only the spirit of God can do...

This spirit was not only at work in Jerusalem at Pentecost, it wants to be at work here, too.

Understanding, reconciliation and peace are possible.

God's spirit creates a new community:

a community that doesn't need towers that reach into heaven

but a language of love and freedom,

and the recognition of the richness that lies in our diversity.

Let us dare to live it out...

for God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of caring...

Amen.