

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

### Babel Undone

### Acts 2:1 - 12



The mission statement of the Bible Society is, “to bring the Bible to life; to help people around the world engage with it, relate to it, and make sense of it.”

If you shift the words just a little; “to bring God’s Word to life and help people around the world engage with it”,

you would have a pretty good description of the Spirit arriving on that Pentecost gathering of the disciples. In the sound of the wind, the vision of tongues of fire and the gift of languages, the Word of God came to life, not just for the disciples but for all those people from Jerusalem and from all the known world. It wasn’t just a great display of divine power for a chosen few, the crowd heard God being praised for great deeds, each in their own language. Five hundred years ago, the Bible was in Latin, and that was all. The Reformation saw people like Luther, Tyndale and others producing scripture in local languages and that work has blossomed through The Bible Society and others to now having scripture available for people in hundreds of languages. God’s Word brought to life. And that is the message of Pentecost. All those visitors to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost were Jews, or people converted to Judaism, and they would have been used to speaking and singing praise in Hebrew, particularly in the Temple. But here, they hear the praise of God in their own language. No longer just the God of Israel, now the God of all the world! God’s Word brought to life for all!

Luke’s story of the tongues of fire bringing many languages has, since the earliest days of the church, been seen as the great reversal of the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel. Where the language of the people was confused as a punishment for their brazen attempt to reach God, here God reaches down to undo that confusion and bring understanding in all languages. However, I think Luke had more in mind when he crafted the story of the coming of the Spirit.

Many people find some difficulty in reading the Hebrew Scriptures with its conflicting stories, repetition, and strange details. However, instead of seeing contradiction, let’s imagine an agreed compilation of stories from many sources - remember that the people of Israel are from 12 tribes. While we read the Tower of Babel as the story that tells of the confusion of languages, opening with the grand statement, ‘*the whole earth had one language and the same words*’, the preceding chapter, about the descendants of the sons of Noah, states that each of the sons’ descendants had their own language. Conflict? Or are these stories from different sources and traditions in the people of Israel? Whatever the answer to that, Luke was obviously a student of scripture who wanted to construct a story that honoured those differences rather than take sides. His list of nations and peoples attending the Pentecost feast in Jerusalem is grouped in a way that looks suspiciously like the descendants of Noah in Genesis chapter 10. Nations to the East of Jerusalem, the Medes and Persians, descendants of Shem; nations to the South of Jerusalem, Egypt and Libya, descendants of Ham; and nations to the West of Jerusalem,

Rome and Crete, descendants of Japheth. Luke has not just written about a breaking of the division of languages, this is a story of the reunification of the world. In the theology of Paul, particularly in his letter to the Romans, Jesus is the new Adam. Luke is reaching for a different tradition and giving us Jesus as the new Noah, the one who found favour in the sight of God and became the progenitor of the nations. And here is God's Word brought alive to reunite broken humanity.

While some may struggle to see a connection between the Gospel text today and the story of Pentecost, beyond both being stories of the Spirit, and indeed the whole picture of the Spirit in John's Gospel seems totally at odds with Luke's grand display at Pentecost, there is one very important connection. The disciples ask Jesus, "*Why is it that you reveal yourself to us and not to the world?*" As grand a miracle as the Pentecost story is, it is not a revelation of the Risen Jesus, or a vision of God; the Spirit brings the revelation through the disciples. The Gospel is not about grand displays of the divine to make God known; revealing the Gospel to people is our job! While driven and gifted by the Spirit, it was the voices of the disciples in praise that the crowd heard. It was the revelation of the Good News in people's heart language from people who were to them almost foreigners - Galileans - that was the great sign and opened the way for God. It was lives captured by the ecstatic, by the joyous, by the empowering Spirit that made the message not just understandable to the crowd, but alive in front of them! That is our mission and ministry - bringing Scripture to life here and now.

Language carried from childhood holds so much more meaning than a language learnt, that is why it is called a heart language. It is wonderful that translators have taken up the task of making the scripture available in so many languages. However, the task of translating scripture into other languages is only a part of our task to bring the scripture to life in our culture and time.

*The other day I was called to lead a funeral and, in talking with the son to prepare the service, I discovered that he was almost functionally illiterate. Raised in Primary School on the phonetic method, he had come up against the great barrier that is our English language, which is less than half phonetic. Even the word phonetic isn't phonetic! He struggled to read the scripture passages I was suggesting.*

And it is for people like that, and young people who have no interest in reading, that we have *The Brick Bible* - scripture stories in *Lego* figures and *The Manga Bible* - the New Testament rendered in Japanese cartoon style. Making scripture come alive for people beyond barriers of language.

*At an Aged Care Service recently, the words for the hymns had been massaged by the young chaplain to be more inclusive and to remove some older theological terms. An admirable task in this culture, but I think for the wrong audience, it caused more objection than communication.*

I regularly hear complaints about word changes in hymns and scripture passages because the old words are familiar, but what about the next generation, for whom those words hold no meaning, or the meaning has shifted and become questionable? Words like *ransomed, redeemed, salvation* - all the royal words around thrones and kingdom - can all get in the way of making God's good news of reconciliation and love come alive. And that is our mission and ministry - bringing scripture to life.

We celebrate Pentecost as the birth of the church and a celebration of our Spirit-given gifts and service, but Pentecost is also the celebration of the spread of God's message of love across barriers of language and culture. As the people of the Spirit, let's not be shy or precious and find new words and new ways to bring God's Word to life.