

CONFUSION AT HEAVEN'S GATE

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-4. John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15.

Today we celebrate Pentecost. This is the day when we remember the coming of God's Spirit with tongues of fire. With this new sense of God's presence Luke tells of a new unity of understanding and purpose amongst people from so many different parts of the then known world. Luke goes on to say that although people spoke in their own languages they each understood the message that was common to them all.

The image that is striking in this account in the Book of Acts is the "coming down" from Heaven of the Spirit of God to multicultural crowd – people from all over the world – and bringing them together, understanding each other. To understand this image of God's coming down it would be interesting to look at another incident in which God "came down" to a people gathered together – this is the incident related to the tale of the building and destruction of the Tower of Babel.

In the book of Acts the Spirit of God comes down to a people who have a confusion of languages and brings them together in understanding. At Babel, God comes down to a people with a common purpose and a common language and disperses them with a confusion of tongues so they lack a common understanding.

This early story of the Tower of Babel is about human genius and ingenuity, it depicts a people filled with a capacity to create, to have a vision which gives them an amazing sense of control over nature. Yet the tale also tells of the very human failure to understand the limits of that genius and the power that it brings.

We marvel today at our human capacity to create and engineer. We have gone to the moon and we have touched Mars. We have captured the power of the atom. When many of us were children such feats were but the stuff of the fanciful tales of Jules Verne. But we still marvel at the wonders that come to us from the past. We still wonder how the Sphinx was built, and what was it for? The Taj Mahal, what love could create such a gift? The enormity of the task, the embracing vision, the depth of love, all of these things are objects of our admiration and we acknowledge them with gratitude and wonder.

Ingenuity and creativity are hallmarks of our human life. And here in this early story of Babel we read about a creative impulse to create a building that was to reach upwards into the heavens – a building that was both to express human aspirations and human power. But it was a power that they believed made them equal to God. They were building a structure that was to approach the gate of God (for that is the meaning of the word "Babel"). In some ways this is a retelling of the story of the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve lusted after God's knowledge and power. So were the men of Babel affirming their equality with God?

These builders were out to prove that God did not need to come down to them, for they could move up to Him – and be His equal. In other words, like Adam and Eve, they wanted to command the same power as God – they could call the shots!!

The human ambition to enter God's domain is still with us symbolically – look at the profile of New York City as you look down upon it from the air, and its skyscrapers rise up into the heavens. It seems to say to us – "Where there is power, there we reach up into our proper domain, heaven, the abode of the Gods." We strive to reach the heavens – it gives us a sense of power. I remember standing on the mountaintop overlooking our narrow valley and looking down at the winding pattern of houses, the river and the railroad stretched below. This always gave me such a thrill as a young boy. There was such a sense of being above the world. I am sure you have all had that kind of experience. It is no wonder that we talk about heaven as the abode of God. The richness of human creativity and power encourage us to reach higher and ever higher and we begin to assume that our power is as boundless as our imagination.

But the point of this little story about Babel is that while we find it difficult to accept that we are limited human beings the limits of our being are there nevertheless. The way in which this story describes God's intervention is so simply stated that we might miss the irony. "The Lord came down to see the city and the tower." The story has shown the exaltation of the humans as they carefully engineered and built the tower stretching upwards into the heavens – the tower that is to be the very gateway to God in his abode. Then we read of God's condescending "coming down" to examine it. In God's quizzical look at the pretentious tower

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this human presumption of the people of Babel – and the presumption of human infallibility – is put in its proper perspective.

Walter Benjamin, the social critic, once observed ‘every monument to civilization is also a monument to Barbarism.’ What he meant was that when we claim something as the very height of our civilized greatness we should look to see what failure lies behind it, what weakness is revealed. Our own monument of Unity in the United States was given expression in a devastating War Between the States. The great and peaceful period of British cultural fame in the world, the Victorian and Edwardian period of its history, culminated in 1914 with a war that brought about the death of so many, and devastated Europe and from which England has never really recovered.

God “comes down” to the high tower at Babel and destroys it, and the builders discovered how foolish they were to think that they could claim equality with God. They thought they were equal to God, but they found that they were not. When we think we have reached the gate of heaven and are ready to take up our abode as equals with God we find ourselves back on the earth we inhabit, creatures bound by our own limits. God is every beyond us.

After God’s visit all that remains at Babel is confusion, the symbol of which is the confusion of languages. At the gate of heave, then, they found confusion. The confusion of those who did not understand that they were not gods, the confusion of those who thought that they could rule all of creation, the confusion of those who thought that there could be no power greater than them upon the earth. Confusion comes in the very moment when we realize that we are not all powerful and that we are not gods. God comes down and laughs at our pretensions.

But how tragic it would be if God’s only response were laughter. We would have no more than the first twelve chapters of Genesis to read. But the confusion at the gate to heaven, fortunately, is not the end of the story – for today we remember our Pentecost. In the Pentecost story there is also God’s “coming down”. There is also the babble of languages. But the fire of heaven was not destructive; the many languages did not cause confusion. The people who had come to Jerusalem had come to pay homage to the Law (for that is the meaning of Pentecost in the Hebrew religious calendar). But what they received was a new spirit. Not the old religion, but a new spirit of freedom given in the suffering of the Christ. A new promise based upon the suffering of Jesus upon the cross. A new being of love came with the self-giving love of God.

There is no condescension in this “coming down”. He comes with love for those who have found a new life and new purpose of living. Compared with the people at Babel, who presumed to be equal to God, those who were gathered in Jerusalem on that first day of a new Pentecost had accepted their own limitations. Why? Because in the suffering of Christ they saw God’s willingness to accept their limitations, and they were filled with a new power to enter into a new world through that acceptance. We do not become gods in this new world, but we become aware of who we really are – God’s creation, creatures loved by God because He has made us who we are.

Karl Barth has written: “Truth is not what we say about God, but what He does and will do and has done.” The wonder of Pentecost is the truth of God’s action that he resolves the confusion of our lives in the new spirit in which we live. In this Spirit’s coming we can know the meaning of our life with all its limitations and all its failures and all its suffering. God lives with us in that acceptance of that life of service. We can be adopted as children of God because he has “come down” and entered our limited being and has become part of our world here, where we are and where we live. We do not need to build a tower to take us up to the heavens to find heaven’s gate. He has come down to us and has taken upon himself the burden of our limited life.

He is here by our side, present in our lives allowing us to live fully even within this finite life of ours. This is the truth of God’s action, the meaning of the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost. He dwells with us. But more than that, he enables us to live together in a common understanding, in a community of love. When we accept who we really are before the presence of God what happened at Pentecost assures us that the Spirit will come with strength and power – and this will be the strength and power by which we can live each day with assurance and hope.

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