

Dean Ansley's Sermon for Pentecost Sunday – June 8, 2025

There is, in certain theological quarters, a fascination with reversal. That is, the saving work of Christ is effective because it undoes or reverses the sinful work of humanity — and most especially of Adam and Eve. So, for example, if the first Adam secured our damnation by disobedience, the second Adam (namely Christ) secured salvation by obeying. If the first Adam partook of the Tree of Life and died, the second Adam partook of the Tree of Death (the Cross), and lived. If our disobedience was enacted in a Garden called Eden, our return to obedience was likewise enacted in a Garden, this time, Gethsemane. If Eve was our undoing, Mary was our re-doing. Indeed some writers have even found providential meaning in the mirror-imaging of the Latin words Eva (Eve) and Ave (as in Ave Maria).

Not surprisingly then, there are many who interpret the story of Pentecost as the inversion or reversal of the story of Babel. In Genesis, remember, God moves to confuse the speech of his people, who are consequently scattered over the face of the earth, no longer able to communicate with one another. In the story of Pentecost, we are told that there were “devout Jews of every nation living in Jerusalem.” In other words, there has been a gathering of those once scattered in the cosmopolitan centre of the Jewish world. The gift of tongues means that they are once again able to communicate with each other. Luke says that each one heard the gospel proclaimed in his mother tongue, so that what was once confused is now made plain again. The coming of the Holy Spirit makes possible the very sense of community, of oneness, that the confusion of Babel first undid. In short, Pentecost undoes Babel. Or at least, such is the point commonly made.

I submit, however, that such a view does a serious injustice both to the text, and to the ways of God. For I contend that the miracle of Pentecost is not the reversal of Babel, but the redemption of it.

Remember that before God confused the speech of the peoples at Babel, they all spoke one language. This means that Pentecost, if it was to effect a true reversal of the confusion of speech, would have had to return to the people a single tongue. But that is not what happened, is it? For there were as many languages after the day of Pentecost as there were before. What happened instead, is that people were empowered to speak each other's language, to reach into someone else's difference and identify with it.

This is no reversal of Babel. Rather, God takes the consequences of Babel, and without setting them aside, makes of them something wonderful. Not reversal, but redemption.

This is an important point to grasp, because I am persuaded that this is most often the general pattern of God's activity among us. Many of us live our lives as if all would be well if only we could return to some mythic past, to the glory days when the way we were was a whole lot better than the way we are. If only we could turn the clock back on COVID. If only the education system would teach multiplication tables or bring back the MacMillan Speller. If only we could have our old boss back. If only we could be re-negotiating CUSMA with a Democrat as president.

But stop. To carry on like this is to imply that "the way we were" was everything God ever intended for us anyway. That Eden was both the beginning and the end of the line. But I don't believe that. When I tutored theology at Trinity College, one of our favourite examination questions was, If human beings had never sinned, would God still have sent Jesus? The answer was, Yes. Yes, because Paradise was only the beginning of what God hoped for us. And salvation is thus almost never a matter of "getting back" to the way we were.

Salvation is a matter, rather, of allowing grace to possess our failings, to take them absolutely seriously, and to make something wonderful of them. Examples? (I mean, besides making a multicultural, multilingual mosaic of disparate nations?... God can make a great listener out of a shy person; a good preacher of the sharp-tongued; a compassionate visitor out of the chronically pained; responsible and grateful stewards out of the poor.

God isn't about to make us back into something we have long since ceased to be. The Christian vocation is not a matter of hankering after the glorious past (if indeed that past ever *was* glorious). Rather, the way of God is to take what we have done with our past, imperfect though our doing may be, and make something of it. Not to undo it, but to redeem it. This is the message of Pentecost.

Where we are headed, my friends, is not for the past, but for the glorious future.