

Pentecost
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

POWERFUL WORDS

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-11; John 14:23-31

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

he importance and the power of language cannot be overestimated. The ability to use language to communicate, it is said, is one of the things that distinguishes human beings from the animals. It is not that animals do not communicate, but they do not use language as we do. With grunts, growls and songs, they communicate basic things, like the need to mate, warnings to opponents and enemies, affection for the pack and the like; but they can not convey ideas and thoughts as human beings do. Man is made in God's image. And so God has made us with a special capacity for communication that is based upon His own way of communicating. God uses words to communicate. And therefore so do we.

And this gift of communication through language is a powerful thing. With language we can communicate to one another far more than our basic needs and urges, but our deepest thoughts and feelings. Communication through language helps build a bond between people, or drive a wedge, depending on how words are used.

But beyond this, language is also necessary for the sharing of knowledge, for organization of people and of society, industry and commerce; for technological development. And by language such things are not only conveyed from person to person, but from generation to generation and from one part of the world to another.

Without language, much of what we do in our lives would be gone. Think about it! No more television, radio, newspapers, or internet. No email. No blogging. No texting or tweeting. No phone calls. No books. No manuscripts. No papyri, etc. etc. All of these things would be meaningless without the ability to understand language.

And Words are power. With words you can do things. You can prove a point and convince someone of your position. You can proclaim truth or tell lies. If you try hard enough and use words with enough cunning, ingenuity and energy, you can even build an empire.

And that brings us to the plain of Shinar and a city called Babel. It is but a short time after the Great Flood. And the descendents of Noah have multiplied. The

people having journeyed eastward from where the Ark had landed, they come to plain of Shinar and begin to put the power of language to use. Moses tells us: "Then they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly... Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.'" So having spoken, having organized, having shared plans and technological knowhow, along with their great desire they build their tower.

Now what is wrong with this, one might ask? And the answer is several things. And we see what is wrong with this building program not from the fact that they built a city and a high tower, but from their words. For what reason do they set forth to build a city and tower? They give two reasons: to make a name for themselves, and to prevent their being scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth. Well, perhaps we can understand their desires. There is safety in numbers after all, and people almost always band together into communities and build villages, towns and cities. And if you are going to go to all the trouble of doing this, why not make your village, town or city impressive so that people recognize your greatness, industry and power? Folks have been doing that for as long as they have been gathering together into communities. So again, what is wrong with this?

What is wrong with this, is that their desires here are directly contrary to the command of God and to faith in God. When Noah and his family disembarked on Mount Ararat, the Lord gave them a simple command and a promise: "So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand...'" and then a few lines later the Lord continues: "Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man." So the Lord had already given them a name and honor. Each one of them was to be honored as a human being who was made after God's likeness. And all of the other creatures were put under their authority. What more of a name did they need? What more honor and respect did they desire than to be held up as the highest of God's creatures, who were to be considered like gods to the creatures under them? And so here we see their lack of faith. They did not want to live with the honor God had given them, but sought greater honor, they sought exaltation among themselves, and perhaps even exaltation on their own terms toward divinity. Let us make a tower that reaches into the heavens! Let God see what we can do! Let God see that we do not need to live under Him, but can manage just fine on our own.

And they directly disobey the command God had given them to fill the earth. Let us build this city, they say, so that we will not be scattered over the face of the earth. Let us build this city and stay right here where we want to dwell, rather than go as the Lord has commanded us. Let us live our lives on our terms, not His.

Words are powerful. And with words they deceived themselves and talked one another into unfaithfulness and unbelief. Just a few generations had passed since the Great Flood, and already they thrust God and His Word aside as those who had been destroyed in that terrible deluge had done before them. How quickly faith passes away! How powerful lying words can be!

And so the Lord put an end to their ambitions and to their lies and self-deceptions. He withdraws from them, in part, the gift of language. He confuses their speech so that they cannot understand one another any longer, so that they cannot plan and organize and work, so that they cannot scheme and deceive. He does this to curb their rebellion. But He also does this to call them to repentance, to remind them of their place, and of their need for His grace and favor. And He scatters them, so that they now fulfill that which was commanded, even though they do so not out of faith, but because they are now forced to move apart by God.

And ever since that day, language barriers have stood between people from different parts of the world. And with differences in language, we find differences in thoughts, philosophies, and culture; differences that can be just as difficult for one to surmount as the language barrier itself. Even today with all of our technology and learning, the language barrier remains a real barrier and challenge, whether it be something as minor as understanding your calculus teaching assistant who comes from Asia and can't speak English, or negotiating a contract for overseas trade, or conducting diplomatic relations for the State Department, the issue is the same: language and communication.

Today in the reading from Acts, we see a miraculous thing happen to the apostles and to those who heard them that day. The language barrier is removed by God. When the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles they began to speak, and everyone who was there heard them in their own native language. And they marveled. Not since the tower of Babel had there been one speech in the world. And they wonder "what could this mean?"

What this meant was that the Lord had fulfilled another ancient promise, a promise older than the one given to Noah, a promise that when all the way back to the Garden of Eden, that the Lord would send a Savior to redeem mankind from his sins, to restore humanity and reconcile it with God, and to usher in a new creation. Yes, Christ Jesus had come. He had spoken, acted, performed miracles, suffered, was crucified, and was raised up again to life on the third day. And now 50 days after that glorious resurrection, the living Lord was sending the Holy Spirit so that His Gospel would be heard and known, so that His forgiveness and life might be believed and received by all, and so that men might be changed, converted to the truth, created anew by the power of His words.

And so the Lord reverses what He did at Babel. Now His Gospel is heard by everyone who was there, regardless of language, culture, nationality or race. Where before there was confusion of language, now they hear the unified voices

of the apostles as they proclaim the one Gospel of Christ. Those people at Shinar built their city because they refused to go out into the world. Now these apostles, anointed with the Spirit of God, leave their city and venture forth to the ends of the earth, so that by the power of God's Word and Spirit the Gospel will be scattered among the nations. Those at Babel used their words to build a tower based on a lie in order to defy God's kingdom and mock His heaven; but the apostles now by the working of the Spirit proclaim truth in order to build the Church and expand the kingdom of God that men may gain heaven.

And now this Word has come, and still comes, to us. This language, this Word of God, is powerful to save you, for it is Spirit filled and Spirit breathed. As Jesus said: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you." The Word Christ sends by His Spirit conveys not just information, or emotion, or plans and organization and goals, but salvation and life and peace. And in this Word, we learn the one speech of the new creation. Oh, our language may be different than that of the Church in other parts of the world, but our words are the same, our confession is the same; for there is but one Gospel, just as there is but one Christ and one Spirit.

Too often we think and live like the people on the plain of Shinar. We make our plans, we deceive ourselves with convincing words, or are deceived by others. We want to make a name for ourselves. And so we build. But we must not forget our place as they did. We must not look to ourselves, but to Christ who has already given us a place and a name. He has already marked us with His name and given us a place in His kingdom. And that is a far greater name and a far greater future than we could ever build on our own. And so while we live in this world with its language and works, let us remember always that we belong to the new creation, the kingdom of the redeemed; for we have heard God's Word, received the Spirit's work, and believed on Christ, in whom alone we have the gift of truth, of real speech, of powerful words, of life, of salvation, of the Peace of Christ. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠