

Sermon for Pentecost 2026

I wonder if you have ever heard a sermon on the Tower of Babel? I haven't in almost half a century of church-going. Yes, we covered the story in Sunday school – but as a serious text with relevance for our modern lives, what has this peculiar text to say to us?

This story of the Tower of Babel ends the first section of the book of Genesis. In these first eleven chapters, the book describes the relationship between God and God's creation, especially humanity. From the beginning of Chapter 12, the story focuses in on Abraham and Sarah and their family and a new phase of God's revelation begins. So the Tower of Babel is the conclusion to the story that started in Genesis 1 with the account of creation. Before we get into Abraham's story and the evolution of God's people, Israel, these first eleven chapters set the distinctive foundation of the relationship this people will have with God.

Our ancient forebears regarded the world as a chaotic and dangerous place, shaped by capricious and frequently violent deities. In contrast, the Jewish faith spoke of a God who ordered creation and called it good. The orderliness was important – not because God is some sort of neat freak – but because it meant you knew who you were and where you stood. For healthy relationships to exist between God and creation, healthy boundaries were vital. The Hebrew word used for sin, literally means “to miss the mark” – to end up in the wrong place. In the old wording of the Lord's prayer, we speak of transgressions – we have strayed into a space which is not ours. Nowadays, people talking about “staying in your lane”, and anyone who drives the busy motorways of this region knows how dangerous it can be to veer into someone else's space. A respect for our limits can save a world of heartache.

In building this Tower, humankind are seeking to stray beyond their boundary. They are human and people of earth, God is the divine God of the heavens. They have no business attempting to cross that line and become like God, and yet that is what we find them trying to do. The building of a tall tower is not the problem. Forgetting that they are human and God is God is the problem. When humans forget their relationship to God, the result will only be disaster.

In his book on Genesis called “Covenant and Conversation”, the late Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks said this:

When human beings try to become more than human, they quickly become less than human. Only when God is God can man be man. That means keeping heaven and earth distinct, organizing the latter only under the conscious sovereignty of the former. Without this, there is little to prevent human beings from sacrificing the many for the sake of the few, or the few for the sake of the many. Only a respect for the integrity of creation stops human beings destroying themselves. Humility in the presence of divine order is our last, best safeguard against mankind aggregating to itself, power without restraint, might without right. Babel was the first civilization, but sadly not the last, to begin with a dream of utopia and end in a nightmare of hell.

The Tower of Babel story is a story, but it is rooted in a real moment in human history. The ancient civilisation of Mesopotamia discovered some key human technologies like the wheel and the arch. They also were the first to create kiln fired bricks which allowed them to build cities – and towers. The result was incredible ziggurats which could reach up to 300 feet tall. That is five feet taller than the old Cathedral spire!

Like many of the Hebrew scriptures, this little tale is full of wordplay which is not obvious to those of us reading in translation. This matters because one of those wordplays is around the word brick. In

Hebrew the sounds in the word brick are *l-v-n*. The mirror opposite of that word is *n-v-l*, and this word also appears in this story. Those are the sounds for the word that means confusion. In our Hebrew scriptures, these things are never accidental. The writer is wanting us to make a connection between these two words.

Bricks and confusion – that might seem a weird connection. Bricks seem fairly straightforward and solid after all. But if we recognize the brick as a new technology which enabled humans to do things they had not done before, that changed the way they saw and interacted with the world – well, perhaps we can see how that might be confusing. And if we think about some of the new technologies we are encountering today – artificial intelligence, the internet, genetic engineering – well, all of them have the potential for real good but all of them ask us some challenging ethical and philosophical questions. They are opening up possibilities and creating connections that were not possible before. That can be really confusing. So maybe what we need to link is not bricks and confusion, but technology and confusion.

In times of developing technology, new knowledge, rapid change and resulting confusion, the temptation is always to forget the limitations of our humanity and try to put ourselves in God's place – just like those forebears at Babel. We ignore the kind and healthy boundaries God has given us and set about creating divisions of our own. We try to deny the confusion by taking control.

We are undoubtedly in one of those seasons at present. AI and internet algorithms mean we no longer know what is true, and changes in our understanding of humanity, community and connectedness mean we sometimes forget who we are. Too often we forget our human limitations and turn not to God's wisdom, but to human power and seek that control. Look around you. Can you see people *aggregating to themselves, power without restraint, might without right* as Rabbi Sachs said. We control our borders, we control our bathrooms, we control who is in and who is out and fracture the human family. Difference is not a bad thing – God created incredible and rich diversity. The problem is when we can no longer understand and value one another and we see those who are different not as a gift but a threat. We look at those who in the orderliness of God are part of us and say that they are not us. Harm and heartache are the inevitable result.

Now some might be hearing this sermon as an attack on technology. But that is not what I am getting at. Some civilisations have tried to gain control in the confusion by rejecting technology, and this has never ended well. Human creativity and curiosity are incredible gifts from God, and responsible stewardship of those gifts does not mean neglecting to use them. The same human abilities which helped those early Mesopotamians invent bricks has helped later generations invent cures for diseases, develop more sustainable food production and build an ever growing understanding of this incredible planet we call home. I look forward to what beautiful, brave and generous things humanity might do next. But how do we negotiate this changing developing world with all its questions and confusions.

The Feast of Pentecost offers us an answer, for in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Godself personally and permanently to us, we find an antidote to confusion and division. In the gift of the Holy Spirit, the church finds new life, new peace and new understanding.

I love how both these readings allude back to the early chapter of Genesis. In Acts we see the mirror opposite to the events at Babel. The barriers of language are overcome and the people can understand the goodness of God. This is a direct consequence of what happened seven weeks before on Easter Day. As Paul writes in Ephesians, chapter 2: *For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.* The Spirit of God who raised Christ from the dead is now at work in a new way, pulling down the barriers we have

created between ourselves and God and one another, giving new understanding of God and one another. Confusion and our harmful attempts at control are swept away. What would our world look like if we understood that we belong to one another and understood the good purposes of God? How might we, empowered and enabled by God's Spirit, live that way today?

Our Gospel reading also refers back to Genesis. John's Gospel does in so many ways. It begins – in the prologue we read each Christmas - with the first words from Genesis, in the beginning. John is making it clear from his first words that this Jesus, whose story he will tell, is none other than God. John's Gospel ends in our reading today with that same Jesus breathing on his disciples, just as God breathes life into Adam in Genesis 2. But this time, God is not breathing on an individual but a community and that community is given peace, a purpose and the power to fulfil it. Filled with the Spirit of God, we have peace in the face of the world's confusion. We have the promise from earlier in John's Gospel that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth when a changing world leaves us wondering how to live. The final verse about forgiving and retaining sins is a peculiar one, but perhaps it suggests that when we work together in peace, inspired by and relying upon the Spirit of God, we may be able to offer grace and create healthy boundaries in the way that God does, rather than resorting to the destructive divisions to which humanity is prone.

Understanding, grace, peace, community, the ending of divisions and a shared hopeful purpose. That sounds an awful lot like reconciliation, doesn't it? And don't we need it? In a world that isn't so different to Bronze Age Babel – at least not in the way humans behave – where humans act like they are God and division is the consequence, we need the reconciling Spirit of God to guide us, to remind us who we are, to remind us that we belong to one another and to help us use our human gifts and capacities for good. So let us pray for a fresh infilling of God's Holy Spirit this Pentecost, for ourselves and for the Church. In a changing and challenging world, may we know God's peace, speak God's truth, share God's hope and offer God's welcome.