

Pentecost sermon by Andrew 9 June 2019

Come, let us build ourselves a tower with its top in the heavens...

So what is it with us human beings that we have to build things to impress? We're desperate to do stuff that will enable us to leave our mark, whether it's prime ministers wanting to leave a legacy, or Trump Tower with its golden lift (and I daresay gold taps too). And of course Hitler, a kind of failed architect himself, had a vision for Berlin filled with buildings to outdo ancient Rome, the would-be capitol of a thousand year reich.

Whether its ancient Babel, Babylon, or 1930's Berlin, or any of the vanity projects of our own day, it's all about pride. For Hitler it was about making a statement that the German people were the master race, and just like the Baylonians and the Romans before them they enslaved and murdered thousands, millions in the service of this delusion of grandeur. Fascism and Communism in the twentieth century aimed to show just how powerful they were by raising up huge buildings on an intimidating scale, deliberately calculated to make the individual feel small, insignificant. The nation, the race, the state were everything. God was banished from people's lives deliberately – or at least they tried to do that – the state was God.

An archaeology programme I saw just last night attributed the building of the Tower of Babel to our old friend Nebuchadnezzar who was the great potentate of the world of his time. He was the man. Nations trembled at the mention of his name. But God sees that for his people, the people he loves, this is going nowhere. Like the Hitler's great building projects it will be built by slaves, it will be built on the backs of people who should be free. It might give Nebuchadnezzar a warm, fuzzy feeling that he's just the ultimate ruler of all time, but nothing to do with it will bring anyone peace. No vanity project ever does, even just small scale stuff for ourselves. No-one but God should have the pre-eminence and the record of the world's atheistic totalitarian regimes of the past hundred years is testimony to what a disaster that is. An ideology can be a Tower of Babel, a false God that needs to be dethroned at all costs.

Just this week we've been remembering the D Day landings and giving thanks for all those young people who sacrificed and suffered so that the false God of Nazism could be dethroned and all its millions of captives set free. Nazism had a common language and an ideology through which it tried to impose an almost satanic rule over free peoples who had their own languages, their own beliefs. The Tower of Babel of the Third Reich burned books and burned people – they burned Jewish people and gypsies and gay people and people with any kind of disability in order to promote this heresy of one perfect master race, flawless and all speaking the one language of total superiority over other people.

This week we saw members of so many nations, the veterans in their nineties but surrounded by young people of this generation, speaking lots of different languages, but one language of hope and human freedom. It was beautiful to see and moving. Men who'd witnesses the worst that human beings can do to each other, and yet they laughed,

they sang, they danced, they cried and in moments they were silent before the beaches where their friends had died, but which they had survived.

Jesus talked about the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. It's a word which in modern English has become a bit debased or weakened. A kind of "there-there sort" of a word. But originally it means, from the Latin, to make strong – com/fort. It's a strengthening spirit. It's the Spirit that gives Peter and the apostles the courage to burst into the streets speaking a love language everyone can recognise when five minutes before they'd been huddled in an upper room too terrified to move.

On the night before D Day many of the men attended services, many received Communion, but whether they did or not they were alike imbued with a vision, a spirit that enabled them to face the unthinkable. This is the courage to face the darkness of this world, the darkness of the human heart, at times the darkness in our own hearts and minds – and, yes, you're afraid but the Spirit of God comes into your heart and gives you the strength to do more than you ever thought you could do, face more than you ever thought you could face. Paul to Timothy: For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

The Spirit is the one – people thought the apostles were drunk! – that bursts you out of that place of imprisonment and fear and enables you to lay hold of the life God promises. The enslavement of Europe in the Second World War was a monstrous evil; the enslavement of the Jews by the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Nazis cried out to heaven for justice. The unleashing of the Spirit of God in us, represented by tongues of fire, is the sign that God won't leave us to be enslaved by anyone or anything.

This is the language of Christian freedom that we need and it doesn't matter what your actual worldly language is. God gives to us a language of the heart that makes us one with our human brothers and sisters whoever they are – regardless of race or colour or creed or gender or sexuality or anything else. All the towers of all the would be thousand year empires fall to dust before the Cross and when the Spirit comes, when human beings realise the dignity God's given them, even the dust of all that vanity and pomp gets blown away.

The hymn, "All my hope on God is founded" puts it perfectly:

"Pride of man and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust; what with care and toil he buildeth, tower and temple fall to dust. But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower."

This is a spirit of human freedom to truly get drunk on. It's the Spirit of the God who won't let us be enslaved by anything, ever. Amen.