

Voices in our hearts

Acts 2:1-21, John 20: 19-23;

Rev Jean Shannon

A long time ago when I was on a long teaching tour in China, a good friend passed away. She was like a sister to me. She lived on the isle of Jersey. Her sister lived in the mid-west of the United States. I got the call from Eastern Australia and I was in yet another time zone in central China. I spent the whole night matching phone calls to time zones and the next day, I had the vacant stare of a person that inhabited no time or place at all. My Chinese hosts recognised something was wrong and organised a day off in a tea house with two Australians. They were complete strangers who had lived in China for a long time. My hosts recognised that what I needed most of all was to hear my own language.

The Yuin peoples had many dialects almost none survive today. There are remnants, some in the naming of places, some in the naming of things. Perhaps generations have passed snatches of old sayings down to their young ones. Holding tight to fragments of culture help define who we are. I cannot say how very important that is.

The Pentecost story is so powerful with all the dramatic wind and flame, yet, it is always the language part that speaks to me – literally. Each person has God whisper in their ear. It is both grand and collective and very, very personal.

Pentecost comes at the end of spring in the Northern Hemisphere so in the Jewish calendar, it coincides with a celebration of the spring harvest and a time of hope and promise. The season starts with Passover in April and carries on to the Autumn harvest festival in September. It is both an end and a beginning as the spring crops are juicy and ripe. They are celebrated during their short life. The summer crops are in the ground. When new crops are sown, hope is all a farmer has. The input costs are sunk and there is nothing yet to show but wait.

The celebration of the spring harvest is the birth of something new. The gestation is over. The birth is about leaving the past behind and coming forth with something shining and fresh – something promising. It is not surprising that the ‘birth’ of the church, the great harvest of souls should happen at this time of year.

The Pentecost narrative is all about new life: sudden, unmerited, irresistible and dynamic!

In Genesis, God breathed life across the earth. In John, Jesus tells his disciples ‘as the father has sent me, I am sending you’ and then he breathes on them – calling for them to receive the Holy Spirit. It sounds so gentle and so small compared to God’s breath across the earth.

But when we gather with the 11 disciples in Jerusalem – it was no gentle breath. “Suddenly a sound like a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house”. A sound that really got their attention and that is before ‘what seemed like’ tongues of fire separated and rested on each of them! Holy moly! And the spirit enabled them to speak in other tongues.

I don’t mean any disrespect to our Pentecostal brothers and sisters who sometimes feel the spirit move through them and speak in tongues even they don’t understand. It is a whole of body experience...but I have always heard this passage in a different way...one more closely related to ordinary human experience. Bear with me.

We all know people who are techno-phobic or mechano-phobic. You know the ones. When you try to explain what is wrong with their computer (or car), their eyes glaze over, their palms get sweaty and their whole body goes into some sort of agitated dance that doesn’t let information get in. You know the one, right? Maybe it’s you?

Well, most people travelling in a foreign place go through a stage that is similar. They are all keyed up because they don’t speak the language. They KNOW they don’t speak the language so every time anyone says anything to them – they go into a hyper-state of denial and their ears close up. But honestly, after you’ve been there a while, once you relax, (or maybe have some wine) communication starts to happen. You may notice ‘loan words’ like ‘cafeteria’; ‘buffet’ or ‘bus’... or maybe inflection and context tells you something that helps you understand the question, “coffee or tea?” I had no problem discerning ‘tsunami’ in the middle of a garbled Kanak accented French sentence. The point is, you have to open to it. And once you are relaxed and open to it, surprisingly, you understand a whole lot more than you thought – especially in overheard conversations that don’t require a response. In other words, no pressure.

There is no historical basis for how I read this passage. It just feels right that this crowd that has come together through a shared ‘holy-moly’ experience feel more like a brotherhood. Because of that shared experience – and *because* they are now comfortable with each other, they are aware that they can hear and understand a whole lot more than they ever thought before. The foreign tongues – are not so foreign now. Even if it is as simple as ‘hello’ and ‘thank you’, people are empowered to bridge the gap. If God is going to create a church family. I think getting them to understand each other – even a little, would be a good first step. Open their ears and we will open their hearts.

They have had a spectacular experience that has bonded them. It brought them together as a crowd even though they came from far ends of the known universe. God whispers to each in their own language and they understand something so much

greater than where they come from. This also reflects the God of Isaiah, the one that is not locked in the arc – the one that is everywhere and speaks to everyone.

Not everyone drinks the cool-aid. Not everyone buys into the experience. Perhaps they are drunk, or just mass hysteria... but Peter says no, too early to be drunk. It is the prophets speaking. The past is laying on the future just as it is with sowing or gestation. What happened then – gives birth now.

Some read the outpouring of the spirit as a prelude to disaster as predicted in the scriptures – the end times, the sky will darken etc... but to Peter the prediction had been fulfilled in Jesus. In other words, disaster has already struck – and it proves that the end is the birth of the story. It proves that the story, Christ's purpose is nothing short of regeneration of humankind. 'The Spirit has invaded human life in ways that shatter old expectations. It is not death that is the aim of the Spirit's visitation but new life.'¹

No matter what language – everyone who calls the name of the Lord will be one. To call on unity without celebrating diversity is to confuse unity with uniformity.

We have made that mistake in the past. Much of our former social policies directed at Aboriginal people was to make them just like us. Putting aside truly horrifying ethnic cleansing incursions which ultimately we can't do ... but for a moment, even without death and destruction, to obliterate ones culture or language is to erase that person.²

Over the years, patiently, we have been taught to understand a few of first peoples' artistic symbols. We have come to appreciate the art. We are beginning to understand traditional land management. We know now how differently we see creation and her wonders. It is like those first few words we can recognise when first we start to relax. In the 70s & 80s, some South Australian primary schools taught Pitjantjara – even in white, affluent neighbourhoods. It means there is a small part of a generation who don't hear those words as foreign. They are part of their childhood memories. Somewhere in that generation, there is a little Pitjantjara voice in their hearts.

One day, I hope we will hear the word of God not just whispered in our ears but also in the voice of the Yuin people; in the voices of all our indigenous and migrated cultures and in the joyous sounds that ring across the land and get our collective attention. So I pray...

Holy spirit – let me fall to sleep tonight wrapped in a gentle cacophony of prayer.
Amen.

¹ Brueggemann, Cousar et al, Texts for Preaching, Year A p.330

² This is what Putin hopes to do in the Ukraine.