

Go High For Me

Genesis 11:1-9

We are in the our series of stories called Grace Gatherings
They all have something in common
A story in Genesis which is ancient and rich and archetypal
Which means that within it we find our own human story
They are usually a story of human failure
And of God finding a way through to the future through that failure

And each of them in that way point to the death and resurrection of Jesus
Who is the grace to the future through all human failure.

I also like many of them because we don't preach or pay attention to them too often.

So once again find yourself in this story of the tower.

At the end of the genealogies of Genesis chapter 10, when we have already heard the story of the multiple languages being born, and of the story of a number of cities in the land of Shinar, including one called Babel, the text then comes back on itself, as if to say - you need to know the story of language, and you need to know the story of this city.

Because its an important story for all the earth...

So lets begin our story in Genesis chapter 11 verse 1...

And there was in all the earth, one tongue, and the same words.

Now fans here of unity,
Or fans of this language here

Kaj estis sur la tuta tero unu lingvo kaj la samaj vortoj.

Would be fans of this verse - all this oneness.

Surprisingly, undifferentiated one-ness doesn't have much of a precedent in the creation story, instead there seems to be an appetite from God for all sorts of different kinds of things. God loves difference...

Day 3 we get
Fruit trees of every kind
Plants yielding seed of every kind
Trees of every kind

Day 5
Fish of every kind
Birds of every kind

Day 6

Cattle and creeping things and wild animals of every kind

When we get the creation of women and men

We get two

Male and female he created them

God loves diversity

The word one hardly appears in Genesis up to this verse in verse 11

Except for the third day where God gathers the waters into one place

But the waters (plural) are referred to as seas

And in Genesis 2, the male and female become one

But that is a one, that is made up of two different kinds.

So when we see in Genesis 11:1

And there was in all the earth, one tongue, and the same words.

We might choose to be a little bit suspicious of this one-ness,

Because it doesn't sound very Genesis-y.

There is a crying out for more variety

We should view this as a we would a meal made of eggs, omelette and

Potatoes, waffles, and chips

So there is one language, and everybody is using the same words

This is a world without even accents.

And then this

And it was, in setting out from the East, and they found the valley of Shinar, and they settled there.

This at this points seems to be a reference to all people, and perhaps also a note of concern because we will remember from Genesis 1:28 - be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth

Don't stop at Shinar.

And now the neighbours start talking to each other,

We could brick some bricks

And we could burn some burnings

For they had stone for bricks

And bitumen for mortar

So there is technology and raw materials to hand.

Come they say, lets make a name for ourselves - this is slightly concerning, because once again it's

And build a city - the Bible is ambiguous about cities, but for the moment lets allow that one to

be okay

And let us build a tower that reaches to the heavens

And make a name for ourselves...

So that is interesting - the tower is not an object for worship
It is an object to point to our own brilliance,

Highest towers in the world - Pyramid until Lincoln Cathedral in 1311 - until its tower fell down
and then a series of cathedrals then the Washington Monument - 169 - 1884

Eiffel tower 312m Paris which held the title for 36 years

Then the Chrysler building 1930 - 319

Then the Empire State Building in 1931 - 381

Ostankino Tower - Moscow - 540

CN Tower - Canada - 553 - 32 years

Burj Khalifa - Dubai- 829 - 2007

Would you say that any of these were about people making a name for themselves, or were they just trying to solve the problem of lack of land space so they built up.

And then here is the interesting phrase

In Genesis 11: 4

"Lest we be scattered across the face of the whole earth"

It seems that the root cause of this impressive building

Is actually fear of being scattered

But actually that scattering is the plan that God has

So this is a rebellion against the plan of God to send us wide

And we want to stick together, and stay safe, because the word of God is too scary

But we dress our fear up in the language of impressive technology and enterprise.

Now we get God's intervention - verse 5 - and note by the way the plural for God, which is used here, and I can't help but thinking is interesting from a Christian Trinitarian point of view, but also in a text which is against monolithic one-ness we see God describing God's self in the plural.

And God went down - so this is one meant to reach up to the heavens

But God still goes down to it- so our loftiest enterprises never reach to God

And God sees what the sons of Adam - sounds of the earth, the earthlings have made..

There's also a Hebrew aliteration going on there - Benu Benai HaAdam

Now though God has had to go down, God is concerned

Because if these people can keep doing this

If they have one tongue and one people, this will only be the start of what they can do

And they will not be cut off from everything they want to do.

Now lovers of human enterprise would have no problem with this

That this is the possibility of human ingenuity

But remember this is being remembered by a people for whom the making of bricks is closely linked to slavery - as is the building of towers

And this is about the power of empires to be able to do anything

So God says - Come and we will go down - a deliberate echo of the humans saying "Come and let us build for ourselves a city"

And we are going to confuse their language
So all those neighbour conversations that they had
Those are not going to be able to happen any more
You will have a different language from your neighbour

So just remember that having neighbours who have a different language from you is a gift from God

So God scatters them across the face of the earth, and they cease from building...
And the name of the place is called Babel which seems to have a lot of memories of Babylon
Which will one day become the enemy...

So what do we make of this story..

1. Is the end of this punishment a gift or a curse..

The story is that your failure to build a tower rooted in fear
Turns out to be a blessing.

I think this is a parable that God stands against human enterprise which seems to use the language of co-operation and building, but which is rooted in fear..

It is about our vanity projects, and against the idea that we can do anything if we speak the one language.

It is about the way that empires like to impose a language, or harness technology or bring about a language and think that they can do anything - and given the name coincidence of Babel and Babylon and the memory of Egypt, this is about the wariness of empires, and one-ness, and Romans, and I think this is about Communist Russia, and I think it is about Facebook...
Beware the empire of one-ness and expansion, rooted in fear..

I think this is about our project plans. Sometimes in the Church of Scotland we think we can plan and co-ordinate our way out of our current difficulties.

This is about human hubris.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow - TS Eliot

There's more to do than the bidding it can be done - Charles I

The best things just happened... sometimes, rather than were planned
Renewal movements,
24/7 prayer

We are always in the search for levers that will build the tower and remove our fear - and they do not exist..

Viktor Chernomyrdin - We tried to do things better, but everything turned out as usual

I have never seen a project plan which made its targets, or a flow chart which generated life

It is always somewhere else.

The Parisians hated the Eiffel Tower

I don't think that the people of Dubai are less fearful because they have a great tower
Any more than the people of New York wanted more skyscrapers - what they really needed were more parks; and they got more parks, but the scandal of the city was that they forgot diversity and built them for the white people only.

Our monocultural plans and tasks are as nothing, to the move of God.

2. I find this very interesting that the people here gather together to avoid doing the thing that God has asked them to do

God asks us to go to vulnerability and to new places and we are scared to go there
And the gift of failure is the challenge of having to enact that which God has called us to.

Something about confronting our fears - possibly talk about speaking to young people, speaking to middle classes and working classes

We can play safe and keep to our one culture...

But the Church and possibly heavy metal are the places we are meant to reach across a diversity

It's interesting that the language is used is different for the same thing

The people in this story speak of their fear of being scattered, which means that their relationship with their past and with the people of their past has been stretched;

Which is that God uses the language of filled, which is about relationship to all creation, which is about the potential to do something new in a new space, and in that space, the only thing that you can do is rely on God...

And as Paul would later write, that any faith which isn't about total trust in God, and in God's new thing, and which clings to the familiar, isn't faith, Faith turns scattering into filling. Discovers that our biggest fears were holding us back from our biggest blessing.

So that this text is about

3. And I think this is a story which stands in counterpoint to Pentecost
In which the gift of languages but languages which can now be heard and understood in the service of a Church which realises that it needs to go out

That we are sent out in the Spirit to Babel, in many languages
But we all hear each other speak of God
And we are not God.

And that leads to two things

There is the Jerusalem Church which stays in the same place and does not really change and for a while is very powerful and seemingly very successful, but gone within two generations.

And the Churches lead by Paul which moved out, and in moving out, they had to face new questions, and discover that God could still be with them, even when their practice radically changed, they discovered the same God.

This is a story about movement out, fragile, frightening movement not to fill the Church but to fill the earth.

What does that look like?

It will not consist in saying
Oh what a wonderful tower we built
Or what a wonderful community which is in the plain and is now safe

It will come from God
It will root in a move into newness
It will be characterised by diversity (and yes at first confusion)

This is the moving out which will lead us very soon to Abraham and then to Isaac
It will lead also to Egypt and to Babylon
But eventually it will also lead us to Jesus
And Pentecost
And the New Jerusalem

AMEN