

Sermon: What Does This Mean?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 19, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I grew up under linguistic divides, first in Taiwan, then later here in Canada.

Taiwan in the 70's and 80's was still under a martial law, imposed by the KMT, or the Nationalist Party. Shortly after losing the Chinese Civil War against the Communists in 1949, the KMT retreated to Taiwan, set up shop, and imposed a prolonged martial law that would last for the next 38 years.

Growing up in the norther part of Taiwan, we were taught in school to speak Mandarin and only Mandarin, the official language of the Republic of China—differentiated from the People's Republic of China. The People's Republic of China is the Communists in the mainland, but the Republic of China is the KMT government in Taiwan. Confusing enough? I know.

Anyway, the Mandarin language was imposed as the official language of both regimes, the imperial language that unifies China across the Taiwan strait. Taiwanese, as a local dialect and my actual mother tongue, was frowned upon. I recall being taught in school, to refrain from using it, and was actually shamed and punished when I accidentally let it slip. My parents spoke Taiwanese to each other, but would switch to Mandarin when speaking to us kids. At the time, I did not quite understand that linguistic divide, but simply accepted it as a daily reality of growing up in Taiwan.

When I immigrated to Canada at the age of 14, first to Lethbridge then to Vancouver, I had to learn English. Sure I took English courses in Taiwan, but it was fairly rudimentary and not quite sufficient. A good part of my first few years in Canada was devoted into forgetting Mandarin and picking up this new language, both for schooling and socializing. I recall the glee I felt when the first time I dreamed in English. That was a serious break through; finally I had arrived!

Then for immigration purpose, we relocated to Montreal, and the process to learn a new language restarted all over again, this time to learn French. That I did not fair so well. A good part of the reason was my

parents' decision to send my sister and I to an English private boarding school. French was just a course that I struggle to pass. Truth be told, I resisted the language. I was growing somewhat a rebellious streak, and being imposed by the Quebec government, under Bill 101, to learn French, did not sit well with me. Failing the conversational component of the provincial exam, threw my educational track into chaos, but that's another story all together.

There is a self-deprecating term, circulated among the Quebec Anglos, that aptly described my predicament—'dysfunctional bilingual'. But in my case in particular, I was a dysfunctional quadri-lingual, the linguistic divide incarnated.

On a personal level, languages facilitate communication, and it is always good to be fluent in more languages, in order to have better communication. But on a societal level, language is a tool used by powers and principalities to foster civic unity, and it is often wielded and imposed through violence and coercion. In the book *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, "The Imperial City has been at pains to impose on conquered people not only her yoke but her language also, as a bond of peace and fellowship." Augustine acknowledges that, in so far as language enables communication, it is a good thing. "But think of the cost of this achievement", he writes, "The scale of those wars, with all that slaughter of human beings, all the human blood that was shed!" Allow me to quote Isaac S. Villegas, an ordained minister in Mennonite Church USA, contributing to a recent online article in the Christian Century magazine, who wrote, "Language is a battlefield. Our tongues have always been the terrain of struggle."

Our first reading today, of Genesis 11, takes us to a time of pre-history, when humankind were united in one language and one tongue. Such condition wasn't imposed upon them by any power or principality, it simply was. Through such an unity, industry of bricks, bitumen, fire and mortar sprung. But instead of channeling such human ingenuity for good, these early people said to themselves, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves."

It was a selfish and self-serving end they sought—to make a name. It was to be accomplished by challenging the Creator—by building a tower to rival the heavens. Pride was their folly, pure and simple. And to such a prideful people, the Lord watched from heaven, came down and confused

their language, thus scattering them abroad over the face of all the earth. The unfinished city and tower was called Babel, which in the Hebrew language means 'to confuse', because the Lord confused the language of all the earth.

Unity of language was not the problem. The problem has always been what people do with such unity, when unity in anything is actually achieved. Do we use it for good or for evil? Do we employ it to further one's own ambition, or to bring blessings to many? That's the issue.

The story of Babel finds its theological counterpart in the story of the Pentecost. The passage of Acts 2, is familiar to many of us, because it is a story of the birth of the Church. The apostles and disciples of Jesus were told by Jesus, at his Ascension, to wait in Jerusalem, and to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, as Comforter and Advocate, who will empower them to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ their Lord.

So came the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which took place took place fifty days after the Passover, during what was supposed to be a harvest festival when new wines flowed freely. When the Spirit did come, it came like a sound of rushing wind, with divided tongues of fire resting on each of them. All of them, filled with the Holy Spirit, began to speak in tongues or other languages.

The linguistic reality of the day deserves an explanation. The Jews gathered in Jerusalem that day were from pretty much all corners of the Roman Empire. They were expats who had returned to the city, for however brief period time, as pilgrims, to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord. The language of worship in the Temple, would have been Hebrew, which is also the language of the Scripture. The language commonly spoken by the people in Jerusalem, however, would have been Aramaic, the official language of the long deceased Babylonian Empire. Greek would have been the common language of the Roman Empire, and understood by most expats.

However, the languages that flowed out of the mouths of the apostles during Pentecost, were not Hebrew, nor Aramaic, nor Greek, but the local native tongues of pretty much all corners of the Empire. 15 specific regions were named—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. More were probably spoken that day.

Now we should keep in mind, these apostles were mostly Judean who had never set foot in any of those named region, so how could they be speaking fluently in these local and native tongues. What exactly were they saying? We do not know for sure, but only that they were understood, not by all, but by some. That whole scene must have been quite confusing, prompting some to ask, “What does this mean?”, and others to scoff, “They are filled with [a bit too much] new wine.”

What does this mean? Good question! Well, we can right away discount the theory of too much wine. We also learn later in Acts 2, the apostles were testifying to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, as foretold in the Hebrew Scripture.

On a deeper level of theological understanding, connecting the Pentecost story to that of Babel, gives us a clue about who God is. God does not speak in a universal language. God does not impose nor coerce a superficial unity. Rather, the Spirit of God delights in communicating in every tongue. Every language is set apart, every dialect holy—they are all the incarnation of God’s living Word expressed in a plurality of different tongues.

In a way, God affirms the holiness of human differences, not just our languages, but cultures as well. The only unity worth pursuing, is unity in Spirit and unity in Christ Jesus as Lord. The only attitude worth seeking, is to humble ourselves before God, and serve to further the Gospel.

Humanity made a mistake at Babel. Here in Church, we get to correct that mistake, a second chance. The multitude of languages employed in our worship today, is only but a glimpse, a taste of the Kingdom to come. Until that day in the Heavenly assembly, where all nations shall gather, all people shall come before the throne, and all knees shall bow, all tongues shall confess that Jesus is Lord.

And the most surprising thing that day is we will all understand.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**