SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: 26/5/2023: PENTECOST:

ACTS 2:1-13:GEOFF CHADWICK:

"GOD IS NOT A FOREIGNER BECAUSE HE SPEAKS TO US IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE"

Today is that great day of Pentecost where we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit onto the church. It is a day full of rich symbolism: fire, wind, and language. Today I want to focus on language. At the first Pentecost the early believers spoke of "God's deeds of power" in various languages. The symbolism is clear: the events of Pentecost tell us that God wants to speak to us in our own language.

For the early church this was a revolutionary idea. The early church members grew up in an era where the Scriptures were written in Hebrew and Greek. In order to understand them you would have to study the language. Interestingly, the universal language of the time was Greek – hence the NT was in Greek so that most people could have access to it, but the day of Pentecost goes beyond the Universal language – it mentions the specific – the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cappadocians, Asians, Egyptians and the rest! God takes the initiative in showing that he is not a foreigner. By speaking in specific languages God shows his desire to be with people of all identities.

Language gives identity. "In the 1880's a police trooper in the Northern Flinders Rangers [of Australia] ... asked the [aboriginal] people [there] what the name of their tribe was. They told him 'Nimbarlda – the people who talk like us!' He then asked them what the name of their language was, and they said 'Ngatyuarlda', which means 'our talk' (Tunbridge, 1992, p20).

We all belong to the people of "our talk", yet Pentecost tells us that God belongs to every group of "our talks". By speaking every language God is not distant, God is not a foreigner, God converses in a language we understand. God is multilingual!

The implication for the people of God (ie the Church) is that we also must be multilingual. The message of God should not be confined to a particular language form but should be expressed as widely as possible. Unfortunately, the church hasn't always recognised this fact.

After the first Pentecost there has been a number of "mini- Pentecosts throughout history. During the 3rd Century there was a mini-Pentecost when the Scriptures were translated into Latin at the spread of the Roman Empire. The Gospel message thus became universal as it became expressed in the new universal language of the time. (Latin took over from Greek). Even so, a strange thing happened. As the Roman Empire fell away and it became swamped with a plethora of strange languages; instead of embracing those languages and endeavouring to communicate the Gospel afresh, the church stuck to its Latin. The language of religion remained foreign until the 16th Century (and for modern Catholics until the 1960s). The services were in Latin, (including the sermon!) and theological students had to converse in Latin. This did promote a sort of universalism whereby religious language was common everywhere, but it also meant that only the educated could really understand religious talk. This seems a far cry from that first Pentecost where the message of God was clearly heard in the language of the everyday people.

In the 16th Century another "mini Pentecost" occurred. The English church decided that religious language should be in the language of the people. Article 24 of the 39 Articles of Religion of 1552 (you can find them in the back of the Prayerbook) states:

> "It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church, to have publick Prayer in the Church, or to minister the Sacraments in a tongue not understanded of the people" (APBA, 1995, p 830).

This Article led to the formation of various English prayerbooks and the publication of the Authorised or King James Version of the bible. Scripture, worship and all sermons were to be in the language of the common people. Once again God "talked like us" and was no longer a foreigner.

But what happened? The English church got stuck into a sort of time warp and the original reason for the English Prayerbook, particularly the 1662 prayerbook, (that the people would have public prayer in a language "understanded of the people") was lost. Even though the English language changed considerably over the next 300 years no real revision of the Prayerbook was done until 1928. (Although the English Parliament rejected it twice for being too modern!)

Another mini-Pentecost occurred in 1978 when Australia published An Australian Prayerbook, one of the first in Modern English. Most other Anglican Provinces soon followed – including England in 1980 with the Alternative Service Book. (This time not rejected by parliament). Furthermore, a number of new translations of the English bible have been produced this century. Each of these has various advantages and disadvantages but they have all had the same purpose – to minister in a tongue "understanded of the people." I know of a number of people who have said that the first time they understood the bible was when they read the Good News Bible. More recently, we have updated our Prayerbook and have moved to using the New Revised Standard Version of the bible to overcome some of the deficiencies in the older editions.

Now I know many of us are fond of the old language. The beautiful rhythms of the 1662 prayerbook and the poetry of the King James Bible are dear to us. This is true, but if we

take the Pentecost message seriously, and if we want to follow in the wisdom of the formulators of the old Prayerbook and Bible, then we are challenged to ensure that our public prayer and administration the sacraments is in a language that is "understanded by the people". God is not a foreigner – God talks like us!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Tunbridge, P., 1992, "Why Translate into 'Dying' Languages?", Zadok Perspectives, No.37, April 1992.