



Keep the Unity

Bible Study on Ephesians 4:1-7 and 11-16

By Azucena Rosal. Ordained Minister of the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala.

4 *“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.”*

11 *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Ephesians 4:1–7 and 11-16 (NIV)

Introduction

Today’s reader of the letters to the first century Christian communities tends to think they were similar to our contemporary church communities. We are inclined to think of them as tight-knit groups of families and individuals with the same geographical and ethnic origins, who all spoke the same language. However, a closer look at the biblical texts and other research examining the social make-up of those communities

suggests this picture is not historically accurate. We find that the early Christian communities were, in fact, very diverse.

Our own context is the same. Christianity comes in many different shapes and sizes. Relationships within faith communities and the ways in which different groups of Christians relate to each other are often fraught with tension. Division is more common than unity. The biblical message to today's Christians is no different than it was to those early communities. We are called to unite, not just around the fundamental theological truth regarding the work of Christ on the cross, but also in our attitudes and behaviour as communities forming the Body of Christ. So, let's dig a bit deeper into the meaning of the text.

“This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.”
Ephesians 1:10, Good News Translation

A circular letter to many different churches

It is generally thought today that the document we call the “letter to the Ephesians” was really more of a circular letter to a number of churches near Ephesus and in the area around the Lycus River valley. When the scribes of ancient times copied the letter for the benefit of anyone who might have been interested, they added to the phrase in verse 1a: “To God’s people **in Ephesus**”. The words in bold are not included in all manuscripts.

The situations faced by the churches of Asia Minor inspired this letter to the Ephesians, traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul. It is interesting for us to look closer at some of these topics.

Huge diversity

The population makeup of the early faith communities was not homogenous. Followers of the new religion came from many different religious and ethnic traditions. There were Jews, Jewish proselytes, and devout people from other sects around at the time.

Within the emerging churches, there were those who were rather intolerant. Amongst these groups were the so-called “Judaizers”, a group that had, for various reasons, mainly emigrated to Asia Minor, which focussed on Judaism of the second temple and insisted on keeping their own rites and cultural traditions such as, for example, circumcision. They did not try to dialogue or discuss others’ beliefs but preferred to use force to impose their beliefs on other believers whose roots were not in Judaism. It is believed that conflicts such as these were what led the early communities to call the church council meeting in Jerusalem that we read about in Acts 15.

Many converts from other religions were attracted by the message of liberating grace. Amongst them were the marginalised of society. Some were not used to exercising self-control and ended up troubling the consciences of the more conventional.

Other converts had been born and raised in religious cults of the time, such as the worship of the goddess Artemis, as the goddess Diana is known in Greek. This cult was born of many different traditions and religions associated with farming, a common occupation of the time. Hence the need for a goddess who would grant blessings on sowing and ensure a good harvest. Some of the beliefs and practices of this cult were at odds with the principles of Christian faith.

Early Christians were not unaware of all these tensions and the call to unity in the letter to the Ephesians is a direct response to this problem.

A profound concept

The New Testament writers use figurative language to try to explain the unity of the church, which all of them see as a tool to demonstrate God's glory. Many pictures are used, including the body, a building, a house being built, human development from birth to maturity, marriage and a farmer's field.

From an academic point of view, it could be argued that all these metaphors were used to help explain a new concept to those early Christian converts to a religion that contrasted greatly with anything they had known before - financially, politically and culturally.

They were clearly being invited to unite without feigning uniformity. And the overall message of the letter is even more ambitious, maintaining that not only should the communities of faith be united, but that God's purpose is actually "to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head." (v. 1:10)

The "how" of unity

This letter is not just a doctrinal manual of the "What" or "Why", but an answer to the question of "How?"

This study considers some of the "hows" of unity, without attempting to cover every possible angle:

- God does not call us to separate ourselves to the exclusion of others. At the centre of God's call to all humanity and to each individual there is an emphasis on unity that transcends any matter that might potentially cause division. (Ephesians 4:1-2). Christians are called to live peacefully and actively seek unity (v.2).
- Almost all religions, by their very nature, are seeking truth. The truth proclaimed in Christianity is seen through the message and the actions of Jesus, which is a message of **loving truth**. This **loving truth** is what enables Christians to practice unity in diversity.
- Those who have genuine faith in the God of Jesus have left behind intolerance and sectarianism because the grace of God leads them to be **humble, loving and patient**.
- In Christian communities, like in music, each instrument comes together to contribute to one marvellous, harmonious whole. Churches like Ephesus were evidence of the fact that each individual had been filled with grace (v. 4:7). The early churches grew, not as a result of paternalism, that is to say because of what the apostles, prophets and evangelists did, but together (v. 11). The actions of each individual strengthened the community (v. 16). Each person was valued, respected and affirmed, not just because of the grace of God in them but because they played a part in creating a loving, harmonious whole.

Reflection questions

1. In your own community of faith, what are the main causes of division? Sometimes the problems communities face are like an iceberg – the problems are just the visible part, but the real roots are hidden underwater.
2. How can we value the grace God has given to each individual? How does the grace within each individual contribute to growth in unity?
3. When we relate to people who are different in any way within the church, whether it is race, character, language, dress, ideologies, sexual orientation, do we practice “loving truth” or just act based on our own opinions?

“Whoever sings, prays twice”

Let’s sing “Many Are the Lightbeams” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5V_ZNvnPpA), a Swedish song that has been translated into German, English and Spanish.

*Many are the light-beams from the one light. Our one light is Jesus.
Many are the light-beams from the one light; we are one in Christ.*

*Many are the branches of the one tree. Our one tree is Jesus.
Many are the branches of the one tree; we are one in Christ.*

*Many are the gifts giv’n, love is all one. Love’s the gift of Jesus.
Many are the gifts giv’n, love is all one; we are one in Christ.*

*Many ways to serve God, the Spirit is one; the servant spirit of Jesus.
Many ways to serve God, the Spirit is one; we are one in Christ.*

*Many are the members, the body is one; members all of Jesus.
Many are the members, the body is one; we are one in Christ.*



Jesus' ministry

Prophetic, multi-ethnic and multicultural

By Berla Andrade, Caracas, Venezuela

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"

"Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a

widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Luke 4: 14-29 (NIV)

Reflection

The marks of a prophet are unmistakable. A prophet speaks out when they see silence and indifference to the suffering and oppression felt by victims of an unjust society that does not treat people equally. They dare to engage with reality with the compassion the Divine One has for those who are victimised. Prophets are used to being different, and spend their whole lives doing things differently, exposing injustice and encouraging change and conversion.

Jesus not only was a prophet, but he acted like one. His life was an example of Israel's prophetic tradition. We cannot ignore the prophetic dimension of Jesus' ministry or the driving force of the divine *Ruah* guiding and motivating him to make dignity a reality for all people.

They may have shouted in Galilee, “a great prophet has appeared among us”, but in Nazareth they refused to embrace his inclusive vision and “they got up [and] drove him out of the town ...”. As the church and as followers of Jesus, we cannot ignore the prophetic dimension of the ministry of Jesus of Galilee. Jesus taught “in their synagogues”. Luke shows us a Jesus rooted in Jewish tradition, loyal to the synagogue, a Sabbath observer. What he read out in the synagogue is the oldest account we have of a synagogue service. There is evidence that the Law was read in cycles and the reader was permitted to choose their own text. Jesus' choice shows who he had come for – the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. The very nation in which Jesus was reading was a poor, captive and oppressed nation. Jesus' vision was all-encompassing, inclusive and broad. He reached out to Jews and Gentiles alike. A study of the text reveals that many of his listeners did not share Jesus' inclusive, multi-ethnic and multicultural perspective. Luke quotes Isaiah to prove the prophetic and inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry, a ministry that did not discriminate between Jews and Gentiles, one race or another, one culture or another. This characteristic of Jesus is woven through the gospels and is intrinsic to his mission. It is interesting to note that Jesus' reflection and explanation of the text from Isaiah which he read out in the synagogue is about salvation, not judgement, inclusion, not exclusion. That was indeed good news for vulnerable people.

Jesus' prophetic message still rings out today. The waiting is over. The promises are fulfilled. He declares a new time, “the year of the Lord's favour”, the year of Jubilee – the return of the Jews to the land of their ancestors, forgiveness of debts, freedom for the slaves. A real year of Jubilee, a time of hope.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed his mission in Nazareth, announcing the year of Jubilee, the time of grace, the symbol of the great ideal, the advent of a society free of injustice, inequality and discrimination, free of xenophobic prejudice, ready to meet otherness and change.

Reflection questions

1. Do we feel the need to awaken a prophetic spirit in our ministry to the community?
2. What would be the equivalent, in our own times, of a Christianity with Jesus' prophetic spirit in a church that we could call multi-ethnic and multicultural?
3. From the perspective of a multi-ethnic and multicultural church, what does it mean to learn to live according to the prophetic spirit of Jesus' ministry?
4. Jesus read out a text of his own choice in the synagogue. What does that tell us about reading the sacred text in our communities? What relationship do we find between the reading of this text and Jesus' practice?
5. Jesus felt called by the Holy Spirit. How did that manifest in him? What does that tell us about the relationship between spirituality and lifestyle?
6. Could you describe the multi-ethnic and multicultural character of Jesus' prophetic ministry in the light of this biblical text we are reflecting on?

Prayer

Spirit of the Divine One, breathe into us new life. Send us out to those who are vulnerable and those who are different. Amen.



The Power of God in Knowing the Other

God's vision of a community of love and belonging

By Drew Jennings-Grisham

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

Acts 1:6-8, 2:1-11 (NIV)

Reflection

In the opening of Acts, Jesus' disciples are trying to wrap their heads around the meaning of the resurrection. The leader of their movement has defeated death, the ultimate power that has always

stopped movements short. Whether through legal or illegal means, violence and death have always been the powers used by people to control and dominate others. But now Jesus is alive again! So the disciples come to him and ask him: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

As a people who have been the victims of oppression and imperial occupation and who long for the vision of restoration God gave them in the prophets, Jesus’ friends see that perhaps now that they have an invincible leader this is the moment to take power to overthrow their oppressor and restore Israelite control over their territory. They reflect the common human desire to live in peace and security in community, but their imaginations are captive to the world’s way of trying to secure this dream—by exercising power over others, using power to protect boundaries and force anyone who would be a part of the community to assimilate or disappear.

Jesus does not reject their question. He understands their desire. And interestingly, he responds that they will indeed receive power. But we find in Acts 2 that our desire for security, comfort and just relationships in community will not be realised by exerting force over others. In this episode, the power Jesus promised his disciples does come through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, but it is not the power to overcome the enemy that they hoped for. Instead, we find the Spirit empowering them to speak in the mother tongues of other nations.

People from all parts of the Roman empire, from many different languages and cultures, all seeking God, heard the disciples’ words in their own native languages! God’s dream of reconciling all things is for all people, to be heard and understood in the most intimate of languages, that which our mothers spoke to us as children, that which touches our hearts and speaks to us most deeply. God enters into our cultures, and the Spirit here is revealing to this new community of Jesus-followers that in order to demonstrate who Jesus is to the world they also are to cross boundaries and enter into an intimate embrace with the other. God’s power is not revealed as the desire to rule over the other but rather in the desire *for* the other, to enter into a relationship with them. The coming of the Spirit ushers in a new era in God’s vision of joining people together in full communion in the midst of our wonderful diversity.

This is a community created and led by the Spirit, born from the community of love that is God. Jesus, in John 17, prays to his Father for his disciples “they may be one as we are one” (v.11) and for those who will become his followers, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (v.21). This was the only thing Jesus asked for on our behalf. Not that we could convince people with our speech, or that we could do great signs and wonders. Just unity. And astonishingly in this prayer Jesus claims that the unity among his followers and between them and God will be enough for the world to know that Jesus was sent by the Father and that God loves the world (v.21, 23). We are sent by Jesus into the world in the same way that Jesus was sent. In Acts 2 the Spirit makes it abundantly clear that this unity is to include all peoples. And it becomes clear throughout Acts that this unity can only be achieved by the power of the Spirit and through the blood of Jesus who calls us to unity.

But when we truly reach out to know and love the other, to learn to speak and think and feel like our neighbour and to be transformed by one another and by Christ, that kind of community will make Jesus irresistible because it is the power of God. It will also cause suffering for those in the community because the existence of this kind of community will threaten the powers and people who feel that the only way to maintain their sense of identity and control is through dominating others and they will not accept the breaking of boundaries.

So what value is there in learning another language, another people and way of seeing and being in the world? What value is there in joining with them? Why do we bother learning the language of another? Is it simply to be able to use them, or to communicate a message I have to give them? We must learn that in joining with the other, in entering in not looking only to change them but to be changed, that we can know and experience God in a deeper and newer way because our mutual knowing and loving is intimately bound with our knowing and loving God. The divine dream of reaching into our lives and inviting us to

participate in the divine dance of love requires that we reach across boundaries and join with one another. This is the true sign of God's love for the world and the true demonstration of God's power.

Reflection questions

1. Who is the Holy Spirit inviting you to join with?
2. What would the church look like if our first priority was unity, reaching out to learn from and know our neighbour? What if we understood that loving unity in the diversity of our community is the best tool for spreading Christ's love? How would that shift the focus of our ministry programs and activities, and even our daily lives?

Prayer

Father, give us the grace to follow where you lead. Jesus, may your self-emptying and your cross be the model for our life together. Spirit, empower us discern your movement, to truly desire to know others. Help us to listen, to learn to sit with our discomfort and not to try to maintain our walls. Help us to live together in such a way that we are a living denouncement of the boundaries that separate and assimilate by force and domination and so that we are a living announcement of the love of the Creator for the creation.



Encounters that transform life

By Jocabed R. Solano Miselis

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Acts 10:9-16 (NIV)

Reflection

Martha was very excited; the next day she would go on her first mission trip. It had been a dream of hers to evangelise an indigenous community. She was going to visit the people of the Gunadule millennial nation in the region of *Abya Yala* (Latin America and the Caribbean). She prepared her backpack where she carried a torch, food, a sleeping bag, a water bottle, repellent, a mobile phone, and her small travel Bible. During her missionary preparation they taught her how she should evangelise and they had prepared the message she would share with the Gunadule people. Her prayer and desire was that they would know God. When she arrived at the town she observed that everyone was working the land with joy, happily sowing seeds and eating together. That same day a baby had been born and he was presented at the 'My First Tree' ceremony, which is performed when a baby is born and during which everyone in the family gives thanks to God for the life of the baby. As they plant the seed, they recognize their interdependence and unity with God, their family, their ancestors, and the land. Martha had never experienced anything like this celebration between the community and the land. She knew that something significant was taking place in the community. This coexistence stirred something special within her. We all have encounters that transform us for good or for evil.

Background music

Peter was a Jew. Though he was not a Pharisee, he observed some of the customs and principles of the Jewish religion. He came from the village of Galilee, known in New Testament times for being more tolerant than the population of Jerusalem. Even so, according to his understanding of the mission of God, the Gentiles were not a priority. This worldview was rooted in how the Jews perceived God — their paradigm about otherness was based on their idea of what God is like.

Conversion stories

The stories found in the Book of Acts Chapter 9 about the conversion of Paul and that of Peter in Chapter 10 permit us to propose that to share Jesus' message of reconciliation, we need a conversion of our vision about God and the Other — Paul from his philosophy that Judaism was the only true religion and Peter from the belief that only the Jews that followed Jesus were accepted into the kingdom of God. Both had a strongly ethnocentric theology. Which theologies today are based on our ethnocentrisms and do not enable us to recognize God in others?

Encounters that transform, based on the experiences of Peter and Martha

Let us weave together both stories. Where do they intersect?

In what way are Peter and Martha alike? Martha's experience does not seem like the one Peter had when he visited Cornelius. His worldview toward the Gentiles was distorted and skewed by his understanding of the Other, until God intervened and showed him a vision. The image that God presented to him was of animals that the Jews categorised as unclean. In it was every kind of four-footed animal, reptile, and bird. Peter heard a voice that said to him: "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." When we encounter other cultures very different from ours, what is our reaction towards the Other? Peter's reaction was one of denial, even though it was Jesus inviting him to eat. Recognizing Jesus in that which seems impure to us only happens when we can see from the perspective of the geography of grace and see God in the Other. It is our encounter with the Other that permits us to meet with God and know the heart of Jesus — that all are invited to live out our faith in him in accordance with each of our identities. But often the worldview that one thing or another is impure blinds us from recognizing Jesus and distances us from his gospel.

What can we learn and take away from this story?

To share the gospel of Jesus we need to deconstruct ethnocentric theology and our vision of the Other. Only when we experience a process of transformation in our perception of God and others can we share the Good News. We cannot communicate a message of reconciliation if we do not believe in a God who shows no partiality nor favouritism. Paul had to recognize that he was persecuting the followers of Jesus (who, according to his spirituality, were the Other). Peter had to recognize that he should not call impure those whom God did not call impure. Both had to learn to recognize God, the God of nations who embraces all. In the words of Peter:

"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

Acts 10: 34-35, NIV

Acts 10: 34-35 is a relevant invitation for the Church to move past the theological frontiers erected by our ethnocentrism and from that place deconstruct our missiology and ecclesiology, so that barriers are brought down and we are permitted to create bridges of dialogue with otherness.

Some brief implications that we can learn from the story:

- The image that we have of God influences the way in which we relate to other people (to the stranger, those considered impure, and those who are different).
- In order to see God in the nations of the world, we need a conversion of our worldview that leads us towards coexistence: the geography of grace that permits us to see him where we did not before.
- It is vital that we deconstruct the meaning of what we believe to be 'pure'. When we approach other people that are not the same as us from a position of superiority, we will not receive grace; we lack the ability to see what God is and has been doing with other people.
- It is necessary for us to pass beyond our theological frontiers; crossing them by means of a conversion and transformation that permit us to understand the experience of the Other with eyes of grace and with a vision of the kingdom of God.

The rhythm of the story implies that only when Peter experienced a conversion in his theology about God and the Other (in this case, Cornelius and his family) was he able to communicate the message of peace. What this permits us to say is that in order to be messengers of this good news, we need to be transformed by the God who includes everyone. The heart of this experience of encounter with the Other is the manifestation and presence of the Spirit of God, which affirms the community that has always been in the heart of Jesus. Opening ourselves to the experience of the Other allows us to understand his heart better and to embrace the way of grace into which God has invited us.

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever asked yourself whether you could learn something about God from cultures different from your own?
2. What challenges does this story in the Book of Acts show you are necessary for us to take on in our journey as followers of Jesus?
3. What did Martha learn from the Gunadule people about their relationship with God and the community?

Prayer

Lord, give us eyes to see grace where we do not see it
Hands to carry out with passion and compassion your will towards others
To embrace and welcome our diversity
Feet to dance with others and create one united circle around you, Jesus
Ears to hear your Good News in creation, in the nations of the world
A sense of smell to sense your kingdom, Jesus, along the way
May your kingdom come, Lord.



Babel, cultural diversity, languages and identity

Bible Study on Genesis 10-11

By Frank Paul and Drew Jennings-Grisham

Cush was the father of Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord." The first centres of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Genesis 10:8-12 and 11:1-9 (NIV)

Reflection

For most people on the planet, globalisation means modern technology, English as a world-language, and an economic system in which everything becomes a commodity and people consumers. Some cultures become dominant cultures: everyone should consume "our" music, food and media, everyone should dress in "our" latest fashion; thin and fair is defined as a universal beauty ideal.

Can peaceful, interdependent coexistence in the midst of cultural diversity be a reality today? Is it even something we should strive for?

In Genesis 10 and 11 we find a genealogy enriched by two narrative texts. Both have to do with the city of Babel in the land of Shinar. Both are about power: Nimrod, the first "mighty" man, and the city of powerful people, whose name and tower reach to the sky. From its first mention here and throughout the Bible, Babylon stands for oppressive, violent power.

In Genesis 10, the three sons of Noah are reported to have inhabited different regions, but one statement is repeated for all three: "... by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations." (10:5, 20, 31). Thus we find that ethnic and linguistic diversity was already present, in fact 70 different peoples are named! Seventy represents completion and is offered as the design of God. And what helps define their identities? Family, territory and language and a consciousness of being a nation. No people group can permanently renounce these pillars.

The first narrative insertion in the genealogy refers to the person of Nimrod, "a mighty warrior" and "mighty hunter" (an ancient metaphor for conqueror of other nations) who established great cities (10:8-12). This descendant of Noah is described as the first to build an imperial empire with two centres: in the land of Shinar and later in the land of Assyria. Its history is placed in the context of the founding fathers of other nations and languages that already exist. Nimrod is portrayed as the first who is expansive in all respects: he uses tools and weapons to spread himself and his family over others, even doing so "before the Lord."

Following this "table of nations" we find the story of the "Tower of Babel." In verses 1 and 9, we discover the words that make up the theme of the text: "Land and Language." The opening words set the stage: "the whole world had one language and a common speech." We know from the previous chapter that this was not so, which means this must have been the sentiment of the people of Nimrod who conquered the lands of Shinar thought. These people who, extending eastwards (or from the east), settle in the land of Shinar to spread out there to exert power over many other peoples. They do what all empires do to stabilise their power: they conquer other people, allow only one language, and try to create a national identity through monumental structures and military and religious power.

As there are no rocks in the Tigris plain to build, the brick is made up of dried clay. Asphalt is used; it had been discovered that it could easily be produced by the heating of crude oil abundant in its region. This is how human culture develops and grows: by solving problems! For the construction work - and the food supply - workers from other peoples are massively enslaved, which is exactly the experience that Israel had in Egypt.

Nimrod wants to go high with his project, but instead Yahweh "descends." In this text passage is incredible humour: God comes down to see what those "down there" made! It is not said that God is angry, he is just interested in his creatures. Especially after the flood catastrophe he is particularly concerned that not everything goes wrong!

So God descends to stop the imperial plan of the Babel people. In biblical wording, "God descends" does not mean that He descends to punish! On the contrary, God is coming to liberate his people and to end their oppression, just as when God freed his people from the power of the Egyptians to lead them into the promised land (Ex 3:8, Acts 7:34). And John affirms God's Son does not come to the earth to punish but to forgive, save and deliver (John 3:17). The Holy Spirit comes to confirm the gospel of salvation and liberation in a global multilingual vision and to equip the church of Jesus Christ with strength from the heights.

The decision of God to descend and to confuse their language so that no one understands the other is therefore no punishment for all, but a divine act of liberation that stops the ambitions of an overbearing people. It is not said that the different languages and peoples were created at this moment (see Genesis 10:5, 20, 31), rather it is said that their languages were confused--an effective measure to stop the Babylonian empire.

God therefore intervenes to make the future possible: the diversity and freedom of peoples, languages, cultures and their history(s). Their language was confused because a ruler and his people with their (national) language would impose themselves upon all others. The sin focused here is the violent globalisation of one people of power and language; the blessing provided by the Creator for mankind is cultural diversity!

Our many languages are not the result of human sin, or even divine punishment, but God's will. Correspondingly, the aspiration of one people over other peoples, their families, cultures and their symbols which make up their own identity, stands against the intended future of God.

In John's revelation, Babel (the prostitute) is described as ruler over peoples and nations and languages (17:15); her sins "are piled up to heaven." (18:5). What Nimrod did not achieve with stones, the Babylonians have reached with their politics of oppression! Yet God's promised descent with the heavenly Jerusalem (21:1-7) once again has a liberating effect, saving the saints and ending the suffering and death dwelling among them. In the end, the nations are not dissolved but allowed to live in the light of God. And their kings shall offer their glory to the Lord of lords.

From the first book of the Bible, to the birth of the Christian community, to the last book of the Bible, we see what God has created for his creatures and their identity: territory, linguistic/cultural diversity and reconciled community.

Reflection questions

1. What does the recognition of the importance of land/territory for identity, and how this has always been a part of God's design, mean for Christian practices of reconciliation and restoration today?
2. What are some ways that the church of Babel, of empire and conquest, can listen and learn from the rest of the church? What would truly listening mean? How are we called to go beyond simple apologies?

Prayer

Creator, you are the God of history and creation. Your good love is reflected in the incredible diversity and community of your creatures. Give us the grace to denounce practices of empire and death that deface your image in your creation and your people and to work with your Spirit in your work of reconciling all things so that in the unity of love we truly reflect the community of love that is found in you

Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.

☎ +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ publications@tearfund.org learn.tearfund.org

Registered office: Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE. Registered in England: 994339. A company limited by guarantee. Registered Charity No. 265464 (England & Wales) Registered Charity No. SC037624 (Scotland).

