



The Spirit of the Age

In the name of him through whom we have been sent the Spirit of truth from the Father, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Old Testament lesson we have the familiar and I have to say *unusual* account of how the Lord confused the languages of the people at Babel. A simple reading of the story raises certain questions for us. Here we have people spreading out across the face of the earth, and in their travels they discover a great plain "in the east". We know this area as the flood plains of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers: what was called "Mesopotamia", the "land between the rivers". It became the cradle of the world's first civilizations. Here people find fertile plains with a large and reliable water source. And here they also find suitable building materials readily available. They decide it's a great spot to build a city, and they go to work. And why not? People need a place to live and conduct their business, don't they? And cities have other benefits: a city wall provides security and defense from nomadic raiders that might try to steal food or other goods – or worse, take people as slaves. And besides the city wall, the concentration of people also make it less likely that you'll suffer such an attack. There's safety in numbers. And numbers also allow for specialization of skills. In small communities almost everyone has to be employed full time in growing and raising food; but the more people you have, the more can be spared to specialize in carpentry, ceramics, metallurgy – making the sorts of things that make life easier. It's this specialization that leads to developments in the arts and sciences as well because people can hand down accumulated knowledge in their specialties. It's not necessary for each generation to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. And so with the rise of cities we soon see great strides forward in literature, mathematics, medicine, and architecture – the latter of which makes it possible for these early settlers on the plain of Shinar to propose building a tower that reaches into the heavens.

And again, why not? Egypt has its pyramids, the Romans built their aqueducts, China has its Great Wall, the French have their Eiffel Tower, Europe is practically littered with magnificent cathedrals whose lofty spires soar heavenward. And here in this country we have our Hoover Dam, our Golden Gate Bridge, our space program that put men on the moon. These are monuments to American industry and ingenuity. It all seems proof enough that we humans have the desire and God-given talents to push the limits of our knowledge and skill in order to build and accomplish tremendous things. And every one of us has benefited from mankind's timeless pursuit of such goals.

Yet for some reason not immediately clear in the text, the Lord Almighty looks down from heaven and sees this early renaissance taking place, and rather than encouraging it, he intervenes to stop it. Here the people are working together, cooperating peacefully, and getting things accomplished. They're advancing the well-being of the human race ... I mean, what else does the Lord want? It seems that things are going very well – and yet he gets his nose out of joint about it. It's like, "Oh no! They're doing entirely too well for themselves down there! If I let things keep going, who knows what they'll achieve? Better stop it. Let's see how I can mess it up for them." We know that God gave the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai; but it appears that here on the plains of Shinar, many centuries before that, he first handed down what we know as Murphy's Law. That's the one that says, "If something can go wrong, it will". Its first corollary is this: "If it seems that everything is going perfectly according to plan, then you can be sure that you've overlooked something."

But why? What's the problem? Why is the Lord so bent on throwing a wrench into the works here? —*And* it might make us wonder, at how many other times and places throughout the history of the world? What is it that the Lord has against human development and growth?

Good question; one that deserves an answer. And part of the answer is that not all growth and development is a good thing. Cancer is growth; but it's too much of the wrong kind, and it can be deadly. Just because it appears that progress is being made, doesn't mean it's necessarily good or healthy progress.

So what determines if it's good or not? In regard to human development, it all depends on the spirit that's behind it. And on the plain of Shinar it's quite clear what kind of spirit is motivating people to bake bricks and get busy building themselves a city. They say, "Let's build a city with a mighty tower with its top reaching to the heavens so *that we might make a name for ourselves.*" They want to do something they can brag about. They're after glory. They're showing the spirit of self-exaltation. It's the spirit of prideful humanism. And on one hand, this may seem to be a good thing. It gives them a cause to rally around and a reason to push themselves to achieve great things. It seems to unify them and it certainly produces results.

But in fact the spirit of pride is always one of division and discord. Why? It's because self-glorification and pride always involves making comparisons. To make a name for yourself, you must do so over and against other names that are somehow less in worth. To stand out and rise above the rest of the pack often means pushing the rest of the pack down. It's *us* over and against *them*. We're proving ourselves to be better than those other guys with a smaller city and their punier tower. But once you start playing that game there's no end to it. They see what you're doing and try to get one up on you. So the spirit spreads. The competition gets fiercer. The stakes get higher. And the same spirit infects your own group within itself. We're compelled to ask which of us that share this great name that we've made for ourselves has earned the greatest name for himself? So that in the end it's not just us over and against them: it always comes down to *me* over and against *you*.

And this really is the story of human history as successive empires and cultures have reached for the sky to make a name for themselves, and how the individuals within those empires and cultures have sought to rise above their contemporaries to achieve the same thing: their own names written in glory. It's always the same prideful spirit that motivates the hearts of people from age to age – including the age we live in. And it's particularly evident in this country of ours. The United States has been enjoying its heyday for the past one hundred years or so, but especially since the close of WWII, and even more now that the cold war fizzled to its end. We're on top of the tower. We're proud of our accomplishments and who we are as a people. We feel smugly superior to the rest. And more and more, it's apparent that many have the sense that here in this great land mankind has at last come of age. We've got the right formula for success. And now it's sort of up to us to bring peace to the earth by spreading the blessings of democracy and free enterprise capitalism abroad. And while we've taken on the mission of savior of the globe, we're also busy playing God in many other ways: our scientists are unraveling the mysteries of life itself and trying their hands at genetic engineering. Meanwhile our jurists are rewriting the moral laws that deal with the oldest and most sacred institutions we have: marriage and family. There's no doubt that the spirit of America is the same old spirit of the ages that inspired the builders of the tower of Babel.

It's interesting: it's shortly before this story in Genesis that the Lord looks from heaven and evaluates the way people are "developing". And what he says is this: "My Spirit is not the one that's governing the hearts of men." No, he looks into the heart of man and sees, "only evil,

all the time.” He sees a different spirit at work there: the spirit of human pride. It is the same spirit seen in Satan who set himself over and against the Lord. He wanted to be God – or at least to play the role. This too is seen in this morning’s text. It turns out that “Babylon”, the city they were building, means “the Gate of God”. And the idea was that they were going to reach up with their tall tower and knock on God’s door and say, “We’ve made it. We’ve arrived at the top. We have become as the gods.”

And so we see that the Lord’s intervention at Babel was his judgment on the spirit of pride they possessed. And it actually shows up in several ways in the passage. First, we see it in their choice of building materials, which the text implies are inferior: “brick instead of stone” and “bitumen instead of mortar”. The idea is that what they’ve chosen to work with are things that are inherently weak and less durable – that their work won’t last. Secondly, we see it in a word play that shows up in the Hebrew language in which this text was originally written. It turns out that there is phonetic connection between some of the key words. There are three consonants, B, L, and N that keep showing up in different order. Depending on their arrangement you get the words “Babylon”, and the phrases “Let us build”, “Let us make bricks”, and “Let us confuse”. Interestingly enough, the same three letters in a different order also form the Hebrew word for “foolishness”. And that seems to be the Lord’s final judgment on the whole project.

It also suggests the method he will use to stop it: he will rearrange the way they speak, jumbling up their letters, as it were. They can’t work together if they can’t communicate. But what I want you to see is that the confusion of tongues brings in focus the truth of the human situation. What appears on the surface to be peaceful cooperation is in fact confusion and contention. The spirit of pride is one that always divides. And so the Lord simply makes the outward situation match the inward one. What he’s showing us is that the prideful spirit in each person’s heart is speaking the private language of me over and against you. When each of us is speaking the personal language of pride we can’t properly communicate and will never get anything done that will last. Which is precisely what the Scriptures assert: unless the Lord builds a house, (or a tower, or a city) its builders labor in vain.

Today we celebrate Pentecost. It’s the event that marks the return of God’s Spirit to govern the hearts of men. This return was made possible by the death and resurrection of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ. His sacrifice of atonement cleanses us of sin – including the sin of pride – to make us a fit dwelling for God’s Spirit. And in today’s reading from Acts we see how, filled with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles immediately are set to work on a new construction project. They’re laying a foundation for new city with a new “tower” that spans the gap between earth and heaven – but this one is built by the Lord from the top down.

This is when true human development begins. This city being built by God is the Church of Jesus Christ. And it’s not being built with bricks made of baked mud, but with people the Bible calls living stones. And we, the stones, are being bound together not with tar or mortar, but with God’s powerful Word and his infinite love. That’s what we read a bit after today’s text in Acts where it says: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, to the breaking of the bread (which is Holy Communion), and to the prayers” (which is their joint worship and their calling on the name of the Lord). And we see them living out this love by sharing their goods and possessions, and eating together with glad and sincere hearts. There’s no sense of that former spirit of pride that divides people. Now the Spirit of God – the Spirit of a new age – is bringing them together as one.

We see this also in today's reading. Note that what brings the people together is the sound of the Spirit coming as a mighty rushing wind. And then when they've assembled, they hear the disciples all speaking different languages that visitors from all over the world can understand. What's happening is that the confusion and discord that comes of everyone speaking the personal language of pride is being undone at Pentecost. With God's Spirit operating within, we can all truly begin to understand each other. This is what happens when we confess as sin the spirit of pride and our desire to make a name for ourselves at the expense of others, and receive in its place the divine spirit of meekness and humility that seeks to serve for the benefit of others – just as God in Christ served and suffered for us. Far from stopping human development, this builds it up and brings it to its most glorious height. It allows us to live in the image of God who is love. With the spirit of pride we fail miserably in our efforts to be God. With the Spirit of God, we live happily as his children in his eternal kingdom, as we were created to be.

And so it's not a coincidence that in last Sunday's reading from the Revelation of St. John, we heard how the Apostle looks ahead to the last days and sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. The Lord himself is the architect and builder of this eternal home. The Pentecost point to be made is that he is building it for us now. He's building it with his Holy Spirit in each of us as we continue to devote ourselves to the Apostles' teaching, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers. In this way he is binding us together in love, as we become the city in which God dwells. And the city's most important feature is its mighty tower that spans the gap between us and the heavens: it is the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins, raised to life, and ascended to God's right hand. And that's the mighty tower we can properly boast about. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!