

Too many stories

22 June, 2014

Scripture lessons: Acts 2:1-13; Mark 12:28-34

At my age, and with as many years as I have been in the ministry, it is not often that I can read a Bible story, particularly a Bible story as familiar as that of the first Pentecost, and find something new in it. But that is just what happened last month, which is why you are getting a slightly belated Pentecost sermon.

I've generally read the story of that first Pentecost as a way of saying that the evil of Babel is remedied in our reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ – and in the fellowship among those who accept that grace, which arises from their reconciliation with God. Babel, the representation of human pride, of human titanism – of man's "come, let us build a city and tower to the heavens, and let us make a name for *ourselves!*" – results in God's "Come, let us go down there and confuse their speech", before they get up to something worse – and in the confusion of human tongues, of human planning and plotting. On Pentecost that is reversed: at last, all who hear the babel of confused tongues again hear the same message: namely, the Good News of God's work in Jesus Christ. The curse of Babel has been wiped away in Jesus Christ. In becoming reconciled with God, mankind has also become one again.

Telling the story that way looks back. What happened back at Babel is now reversed. The issue is not whether Parthians, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Capadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretan and Arabs (whew, that's a list; sounds like the languages to be heard on West Kruiskade in a day) – it seems to me that the question is not whether all of them actually heard "the great things God has done" in their own language, and if so, how the miracle was accomplished. The point of the story is that the miracle of the reconciliation of mankind is accomplished in the Church. The wound of Babel is healed.

Or is it? For that was what suddenly struck me as I read the story this time. On the first Pentecost, *everybody who was there heard a different story – but these different stories were all the same story. Today, in the church we are all telling the same story* – or at least we are supposed to be – but that one story ends up different, conflicting, exclusionary stories. In fact, we have Catholic and Protestant and Orthodox stories, Pentecostalist/charismatic and high church stories, Fundamentalist and liberal stories, stories of Christians from the North and from the South. Unless you perform Mass you are not Christian! Unless you have Apostolic succession you cannot have a Mass or be a Christian! Churches that ordain women and homosexuals have turned their back on Christ! Unless you practice the gift of tongues you are not a Christian! Unless you accept a seven-day creation you are not a Christian! Churches must be "pro-life", and those so-called fellow Christians who promote or accept abortion deserve whatever happens to them! We are back to Babel – with a vengeance!

Over the years I have come to realise that the most important thing I learned in during my training in seminary – sometimes I am cynical enough to think it is the *ONLY* thing of importance I learned – was from a rather obscure exegetics professor, James Sanders. I took a number of Old Testament courses with him; when I go back now and look at the notes, I find that the actual lecture notes are often very sketchy, because I was too busy making annotations in the margins, following up the implications of novel insights he would

throw out. And one thing he said repeatedly was this: *Beware of treating metaphor as doctrine.*

Let's see how that works. Take creation, for instance. Many of us today will agree that the creation story in the first two chapters of Genesis (or creation stories, as there are two) are proto-scientific. In their day they may even, to some extent, have been pre-scientific attempts to explain how the created world got here, but as science developed they lost that function. Not that that is necessarily a bad thing, most of us would say, for that never was their main purpose. They were never really meant to explain the *how* of creation, but rather to make affirmations about the *why* and *wherefore*. They were meant to affirm that the world is a meaningful, intentional place, not the result of sheer chaos; that there is a God, and that the cosmos is in some sense created – which equally means that unlike in pantheism, the universe is not itself God; that there is thus an order in life, both physical and moral; and finally, that creation, and its order, is fundamentally good. The truth of the story is not whether or not creation began on Sunday, October 23, 4004 BC and lasted a week; its truth is in the affirmations about God, man, the cosmos and life on earth that it contains. If Lyell and Darwin have led to theories about the how that fit better with observable facts, so be it; that in no way challenges, much less disproves, the affirmations about the world and life that Genesis makes. Such basic affirmations are never open to empirical proof, anyhow, but only to testing by experience as one lives according to them. Thus: beware of turning the metaphor that is the creation story into doctrine! Not all Christians, unfortunately, have heeded that warning.

Things that are even more clearly doctrines than creationism work the same way – the Virgin Birth, for instance. The account of the Virgin Birth is not, as has often been suggested, just a way of saying that Jesus was somebody special – in the same way that an account of the virgin birth of Gautama, the Buddha, eventually attached itself to him – nor did the affirmation of the virgin birth of Jesus originally have the importance it has since gained when linked with substitutionary atonement. Rather, seen in the light of a whole series of accounts in the Old and New Testaments of God “opening the womb” when a woman is unable to conceive – starting with Sarah, followed the next generation by Rebecca, and in the next by Rachel, and including Hannah yet in the Old Testament and Elizabeth in the New – we get a clear statement: God will make a way, when there is no human way possible. And is that not the whole message of the gospel in a nutshell?: God took action to seek us out, and reconcile us to himself, when we could not or would not find our way back to Him. Understood as such, it is a most fitting opening to the gospel story, and one which every Christian can affirm: for what is the gospel except the affirmation that God accomplished our reconciliation when we, in our capacity, were unable to? But that admittedly begs the question of *whether* the virgin birth actually happened, much less *how* the virgin birth happened. Understood metaphorically, as I suggest, I have no problem confessing my belief in the virgin birth when I recite the Apostles' Creed – I most certainly believe God finds a way to us, when we can't find a way to God – while questioning whether *the* Virgin Birth happened. Or in other still other words: I personally accept the mythic, metaphorical, poetic truth of the virgin birth, what the story is meant to tell us about God, without accepting the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Beware of mistaking metaphor for doctrine.

The Virgin Birth is handy for explaining the how of another doctrine, the Incarnation. But that too can be looked at metaphorically. We often hear the claim that all religions – at least the “world religions” – are really all kind of the same: you know, they all teach kind of the same values, of charity and brotherhood. There may be some truth in the

claim that they all end up more or less in the same place, but they certainly get there by totally different routes. We've already seen, when discussing the creation narrative, how that story separates the Abrahamic religions or religions of the book from the story that Hinduism tells, with its pantheism; and, as a result of the creation story, the religions of the book are equally different from Buddhism, at least in its earliest forms, where the world is regarded as illusion, from which one must escape by extinguishing desire. But even among the religions of the book, which affirm there is a creator-God who enters into some sort of relation with the world – the God of Judaism, who chooses a people and works in history, and the all-merciful God who works in the lives of his people of Islam, or even the divine watchmaker of the Christian deist – only traditional Christianity goes so far as to affirm that God was so concerned with the world that He somehow took the initiative in seeking to return stubborn and sinful mankind to him by literally entering into that world, seeking them – the metaphor of the shepherd seeking the lost sheep, of the father coming out to meet the prodigal son before he can get home himself. That God should have done so is the true mystery of our belief – not the mechanics of *how* this was accomplished, but that, as we believe, it was accomplished at all, and that it was accomplished somewhere around the historical person of one Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ, the “Anointed One”, and that it somehow involved his suffering and death, as well as his life, teaching and example. For both the Jew and the Muslim, such an assertion about God crossing the lines between his divinity and our humanity, goes much too far. This unique assertion should be what draws the Church together, but ironically, in our attempts to explain it we become divided.

What we usually don't notice is that the New Testament is all over the place with its explanations of what happened. Paul, who was the one writing closest to the experience the first Christians had with Jesus, in his letter to the Philippians simply assumes a divine nature for Jesus, but without specific reference to the idea of an incarnation or virgin birth (Phil. 2:5-11); in Romans 5 he develops a legal metaphor with substitutionary atonement – one person taking another's punishment; and in Ephesians (4:9-10) he introduces the military *Christus victor* metaphor – previously touched on by Peter in his Pentecost sermon when he cites Psalm 16:10 (Acts 2:27), and again by the writer of I Peter (3:19 and 4:6), from which the defeat of Satan and hell is most familiar, and from whence it arrives in the Apostles' Creed. But it is John's gospel, with its development of the Hebrew sacrificial metaphor of Christ as Priest and Lamb – combined with Paul's substitutionary atonement – that finally froze into doctrine: the dogma that Christ sacrificed himself, shedding his innocent blood to satisfy the righteous demand of God. The metaphor became doctrine.

And with it come other doctrines: for instance, the understanding of the Eucharist as a recreation of that sacrifice, in the Mass – and with that, in turn, transubstantiation, and also the insistence that only men can be priests – that is, perform the sacrifice of the Mass – and only heterosexual men at that, as a priest must be without blemish.

Or could it be consubstantiation? Or might Jesus Christ have been the final Priest, and his sacrifice have been once and for all – which we merely commemorate, remember, rather than re-enact? Are sacraments efficacious in and of themselves – or merely symbolic? Or are they the ‘handshake of God’, more than mere signs, but rather, directed symbols, so that we can experience the certainty that God's grace was for us? (Surely not! That is Calvinist heresy!)

Having mistaken metaphors for doctrine, we fall to warring with one another.

As an example: I recall the complex choreography among the non-Roman, non-Orthodox churches in the neighbourhood of my old Reformed Church in North Brooklyn: we could all agree to have a preaching derby on Good Friday, and it didn't matter where it was held

or who participated. But an ecumenical Maundy Thursday service? We Calvinists could go to the Baptists and Methodists and the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and they could come to us, but while the Lutherans were willing to join us and the Baptists and Methodists and C&MA at the Reformed Church, and have us and the Baptists and Methodists and C&MA come to them, they would themselves not go to the Baptists and C&MA. We were all welcome to go to the Episcopalians too, but only the Lutheran minister and the Polish National Catholic priests could join the Episcopalian priest there on the chancel and share leadership in the Eucharist, because they all at least believed in the Real Presence, which Calvinists and evangelicals did not. The Episcopalians themselves would not go anywhere except the Lutheran church. And the Polish National Catholics? Well, they weren't in communion with anybody except the Episcopalians – and they stopped that when the Lutherans ordained women and one was called at the Lutheran church – because they could not share the chancel with a woman, when the Episcopalians continued to invite her! As Tertullian said, “See these Christians, how they love one another!”

We cannot sit down together at the Lord's Table, because we can't agree on what we are doing there (No! It's not the Lord's Table, it's Eucharist!), and ironically, we cannot do so because we cannot agree on how God reconciled us with himself and with one another. We no longer have one story, the gospel of the love and mercy of God, but too many stories.

Now, for the application, because every sermon has to have an application. I'm not going to call for theological dialogue: after 2000 years of disagreements about how God did what he did, more talking is not going to help. In fact, less talking might help. Stories are meaningful to those for whom they are meaningful; let us indeed continue to tell them among ourselves, if we will. But perhaps when it comes to addressing those outside our own groups it would be wisest to stick to proclaiming those things which are central to the gospel – to not go beyond the story in the Bible itself – or beyond those elements which we can agree on in the creeds – however we may expound them.

Or maybe we Christians ought to shut up altogether. You know, shut up, as in ‘actions speak louder than words’. It occurs to me that perhaps, read globally, those first few of chapters in Acts suggest one reason why the hearers around the time of that first Pentecost recognised the one story behind all the stories: people saw how the Christians lived. We are twice told “they were held in high esteem” (4:34) and “people spoke highly of them” (5:13) – and the latter affirmation is linked with one of the observations about how many new members were being added to the community almost daily.

Now, I recognise that we need to be clear: the charity and concern that characterised the Christians in Acts was within their own community. We are not being told in Acts about community service, in the sense we know it today, but about Christians showing love and concern for one another, for their own poor, for the socially marginal among them, such as widows. As Rev. Couvee reminded us implicitly two weeks ago with his selection of texts, for the concept of care for the poor and excluded in society at large, we have to look back to Old Testament law – or ahead, to after the Constantinian compromise that I so detest. But either way, we have to look to times when “our” religion was contiguous with society. Historically, when the Church was a minority religion, it did not have a social mission – save denouncing the evil of the world around it.

But let us understand: even living at peace with one another as Christians, instead of sniping at one another, would be a start. And beyond that, we would do well to operationalize the claim of the gospel – that God sought out, accepted and forgave *us* – us, as in all mankind – in something even shorter than the Apostle's Creed: in the double

law of honouring God with our whole heart, mind and soul, and loving our neighbour as ourselves