

A good few years ago I read a book of traveller's tales. There was one that told of two intrepid Victorian English gentlemen who took part in the exploration of Africa in the nineteenth century. Unknown to each other, they had set out in two different expeditions, each with a band of native bearers, carrying their baggage. At one point in their travels the two parties met somewhere in that vast and as then, uncharted continent. Immediately, the native Africans of both parties greeted one another in surprise and delight, discovering that they had come across friends and even relatives, in the other party.

The two Englishmen, strangers in a strange land and moreover, strangers to one another, were caught up in a moment of acute embarrassment. According to the rules of strict Victorian English etiquette and refined social behaviour, it was considered improper to greet and converse with someone to whom you had not been formally introduced.

We can picture their awkwardness, 'hot-under-the-collar', as we say, in that steaming heat, far, far from civilisation and not quite sure what they should do. In the end they both broke with convention and politely took off their hats and acknowledged each other with as much grace and decorum as they could manage, whilst all around them the Africans thoroughly enjoyed a time a relaxed conviviality.

I must admit a certain sympathy for those Victorian explorers: as a frequent visitor to France I readily do my best to avoid my fellow-Englishmen, preferring to take the opportunity to practice my French whenever I can. It is, of course, not language alone nor social behaviour and attitudes that mark differences between the races of mankind. Language is more than grammar and syntax; social mores and attitudes are more than mere patterns of behaviour. The differences between the many cultures of mankind are very real.

As we heard in the hymns at Vespers last evening on the eve of this great feast, *"Of old there was confusion of tongues because of the boldness of the tower-builders. But those tongues have not*

*uttered wisdom for the glory of divine knowledge. There God condemned the infidels to punishment, and here with the Spirit Christ illuminated the fishermen. At that time, the confusion of tongues was designed for vengeance, and now the unison of tongues hath been renewed for the salvation of our souls.”* [Doxastikon of the Aposticha]

It refers, of course, to the story of Babel in the book of Genesis, which finds the origin of human divisions not just in our fallen nature and propensity to sin but also in our separated lives, scattered over the face of the earth.

I counted the other Sunday nineteen different nationalities present here at Church. I have noticed how often members of the congregation are delighted to find their fellow-countrymen or, at least, find someone with whom they may speak their native language. Unlike our stiff, formal and upright Victorian explorers, there is usually little to hold back the encounters and the conversations here.

There is an ancient and innate human instinct to feel comfortable, safe and secure within our own groups; we feel at ease in our own culture, whilst we can still be fascinated and drawn to the other, the different, the exotic. Important as all this is, it cannot be more important than what binds us in unity.

The feast of Pentecost, as we were reminded in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, not only commemorates the manifestation, in fire, of God the Holy Spirit, anointing Christ's apostles and those with them but marks, also, the beginning of the mission of the Church, calling all into communion with the holy, consubstantial and life-giving Trinity. For it is through the Holy Spirit, that we begin to share in the divine nature and, thereby, are being formed into the new Adam according to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. [Eph.4:13]

Yet, furthermore, because of our union with Christ, we also have union with one another, a union despite our differences in culture and language. It is right that here, in this land, English be the common language, just as in any other land the local language should be used

for the liturgy; and yes, I have assisted at the Liturgy in French once, whilst in France.

In our Orthodox understanding, the churches in Christ are always local, never national. Wherever the Holy Spirit makes His abode among us, there is the common bond, for in the kingdom of God, in the New Jerusalem, the Spirit has sanctified a new people to the glory of God. As the Psalmist, in a prophecy of this unity could sing: *Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God! I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who know Me; Behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia: this one was born there.* Psalm 86 is remarkable, presenting a vision of Jerusalem as the mother of all nations; a mystery fulfilled in this feast.

To deny this union in which we share is to deny the very foundation of the Church and, indeed, the work of the Holy Spirit Himself. Early in the life of the apostolic Church, as we can read in the Acts of the Apostles, there occurred a division between the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and the Hellenists, converts to Christ from among the diaspora Jews, Greek in language and in much of their culture. Yet out of this The Holy Spirit gave us the gift of the sacred diaconal ministry among the sacred ordering of the Church.

You may know, also, that in 1872 a council of the Orthodox Church condemned the ecclesiastical heresy of *Phyletism*, the belief that salvation comes through an exclusive national allegiance. The fathers at the council said, *We renounce, censure and condemn Phyletism, that is racial discrimination, ethnic feuds, hatreds and dissensions within the Church of Christ, as contrary to the teaching of the Gospel and the holy canons of our blessed fathers.*

So, what do we do who have come from such varied backgrounds, such different countries? St Paul tells us in Ephesians, *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.* [4:4-6] The practical way of dealing with this has been there since the beginning. When puzzled by differences in tradition and custom in the churches, Blessed Augustine of Hippo was told by St Ambrose of Milan, *si fueris*

*Rōmae, Rōmānō vīvitō mōre*: in other words, *When in Rome, live as a Roman*.

Each one of us here among the Orthodox possesses that identification not because we came from a particular nation. No one is born an Orthodox Christian: we are all born fallen, in the nature of the old Adam. But we were all reborn in Christ through Baptism and, moreover, anointed with the seal of the gift of the life-creating Spirit. Each one of us, outwardly was sealed by the anointing brush, tracing the sign of the Cross on our organs of sense, our bodies, our hands and our feet: accepted and welcomed home, embraced with the kisses of God Himself. As again, the Psalmist says, *Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed*. [Ps.84:10]

For each one of us, this was our personal Pentecost. What we heard read as happening to the apostles in that upper room in Jerusalem, has fallen up each of one us as well. It is the source of our unity. Think of that bond, binding us together even when each is scattered around this town, this place, through the days of the week. Think of how, when we sin, we draw further and further away from that union, grieving the Holy Spirit. But we can repent and confess, seek absolution and be restored, on the authority of the Holy Spirit: such was Christ's gift to His Church through His holy apostles.

The disaster of Babel has been undone and so now, as we sang in the first antiphon today: *There are neither tongues nor words in which their voices are not heard. Their sound hath gone forth into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world*.