

The Swiss Church in London
17 March 2019 “The Tower of Babel”

Reading Genesis 11:1-9

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 God came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. God 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 God scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel —because there God confused the language of the whole world. From there God scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Sermon

Human ambition

The story of the tower of Babel is a familiar story, not just because it is a famous bible story, but also because it reflects a side of us that we are all too familiar with. From the very beginning human beings have always wanted to build higher, dig deeper, move faster and reach farther. We want to reach for the stars. Discover every corner of the world and the universe. Push ourselves to the limit. Invent new things. Achieve better results.

The story of the tower of Babel is the story of human ambition. Ambition is a part of who we are. And it is not a bad thing! Ambition has brought many great results. We live longer and healthier lives thanks to our understanding of the human body and the development of treatments, vaccinations and medications that protect us from life-shortening diseases. This would not be possible without ambition.

The construction of buildings too has become much safer than when the tower of Babel was built. New construction methods and materials make it possible to live relatively safe even in earth quake zones. Great inventions always start with the ambition to increase our knowledge and to do things better.

But ambition can also go too far and cause great harm. The turning point is when we risk other people’s wellbeing or even lives for the sake of going faster and higher than anyone else. Ambition turns negative when our own reputation becomes the focal point of our actions. An example that comes to mind is the Grenfell tower fire in West London on 14 June 2017 that caused 72 deaths. The devastating fire could have been prevented, but the ambition to build a high building in a short time and at low costs disregarded the safety and wellbeing of its inhabitants which led to fatal consequences.

Ambition is a good thing as long as we know when to stop and as long as our ambition serves not only our own needs but also the common good. To find the right balance is a huge challenge and perhaps in the world we live in is not possible at all. It is human to think about our own wellbeing and that of our families first, and to forget the ones that live somewhere far away and might suffer the consequences of our lifestyle. We are caught in a perpetual cycle of sinfulness and evil that we are part of, more closely intertwined with all of humankind than we think.

From bricks and buildings to fame and name

This complexity of our human nature is at the centre of many biblical stories. The sinful nature of humankind, this complex entanglement of good and bad that lives in all of us and is often more of a grey zone than a clear-cut boundary, was also the reason why God sent a flood to eradicate humankind, except for Noah and his family and a pair of each animal. God wanted to press the reset button. There should be a fresh start and all people should live in peace and harmony. The rainbow in the clouds was to be a reminder for God's promise never to destroy humankind again.

Many nations descended from Noah and his wife, their daughters and sons. They spread across the earth to settle in different places. They all spoke the same language. Things went well and people on earth lived good lives. God's reset button seemed to have worked. Humankind lived according to God's will without evil intentions. They understood each other perfectly. One day they came together in one place and said to one another: "come let us build bricks and burn them thoroughly". This was a good start, a promising ambition. Together they wanted to build something new, build houses and places to live together safely. To build houses together is a wonderful thing to do.

In London we are surrounded by buildings and houses. It is sometimes hard to see the beauty of buildings when there are so many of them and all we want is to get away from the bricks and stones. For people without permanent housing, homeless people and rough-sleepers, houses have a whole different meaning. Perhaps we only really understand the full meaning of home when it is absent from our lives. There is nothing more beautiful than finding shelter in a warm, friendly house after a long walk in the cold, when night breaks.

So the people in Babel did something beautiful and important: they made bricks, built houses and cities. But soon they got carried away by their own ambition. They did not know where to stop. More than just houses to live in, they wanted to build a tower with its top in the heavens. They wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to put their name to the highest building ever built, no matter whether it would actually have any practical purpose. The ambition turned from creating something good and useful to being someone important and to have more power than others. This is when God intervened.

Now there are many things God could have done to stop the overambitious ways of humans. He could have hidden their construction plans or destroyed the bricks or sent a strong wind. Instead he came up with a rather creative solution. He confused their language so they couldn't understand each other anymore. Without a common language, how could they possibly build something together?

Before we think further about this question, a little side note...

The many Gods

There is an interesting detail I want to mention in this bible story, a small side note but with a great impact on our understanding of the Jewish-Christian God. Did you notice that God says: "Come, let us go down and confuse their language"? Who is *us*? Who does God speak to when he says *us*?

This small sentence brings us all the way back to the very roots of Jewish faith, and therefore also the roots of our Christian faith. It brings us back to when people turned from polytheism, the faith in many gods, to monotheism, the faith in one God. This was a major paradigm shift and its impact on our thinking cannot be underestimated. We can't go into more details today, but it is interesting to see that the shift from polytheistic to monotheistic faith has left its marks in the Bible. This small sentence "come, let us go down" shows that our ancestors once believed in more than one God...

Build something without a common language

But let us go back to the confusion of the languages. God confuses the languages to stop people from becoming harmfully overambitious. This should stop their hubris and make them humble again. It is true that different languages complicate things. We have a bit of experience with this in Switzerland, and in the 1980ies when the Swiss Church decided to bring together the German speaking and the French speaking congregations and change to English as a common language, this was not only an easy step. Many members were upset and even stayed away from church. Languages can bring together, and they can divide. Different languages can lead to misunderstandings, or they can enrich our lives and change our perspective in a positive sense.

Different languages can be an obstacle, but we can also build great things together without sharing a common language. It requires however more patience and creative ways of interaction. Perhaps that's what God had in mind when he confused the languages, that we become more patient, creative and attentive. I remember many situations on my travels across the world when all I had were my hand and feet to communicate, and it worked. I once found myself in a tiny café in a side street in Beijing. My friend and I did not speak a word of Chinese and we couldn't read the menu. At some point we found ourselves making animal noises together with the waitress and having a good laugh. We understood each other perfectly and we had a delicious meal. I'm sure all of you can think of a similar situation!

It is not difficult to build something with people who are very similar to us. If we share similar ideas and speak the same language we can build higher and faster. Uniformity is easy because we don't need to second guess our ambitions. We understand each other. The speaking of different languages however forces us to be more attentive, to find alternative ways of understanding each other. The speaking of different languages slows things down and helps us to keep our feet on the ground. Diversity is much more challenging than

uniformity. To work with people from diverse backgrounds challenges our ways of thinking and adds new perspectives. Perhaps this is what God had in mind when he confused the languages, to add more diversity to humanity and challenge our narrow ways of thinking.

We can build things together even without speaking the same language, but perhaps we can't build a tower that reaches the heavens. We might build smaller buildings and it might take us longer to reach our goals. Yet on the way there we learn so much more about the world, about humankind and about ourselves and others. It might even bring us closer to God than the highest tower ever will.

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Amen