

1] The Neolithic Age was highly significant in the development of human civilisation. Agriculture began and the age was marked by its great stone structures, like Stonehenge. On the island of Malta are to be found the oldest free-standing buildings on earth. They are megalithic temples, dating from around 3,600BC. Other animals may build their shelters and nests, but only mankind builds temples.

2] The Old Testament book of Genesis preserves the story of men, united in purpose, wanting to build a city with a tower that reached into the heavens, a story perhaps inspired by the great Ziggurats, the step-pyramids of the ancient Near East. But their pride and ambitions are dashed, for the Lord said, 'Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.' [Gen.11:7-8] Thus the disaster of Babel happens, a parable of Mankind divided through differences of language; the various groups unable to cooperate with those who are other than they.

3] It is interesting to notice that amidst the plethora of languages on earth, the variety of culture and the rise and fall of empires, it was in the reign of the first Roman Emperor, Augustus, that Christ was born: the day of the Lord, not just for His old people, the children of Israel, but for all the earth, as the doxology by, Cassia the nun, sung at Vespers on the Eve of the Nativity runs: 'When Augustus reigned alone upon earth, the many kingdoms of men came to an end...The cities of the world passed under one single rule; and the nations came to believe in one sovereign Godhead.'

4] So it was that the wisdom of God chose a time of settled peace to enter the world, to draw all men to Himself. Truly, in all things, God's time is best. We can, by the way, discover that, in our prayers, learning to wait upon God with patience.

5] Think, therefore, of all those nations gathered at Jerusalem, as we heard in the Acts of the Apostles; Jews of the diaspora from all

over the Roman Empire. They have gathered fifty days after Pesach, the Passover festival, to celebrate Shavuot, the feast of weeks - Pentecost in the Greek - in the holy city. A group of those pilgrims are astounded when each hears a group of the local inhabitants conversing, celebrating, rejoicing and praising God, not in classical Hebrew, not even in the heavily accented Galilean Aramaic, but in their own particular languages and dialects. They can understand what is being said without any need for translation. 'We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.'

6] This incident from the Acts of the Apostles is often interpreted as the reversal, the healing, of the disaster of Babel. But on further reflection there is something very odd about this story. This is in the reign of Tiberius Caesar, the successor of Augustus: an age when the Mediterranean world already had a common language. The conquests of Alexander the Great had introduced Greek all over the Ancient world. Those visitors from Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, and all those other places, would have known that Greek. Its classical form had morphed into Koine or common Greek. It was the international lingua franca, essential for trade and commerce. In the third century before Christ the Torah, Prophets and other sacred writings of the Jews had been translated into Koine Greek at Alexandria in Egypt, and to this day it is the standard text of the Old Testament for Orthodox Christians. And, of course, the New Testament was written in this language to make it accessible to all. I had to learn it and pass the exam when I did my Theological degree all those years ago: essential for the academic study of the sacred text.

7] So why this miracle of the languages; why has the Holy Spirit given them utterance? Simpler, surely, just to have praised the mighty works of God in Greek rather than in this confusion of languages! Clearly, though, something else was happening there. The mind of God is not interested in wonders for their own sake, merely to astound with no hidden purpose.

8] The problem with all translation, no matter how well you might know a foreign language, is that you can never quite enter the complete understanding, the ethos, of the native speaker who has

known the language from his mother's knee. It is as if there were often a veil before the eyes, obscuring the full appreciation of the meaning. The paradigms and the meanings of words connect with an inner, subjective experience for a native speaker of any language that a learner from outside might take years to acquire.

9] Here, though, is the key to the miracle of Pentecost. All the various languages of the earth, once the sign of our disintegration, have been blessed to serve the gospel. All now are to have the gospel in their own native tongue. Far from imposing one language over all the earth, now it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that can unite all people in one communion, for each nation, each region, each language, can now be offered to serve God in the Church, the Holy Spirit binding all in unity. Even though the Holy Orthodox Church might be manifest in different jurisdictions and many local churches, all are united in the communion of Theology, the Word, the language, of the living God, rejecting the heresy of Phyletism, that is, any exclusive nationalism in church affairs.

10] Here at the first Pentecost the apostles begin their vocation, as the troparion today says, to draw the whole world into their net, fishermen of the kingdom of God. And this is to be done not by subduing and obliterating all other cultures in a stark uniformity, but in blessing each to seek God within the ethos and speech that they can appreciate and absorb. For in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither barbarian nor Scythian in exclusion, for in baptism all are united in Orthodoxy and under the authority of the tradition of the Apostles.

11] We have only to look around us here to see the fruit of that apostolic labour in God the Holy Spirit. But it is, therefore, imperative for us to make certain that we incorporate and recognise all in Christ Jesus. Like the Lamb that lies consecrated upon the Holy Table, we might be divided but not disunited, and sanctified together in partaking. Will there emerge in the end an English Orthodoxy, a recovery of that which was lost here a thousand years ago? Who knows where the Holy Spirit will lead, for as the beautiful seventeenth century English of the Authorised Bible says in St John's Gospel, 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound

thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.’
[Jn.3:8]

12] In commemorating the feast of Pentecost each one of us can call to mind our own, personal participation, in that mystery: the genesis of the Church herself. For when we were Chrismated, we were sealed in the Gift of the Spirit, just as Benedict was Chrismated after his baptism earlier this morning. So that here, in this place, the first Pentecost re-echoes within these walls. So often in the New Testament the word translated as ‘church,’ ecclesia, refers to a specific group of Christians, in a particular place: those who have been called and gathered together in the Lord. So it is with us here. Our authorisation to do so, our permission and authenticity is nothing less than the Holy Spirit Himself.

13] As we move through the seasons and we make our way, time-bound in this cosmos, we make together the anemnesis, the remembrance of incarnation, the baptism, the transfiguration, crucifixion, the burial, the resurrection and ascension, and all the other mysteries of Christ in the gospel. Through the Holy Spirit now, the physical presence of Christ, who once walked in Palestine, east of here, has now passed into the sacraments and is universal, so that for us the Church is here, tangible, local and truly experienced and known, as it is for all Orthodox Christians wherever they be.

14] Unlike the men in the story of Genesis, we have no need to build our own city and tower which, at best, would last but for a time. For the disaster of Babel has ended and we await something even better, when what we know by faith here, in this place, in this locality, in these same holy mysteries, will be fulfilled, like the apostle in the book of the Apocalypse foresees: ‘And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.’ [Apoc.21:2] ‘And the Spirit and the bride say, Come.’ [ibid.22:17]; ‘Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.’ [ibid.22:20]