

Genesis 11:1-9 (Acts 2:1-21)

Dear Christian friends,

When I lived in Sydney as a child, the tallest building in Australia was the 25 story AMP building at Circular Quay. It cost a whole \$1 to go to the top, and I remember the thrill of being allowed to go up just the once, right to the top of the world! Newer buildings now dwarf that old tower as we continue to build taller and taller, even here in Adelaide.

Genesis 11 records another civilisation that also built a tall tower as a sign of self-confidence and technological prowess. Genesis says that they built it so they wouldn't be scattered across the world.

The city was a testament to their permanence, strength, unity and ingenuity. The technology they used was cutting-edge for the time: specially baked bricks with a mortar of tar. It reached higher than humans had ever gone before, a guarantee of their place in the world and even in heaven.

The author of Genesis reflects on this effort somewhat ironically, writing, '*The LORD **came down** to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.*' While mortals work to reach the heavens, the immortal God must always **come down** to see what they're up to. That's the story of the Bible, including Jesus; God **come down** to us on earth. It's the story of Pentecost, which we celebrate today. The Spirit **came down**, as Jesus had promised, spreading the message of faith in Christ through the disciples across the face of the earth.

But back to Babel, for a moment. One people, one language, one city, one tower – what was the problem? God's first command to humankind at creation had been, '*Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth.*'¹ Just a little before Babel, God had repeated this command to Noah and his family after the great flood.² The people of Babel opposed that command. They wanted stay on their own, in the one spot and build a reputation for themselves. The city and tower would make them famous, drawing other people in. So, God does the very thing they feared, scattering them over the face of the earth.

God didn't do this by sending armies against them or knocking down their tower. This wasn't a punishment so much as a course correction. God redirected them simply by confusing their language. They stopped understanding each other. They gradually wandered away. Without its people, the fine city fell into ruins and became lost in antiquity. No one today knows where it was, or whether it even really existed.

There isn't a single story in the Bible in which people are able to work their own way to heaven. Humanity's efforts to cross the divine boundary always come up short. You might remember this discovery was what prompted Martin Luther to struggle against church indulgences and the power of Rome in his day, and we have inherited the freedom in Christ that Scripture revealed to him.

All human efforts are inevitably destined to fail. We could do nothing to make our way up to God. So, in love, God **came down** to us. At Babel. As Jesus. At Pentecost. And still, in

¹ Genesis 1:28

² Genesis 9:7

baptism, in the Spirit, in the bread and the wine, and in countless other ways. Our God is a God who **comes down** to us, and lifts us up from trouble, despair and death, and ultimately, to heaven.

Let's turn to Acts 1 and the Pentecost event we heard this morning. From across the earth people of many languages had come to Jerusalem for the Jewish Pentecost festival. Jesus' disciples were there, gathered in a house. It wasn't long since Jesus had ascended into heaven, leaving behind the promise of the Spirit. Suddenly, the Spirit **came down** and filled the house. They started speaking in the languages of the people, even though they had not known them before this. Many heard them speaking about Jesus and the power of God. Peter gave his Pentecost sermon. Thousands believed and were baptised, and they took their faith back home with them.

In this way God scattered the first believers across the face of the earth. They came from many nations but were one people united in Christ. This is the type of unity God wants – unity in diversity. One gospel for the whole world. In this way the New Testament describes the diversity which has been at the heart of the church since the beginning.

When Christians pull back from this diversity and try to enforce their own version of unity, the Spirit will **come down** and scatter them once more. If God's people bog down in one place, try to put a boundary around God's church, refuse to welcome or embrace diversity, decide for themselves who is in and who is out, who God loves and who God doesn't, they are just trying to 'make a name' for themselves, like the people who built Babel. The church is always sent into the world, not for itself, not for its own fame, but for others.

Locally, among us, we sometimes feel as though things are winding down. We can do less than we used to, we are more tired, there are too few of us. But think about it this way. This congregation gathered and built this place as a witness to a God who is on the move, sending people out into a world in need. It was a place of mission. So, over the decades people have come, the Spirit has been here. Thousands of them have gone on to other places, carrying the Spirit with them in their hearts and their lives. With them, the church has moved onwards and outwards. None of that is a loss – it is a net gain. Things are not ending – they are just moving out, moving on – to new places and new challenges.

Maybe one day, like Babel, people will not remember us so much. They won't know who we were or what we did. But they will know Jesus, the God who **comes down** to live with us and within us. And we will have played our small part in that, to the glory of God. For nothing we do here can be for personal gain. It's only for him.

The Tower of Babel and the Pentecost festival, encourage us with a God who is always on the move, always sending people out, reaching more people, however far away they are. God grant us the grace to do what we need to do today with cheerfulness and determination, knowing that it's always the Spirit's power at work in and through us.

Amen.