

The Language of Love at Pentecost

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC on Pentecost Sunday June 8th, 2025 – Acts 2:1-21)

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Welcome to the celebration of the day that marks the beginning of the growth of the church, that movement from a little band of disciples to a world-wide movement. It is the day the people had a very real experience of God's spirit in their midst. It is the day people understood the core message, that of God's love for all, in ways they understood.

The first Pentecost occurred as part of a kind of Harvest festival, a time of giving thanks to God for the harvest and offering back to him the first fruits of the harvest in thanksgiving. That is why there were so many people from so many places gathered in Jerusalem, that is why thousands heard the message and later in Acts we are told about three thousand responded to the message and were baptised.

So, in the chaos, bewilderment and amazement, in the midst of accusations of drunkenness or even insanity, thousands of people heard the message of God's love in words and language they could understand.

This story is not about a single universal language but rather about people being able to understand one another. Each person hears in their own language, they all understand in their own language, they all understand in their own culture. No one is excluded.

I find learning languages difficult, and only really speak English despite doing four years of French at school and then having to learn Ancient Greek when I did my ministry training.

Learning and understanding other languages is hard, many of you here will know that, having come to this country and having had to learn English, which is one of the most difficult languages to learn.

So, what exactly language? It is the way in which we convey meaning.

As I tried to convey in the children's talk, we don't only use words to do that. We use signs, gestures to get across what we are trying to communicate.

Now I don't know how everyone began to understand what Peter was saying – maybe people were multilingual, perhaps people translated for others, perhaps it was the way things were said, maybe they used signs or gestures, however it happened people understood that God was love. In the midst of a cacophony of voices, people understood.

I want to suggest that on that Pentecost day that the common language people experienced was that of love. The love of God was communicated in the words said, in the way they were said.

I wonder what this story has to say to us as we live out our faith here in multicultural Australia.

First, we are reminded that no-one is excluded from the message of God's love and all Jesus has shown us. One's language, culture, gender, age, ability, socio economic standing, station in life is excluded. We are all equal and that our diversity is something

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to celebrate. Being a Christian is not about being the same, using the same language, doing things the same way, it is the life of inclusion.

Second, that we are called to convey the message of God's love in meaningful ways. To do that it will need to be relevant, clear and understandable.

This will mean a number of things. We need to get rid of our 'Christian' words (eg. Justification by faith, saved by the blood of Christ etc) as these are not understandable to those beyond the walls of the church buildings. We need instead to learn to speak the language of those beyond the walls of this place. We need to simplify our words and to not fall back into the jargon. This will mean learning about how others live and understanding their world, we will need to find ways to enter into the sub-cultures around us and there are many. What words will you use to speak of God's love to one affected by alcohol or drugs or homelessness? How will you speak of God's love to someone escaping domestic violence? How will you speak of God's love to an asylum seeker or new arrival to the country? How will you speak of God's love to someone living with mental illness or dementia? What words will you use to explain God's love to someone from another ethnic group or religion? What words will you use to speak to a young person or a child? What is clear to me is that I need to understand them first, before I attempt to speak. It may be that the language we need to use will be that of actions of gestures.

The God-given language that by God's spirit we are enabled to use to speak of God's love is one that is understandable and understanding, one that is gentle and loving, one that looks to include rather than exclude, one that celebrates diversity and difference, one that may use few words but many actions, the language of love, the language of our hearts. The language of love is common to all, we can all speak it and can all understand it.

Language is how we convey meaning, it is how we communicate with each other, it is how we connect with one another. Language is more than words, it is actions.

In summary today we celebrate the birth of the Christian church where a diverse audience, speaking many languages and coming from many cultures hear the Gospel message. God's gospel crosses all kinds of barriers and is made available to all. Our task is to continue the work that Peter and the disciples began on that day.

Let me conclude with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer where he describes what that church looks like when it is being the church, noting it is in the language of this love that the church finds its task. He says the church *"only when it exists for others ... not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men (sic) of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others."*¹

So, on this Pentecost Sunday and during this Pentecost season go out from this place, share and spread the good news and if you must use words. Amen.

¹ From 'Letters from Prison' by Dietrich Bonhoeffer