

The Language of God

Language is a gift of God. With it, God creates, commands, and reveals himself to us. In response we use language to witness to the truth of God, to confess our sins, and sing praises to God. We use this very same language for more prosaic purposes too, in getting to know one another, in expressing love, in buying and selling, in writing letters and reading books. We can also misuse words, of course—to blaspheme and curse, to lie and abuse, to gossip and insult. But language remains a powerful gift. If you’ve ever wondered about what it is that separates us from other animals, what it means to be made “in the image and likeness of God,” you might consider it to be our ability to love or to create or to reason. But I think it is language, the ability to express and name and bless.

Humans, of course, aren’t the only animals who communicate. Just about every animal has some way of sharing information. Even insects, such as bees and ants, know how to tell one another of the whereabouts of food. Nor are we alone in communicating vocally. Many animals, including all ape and monkey species, use vocal signs. Green monkeys, for example, use calls of various kinds to warn each other of danger: ‘Careful! An eagle!’ ‘Careful! A lion!’ Humans of course can produce many more distinct sounds than green monkeys, but whales and elephants have equally impressive abilities. And parrots can say anything we can say, as well as mimic the sounds of phones ringing, doors slamming and sirens wailing. What, then, is so special about the language of humans?

The most common answer is that our language is amazingly supple and complex. We can connect a limited number of sounds and signs to produce an infinite number of sentences, each with a distinct meaning. I mean, a green monkey can yell to its comrades, ‘Careful! A lion!’ But a modern human can tell her friends that this morning, near the bend in the river, she saw a lion tracking a herd of bison. She can then describe the exact location, including the different paths leading to the area. With this information, the members of her band can then put their heads together and discuss whether they should approach the river, chase away the lion and hunt the bison.

A second theory agrees that our unique language evolved as a means of sharing information about the world, but it suggests that the most important information needing to be conveyed was not about lions and bison, but about other humans. That is to say, our language evolved in order to gossip. According to this theory humans are primarily social animals. And social cooperation has been key for our survival and reproduction. It is not enough for individual men and women to know the whereabouts of lions and bison. It’s much more important for them to know who in their band hates whom, who is sleeping with whom, who is honest, and who is a cheat.

There is yet a third possibility. In his book entitled *Sapiens*, Yuval Harari acknowledges that both the gossip theory and the there-is-a-lion-near-the-river theory are valid, but he suggests that

it is the ability to transmit information about things that we cannot see, not things we can, is what makes our language so special. The idea is that, as far as we know, only human beings can talk about all kinds of things they have never seen, touched or smelled. In academic circles, these kinds of things are known as ‘fictions’, or ‘social constructs’, or ‘imagined realities.’ Legends, myths, gods and religions are ‘social constructs,’ ‘imagined realities’ and as such are unique to human beings. Many animals can say, ‘Careful! A lion!’ But at a critical point, humans acquired the ability to say, ‘The lion is the guardian spirit of our tribe.’ This ability, the ability to speak of such ‘imagined realities,’ is the most unique feature of human language. You could never convince a monkey to give you a banana by promising him limitless bananas after death in monkey heaven. But something like it can work on humans. Why though is this important? How did spending hours praying to non-existing guardian spirits, instead of hunting and foraging, help our ancient ancestors survive?

What makes the ability to speak about imaginary realities so significant, says Harari, is that it has enabled us not merely to conceive things, but to do so collectively. As Harari explains, because we can speak of things we cannot see, we can create shared identities through stories such as the biblical creation story, or the Dreamtime myths of Australian Aborigines or the nationalist myths of modern states. These stories tell us who we are collectively, as a people. They allow us to see others as part of us, for we live in the same imagined reality as we do, and therefore we have a shared identity with them. And so some creatures can work together to some extent, humans, when they share a story, an identity, they can cooperate in extremely flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers. Indeed, over the centuries, people have woven an incredibly complex network of imaginary realities, things such as nations and laws and the limited liability corporation. These things are made up. They exist in our minds, our collective minds, not in real life. they don’t exist in real life. I mean, you cannot ‘touch’ Facebook or France or Marxist philosophy. Yet they exist, indeed they exercise immense power in our world.

Now, an imagined reality is not a lie. I lie when I say that there is a lion near the river when I know perfectly well that there is no lion there. Rather, an imagined reality is something that everyone believes in, and as long as this communal belief persists, the reality exerts force in the world. Consider that while some sorcerers in primitive times were charlatans, most sincerely believed in the existence of magic and potions. And most millionaires sincerely believe in the existence of money and the power of contracts. Most human-rights activists sincerely believe in the existence of human rights. Yet human rights, like money, are figments of our fertile imaginations. That’s not to say it’s not good or useful to believe in them. But you can’t prove their existence, not like you can prove that gravity exists.

We humans therefore live in a dual world. On the one hand, we can speak of objective realities like rivers, trees and lions; and on the other hand, we can talk about imagined realities like myths, nations and corporations. We can speak of things we see with our eyes as well as things we perceive with the eyes of faith, through shared belief.

You probably know where I am going with this. The same ability that allows us to conceive of and speak of nations and corporations and money allows us also to speak of God. For God exists outside of the world we can touch and see and hear, yet he is very real and has immense significance for our lives. It is language, the ability to speak of abstraction, of imaginaries, that

allows us to know God, to hear him, to recognize his call and respond in faith. We might even say that this is the very purpose of language, what God gave it to us for in the first place—to use it to know Him and speak of Him with others. To know God and make him known.

Yet this same ability that God gave as a gift, we routinely misuse and pervert to our own ends. This has been the case since the earliest days of history, as we see in the story of the Tower of Babel, in our first lesson this morning. The story is one of a people “trying to make a name for themselves,” using language to build an identity. This story comes from sometime after the Flood, when “the whole earth spoke one language.” The descendants of Noah moved eastward to the Babylonian plain, settled there, and decided to build a city and a gigantic tower. Really it was a ziggurat, a stepped building with many stories. Several such structure still exist today. The largest of these was seven stories tall, some three hundred feet high, on a base of roughly the same dimensions. The reason for this building, Genesis tells us, was to “make a name for themselves” and keep themselves from being scattered across the face of the whole earth.”

The boast of the Babel builders—to reach heaven—is laughable and indeed Genesis makes a joke of it. They think that their construction—just 300 feet high—has reached heaven, yet God had to “come down” to look at it! For this conceit, for their pride, God punishes them by confusing their language, leaving the men of Babel ‘babbling’ to each other. But the story is even more clever than that. In the Hebrew, the consonant in the verb “confuse,” *n-b-l*, is a scrambling of the three consonants, *l-b-n*, in the word for brick. And so, because God *n-b-l* (“confused”) their language, they could no longer use their *l-b-n* (“bricks”). So we could say that God destroyed the ‘building blocks’ of their speech.

Babel is more than just a funny etymological story, though, a tale that explains why things are the way they are, in this case why there are so many languages in the world. The Tower of Babel alerts us to the dangers of misusing language, of trying to unite a people through shared fictions, rather than being united by God. At Babel, the very thing—language—that was intended to bridge the gap between people, to bring them to a common purpose and unity, in its misuse left humanity separated, alienated, misunderstanding each other, provoking countless wars and hurt feelings.

Now if we stopped here, there would not be much that is good news or positive about this story. The sin of Babel left us with the confusion of language and purpose. But in our second lesson, from Acts, we see the end of that confusion. At the feast of Pentecost, devout Jews from all corners of the earth had returned to Jerusalem: the reverse of the scattering of people at Babel. Yet, divided by language though they were, suddenly each hears a bunch of yokels, Jesus’ disciples, speaking the languages of their homelands. This would be like ambassadors walking into the UN and being greeted by a group from Bumpass speaking their home languages – Swahili, Mandarin, Finnish and Quechua. Surprising to say the least. But that’s what happened—Babel reversed by the power of the Holy Spirit! The confusion of tongues undone by the Spirit’s tongues of fire! To be fair, the divide of language was not so much removed as it was transcended, overcome. The differences dividing peoples of various languages and cultures still remain, but they no longer prevent their speakers from having a shared identity and purpose.

That we should understand Pentecost this way is evidenced in prophecies of the Old Testament

and the final Revelation of the New Testament, which speak of how the curse of Babel will be lifted at the coming of Christ. The prophet Zephaniah, for instance, prophecies: “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.” (Zephaniah 3:9). Then you have the prophet Joel, whom Peter quotes here in Acts, who foretells a time when everyone, male and female, young and old, the free and the slave will speak God’s word. And in response to this outpouring of speech, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Similarly, in the last book of the Bible, as we saw weeks ago, surrounding the heavenly throne are people of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation singing praises to the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb. The point is clear and constant: in Jesus there is true unity in diversity, one message shared by all: the good news of Jesus Christ on the tongues of peoples of every tribe, language and nation.

If Babel turned the world upside down, Pentecost turned it back aright. Babel’s curse has been reversed. God’s Pentecost work *has* begun, and it continues among us. As Christians, we have joined ourselves to those first followers. We are united with them in faith and we are to share in their missionary work. What they have begun, we are called to continue. But, we do not do so un-empowered. We have the same source of strength, the same fire that the disciples had. Let us not be surprised when the Spirit shows up, blowing among us and burning its way into our hearts, opening our mouths in speech, inspiring us to speak the Good News to others. May the Spirit drive us out among the remnants of Babel and use us to draw others into communion with God’s people and into the kingdom of heaven. Thanks be to God!