

Sunday 17th September 2013

INTERFAITH WEEK 1013

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton of Kol Chai Hatch End Jewish Community, at Hatch End Free Church

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I feel a great sense of privilege, as someone who is not a Christian, to have the honour of speaking to you this morning. The theme you have chosen for this morning is “The Community of Disciples”, and I have decided to talk about the word “Community.” What is our community? Is it our Church, our Synagogue, or our place of worship? Is it our fellow Jews or our fellow Christians? Is it those who live near us, and those we encounter in our daily lives, or is it everyone? Should we think of our world as really one community? Last Sunday, just one week ago, I had the privilege of being present at Westminster Abbey with hundreds of others, at a very moving service held for the 75th Anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, when Nazis went on the rampage through the streets of Germany and Austria, ransacking and setting fire to synagogues and Jewish owned shops and factories. We heard some very moving testimonies from people who had been there and seen it for themselves on November 9th and 10th 1938. But what made it especially moving was that we who were present, well over a thousand of us, in that historic Church, were there as a mixed group of Jews and Christians, for that evening at least very definitely one community. So while our individual places of worship may indeed be our home community, there are times, many times in our lives, when we have to reach out to others, to build bridges, to enter into dialogue, to take the risk of meeting and encounter. Here we are: Kol Chai Synagogue and Hatch End Free Church, just a short walk from each other at opposite ends of Hatch End, serving people in the same streets, in the same area, supporting the same local causes, and yet so rarely meeting. And that’s why times such as this, events such as this are incredibly important, and it seems entirely fitting that National Interfaith Week follows on from the season of Remembrance which we both share.

So let’s look at our text this morning, Acts 2; 43 – 47. In the magnificent King James Bible it reads:

And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

Language is all important in this story, and that translation has one trap, the work meat, which in Jacobean English means a meal, not just meat. The Greek word is TROPHE, and I think the correct translation of the phrase EPILAMBANON TROPES is they seized on their food! This text describes a very eager community. It is a wonderful text, proclaiming an ideal society of communal living, joy and salvation, the culmination of a story of good news among the new and fledgling Christian community. For me, reading it as a Jew, it is the context of this text which is all important. The story of Acts chapter 2 is the very famous account of the descent of the Holy Spirit and the disciples speaking so that from every nation under heaven each understood in his own language. This story of revelation is described as taking place at the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the only festival of the year which to this day Jews and Christians ever describe by the same name, the festival of the fiftieth day, for Christians from Easter Day, for Jews from the beginning of Passover. We both celebrate that fiftieth day as the anniversary of revelation, for Jews the revelation at Sinai, for Christians the revelation encountered in this story. Both revelations are described in the Bible as being accompanied by fire. We both celebrate the revelation of God, and yet there is a profound difference, because for Jews the story is one of revelation of Torah to our people alone, and for Christians the story is one of proclaiming the good news to all peoples, in every language. And this brings us back to our original question of what is our community, and whether it's better to begin with a narrower vision of our own group and those around us, or a wider vision of the whole world.

It is very easy, too easy to view my faith, Judaism as an inward looking faith. We accept those who wish to join us, but we are not missionaries, and we do not seek to convert the world. Often living as minorities in Europe, Jews were simply not allowed to accept people into our faith, though today all are welcome to join. But we still have no mission to the world as a whole. A clue to understanding why this is provided by this question of languages – how do we cope with the world as it is, a world in which there are so many different languages, religions and cultures? Our story in Acts, in which everyone could hear in his own language, is a kind of reversal of the story in Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel story, in which we learn that everyone originally had one language, but God dispersed them and gave them different languages because they were trying to build a tower to heaven, becoming too arrogant. The world before Babel had one community and one language, but from now on your language defined your community.

In Hebrew BABEL, Bavel, means Babylon, and the Tower of Babel story was the story of the founding of that city. Also in our Bible is the story of the end of Babylon, and this is the story of Belshazzar's feast, the writing on the wall, Daniel chapter 5. In this second story, written in the Aramaic language, the king is feasting when strange writing which he cannot interpret appears on the wall. Only Daniel is able to tell him what it means, four words which are names of coins, the first one being TEKEL the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew SHEKEL. Daniel tells him that it all means his

kingdom is weighed in the balance and found wanting. That night, Babylon fell to the Persians. Here too we have a confusion of languages at the heart of the story.¹

Today's story then, Acts 2, is the third in this series. This is a breakthrough story. People suddenly can speak in other languages, and understand in their own language. This is telling us that from now on, in the fledgling Christian community, language is no longer to be an obstacle. Most importantly, community can for the first time cross language boundaries. It is a modern story, for a world like ours in which we have learned to co-operate with those who speak different tongues from ours, and for Churches in a city like ours where indeed many different languages are spoken.

Ludwig Zamenhov (1859-1917) was a Jew from Bialystok in the Russian Empire, who had a vision of a world where everyone speaks the same language. In his youth he wrote a Yiddish grammar: as an adult he invented a language called ESPERANTO, which he hoped would reverse Babel and become the accepted international language. Now Zamenhov had a contemporary and fellow Jew called Eliezer ben Yehuda (1858 – 1992), He was born in Lithuania but went to live in the Holy Land in 1881. Ben Yehuda had a narrower vision, a national language not for the world but for the Jewish people alone as they regathered from their dispersion into their ancient land. Ben Yehuda revived Hebrew, which had become a language only of books and prayers like Latin, and made it once again a living spoken language. He succeeded. Hebrew today is now spoken or understood by nine million people across the world. Today there are perhaps two million people in the world with some knowledge of Esperanto, but it never succeeded really in becoming a credible alternative beyond the enthusiastic Esperanto community. Having a broad wide vision which encompasses the world is wonderful, but sometimes a narrower one can be more practical.

I venture to suggest that we live in a world where having different languages is not just an obstacle, but part of humanity given us by God which remains really important. There are times when we need to detach ourselves a little from each other, and recognise the true value of pluralism. After all, God arranged that none of us look the same: why then should we think the same or speak the same words?

If only those involved in conflict could take a step back: those opposed to each other in Syria, in the Middle East, those who have passionately different views on Europe; if only they could take a step back and look at themselves. We do not need a world hopelessly divided on the one hand or a world where everyone is the same on the other hand, but a pluralist world: for pluralism implies both unity and diversity, one humanity with many nations and cultures, which embraces both the universality of Christianity and the particularity of smaller faiths such as Judaism. May this interfaith week be a time when each of us is called to our own community, and peoples of different cultures and tongues encounter each other, as the apostles once

¹ For Daniel 5 as a story which reverses Genesis 11, see Michael Hilton "Babel Reversed - Daniel Chapter 5", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Sheffield Academic Press, Vol. 66 (1995), pp. 99-112.

did. Let me end with one of our most famous Jewish sayings, attributed to Hillel the Elder, a contemporary of Jesus.

הוא הִזָּה אֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאָנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי. וְאִם לֹא
עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתָי:

He used to say, If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?²

It is my belief that our two faiths are parallel faiths which, even through centuries of opposition, have shaped the course of European history. How much more we will be able to do so in an era of friendly dialogue and co-operation.

² Mishnah *Avot* 1:14.