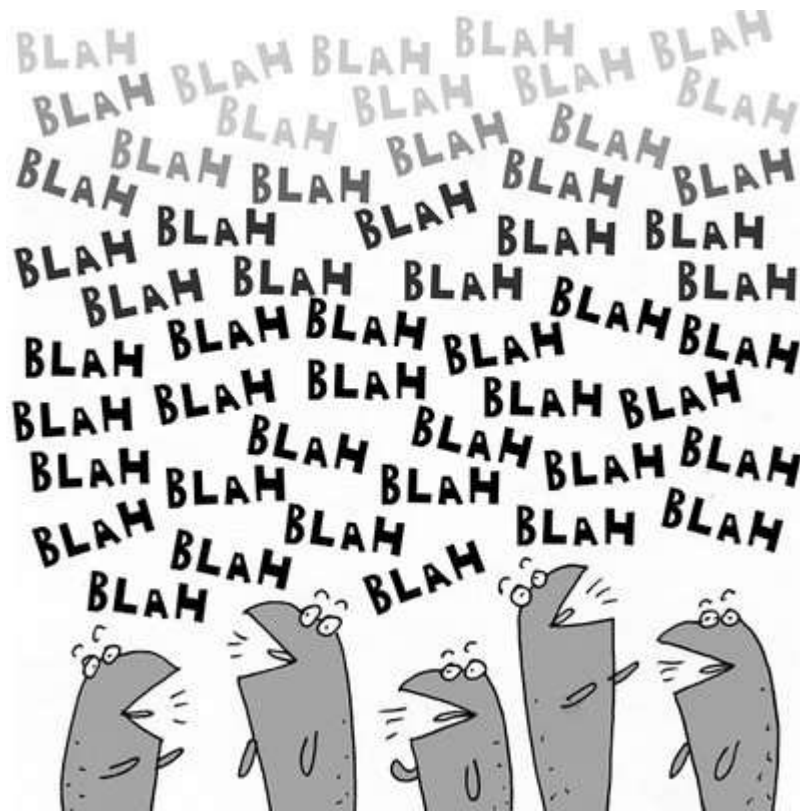


# Genesis: The Tower of Babel

Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2020



*'Stop your babbling! Oh you don't half babble about rubbish!'* In our biblical reflection today we see the origins of the word '*babbling*' as we approach the Tower of Babel and I invite you to read Gn 11:1-9. As always let's begin in prayer.

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Come, O Holy Spirit,  
and fill us with the gifts of knowledge and wisdom.  
Strengthen us, we pray, with heavenly grace,  
so that we may grasp with our minds,  
treasure in our hearts,  
and carry out in our deeds,  
all the teachings of your Holy Book  
which lead to salvation.  
Amen.

Our story today begins in Babylon, present day Iraq. You may remember from a few weeks ago that the city of Babylon became the home for many Jews who were forced into exile after 596BC when the Babylonian Empire conquered their Kingdom of Judah.



As you can see from the artist's impression above, Babylon was a city built in bricks and mortar. As there was no natural stone to be found close to the city the inhabitants produced their own bricks from clay and baked them in kilns. For the exiled Jewish community they found themselves in a foreign world, that spoke a different language, worshipped many gods and goddesses and whose culture was very different to their own. It was during this period that the exiled community, who wanted to retain and keep alive their faith which had been given to them by God, undertook to record and express many of their divine revealed beliefs and teachings. It was the surrounding environment of Babylon, their exiled city, that flavoured and shaped many of their images.

For example, the inspiration for the Tower of Babel may have come from the Babylonian temples of worship that were called ziggurats.

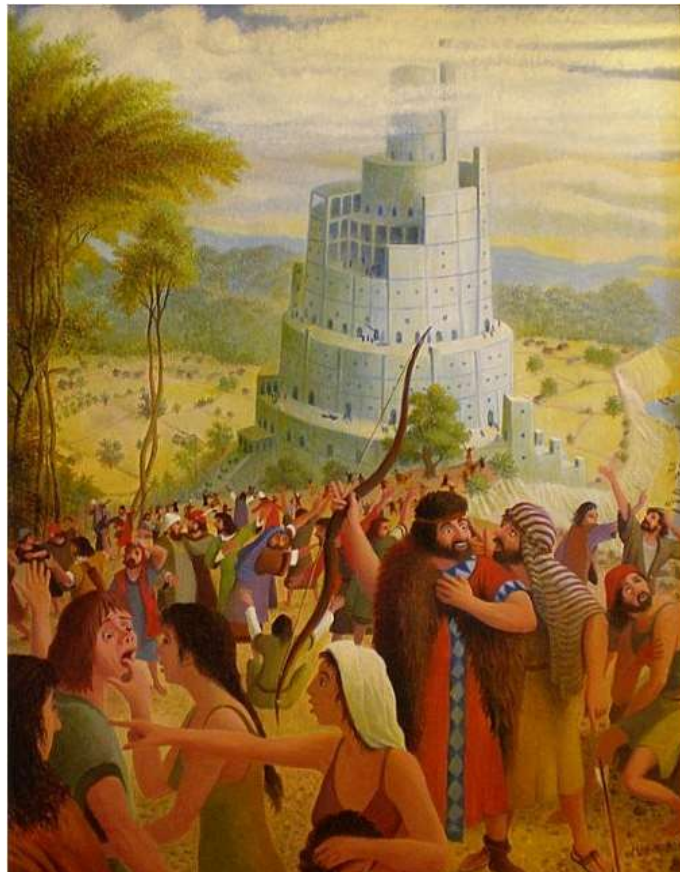


They were pyramid like structures, built of bricks and mortar, that resembled mountains. Usually they were split into two sanctuaries, a bottom level and an upper level. In both these spaces the Babylonian gods were worshiped and believers, in solemn procession, would ascend and descend the ziggurat.

We can see the environmental shaping and flavouring of the exiles experience in Babylon within the first few lines of Gn 11.

***'Now as they moved eastwards they found a plain in the land of Shinar where they settled. They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and bake them in the fire...Come let us build ourselves a town and a tower with its top reaching heaven.'*** (Gn 11:2-4)

What moves the people in the narrative to want to build a town and a tower? Disobedience, pride and ego. In other words sin, that same sin that was brought into the world by Adam and Eve and has tainted each generation. God gave the command to Noah after the flood to ***'...be fruitful, multiply, teem over the earth and be lord of it.'*** (Gn 9:7) The builders of the Tower of Babel decided, like Adam and Eve, to disobey God and make a name for themselves independently from the Creator. They chose not to multiply or teem over the earth but to settle in one place and their remain.



Not only did the people decide freely not to follow God's command but they had the audacity to build a structure that they presumed would bring them to heavens and allow them to face God as equals! As always, God in his mercy corrects and re-directs His people back on to the right path.

***'Now the Lord came down to see the town and the tower that the sons of man had built.'*** (Gn 11:6) This is a good sentence to remind us of the poetic language and imagery of parts of Genesis. God is all powerful, all knowing and all seeing or to be posh – omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent! He has no need to ***'come down to see the town and the tower'***, because He sees and knows all things. However, in the imagery of the Old Testament by giving God human qualities such as movement and form, it allows the poetry to flow and attempts to convey abstract concepts into accessible pictures.

God was disappointed that the builders and people of Babel did not wish to multiply and grow but follow their own destiny. He decided to confuse their language so that they could not understand one another. The Hebrew word for confused is ***balal*** and the name Babylon which is ***babel*** means ***'gate of God'***. From these word similarities and resemblances it is possible to see where we get the phrase ***'babbling'*** – A babbling person is one who cannot be understood by another.





As you will have read, God made sure that His actions had the effect of not only humbling His people and bringing them down to earth but also forcing them to be more than just a single isolated community. God intended His people to use their gifts and talents for the greater good of all and not just use them for their own private and selfish ambitions and wants. By causing confusion in language, God's people had to work together, share and communicate.

Maybe today we could look at our own babbling! How often do our words hurt others? Are we all too ready to make comment and judgement about people without knowing the full story? Do we curse and misuse the gift of language in how we publicly talk? Do we babble in prayer or think before we speak to God the Almighty? Have we used our words to heal, reconcile and forgive?

The following wisdom is from the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament.

*'Through his mouth the godless man is the ruin of his neighbour,  
but by knowledge the virtuous are safeguarded.'* (Pr 11:9)

*'Who scoffs at his neighbour is a fool;  
the man of discernment holds his tongue.'* (Pr 11:12)

*'A mild answer turns away wrath,  
sharp words stir up anger.'* (Pr 15:1)

*'Kindly words are a honeycomb,  
sweet to the taste, wholesome to the body.'* (Pr 16:24)

*'There is gold, and profusion of pearls,  
but lips that speak of knowledge, that is the priceless ornament.'* (Pr 20:15)

*'A mace, a sword, a keen arrow,  
such is the man who bears false witness against his neighbour.'* (Pr 25:18)

Our next biblical reflection will be an encounter with the great patriarch and our father in faith – Abraham.

God Bless and keep praying

Fr. O'Brien