

A Gold Logie Pentecost

A sermon on Acts 2:1-21 & Genesis 11:1-9 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 May 2016

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Message

God's Holy Spirit gathers us into one body where our differences are not erased or downplayed, but boldly offered in love and service of one another.

Sermon

The TV Week Logie Awards are not something I've often taken much notice of, but it would have been hard to escape the excitement generated by last Sunday night's awarding of the Gold Logie to Waleed Aly. As has been pointed out repeatedly, it has not been common to give this award to someone who expresses an informed and intelligent critique of our culture, and neither has it been common to give it to people with brown skin, or Muslim faith, or, as he put it himself, unpronounceable names. And one of the things that makes his win particularly important, is that this prize is essentially a popularity contest. It is voted on by the public. And not, for the most part by the sort of inner-city leftie public who trumpet the cause of multiculturalism and might like to think of Waleed Aly as one of them. It is voted for by the readers of *TV Week*, which is not what readers of *Eureka Street* or the *Guardian Weekly* usually turn to next. So Waleed Aly's win has been widely celebrated as a testimony to an increasingly mature acceptance of multiculturalism in the mainstream Australian community.

But Waleed Aly himself is not a simplistic cheerleader for mainstream multiculturalism. He tends to keep asking the hard questions that infuriate both supporters and opponents. And I suspect that he is asking some questions that we who would follow Jesus in multicultural Australia need to hear and think seriously about.

It is perfectly obvious from the way we are playfully trying to pray in multiple languages tonight that we in this church are not opponents of multiculturalism, but as [Martin Flanagan pointed out in the weekend paper](#), multiculturalism is no longer an option. It is just a reality like overpopulation and mass migration. It is neither an end in itself nor really a value by itself. It is just a reality. The question is how we respond to this reality and how we live within it. As Flanagan also pointed out, it is not a new phenomenon that arrived with the recent waves of immigration. He illustrated sectarian divisions in Australia that go back a lot further than that, often grounded in religious differences.

Tonight's Bible readings had a lot to say on the topic of multiculturalism. The thing that catches most people's attention is the account of the miraculous overcoming of the language barriers. On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were heard speaking of the great things of God in languages they had never learned. Now it is common to refer to this as "the gift of tongues", but this can be misleading, if not just plain wrong. Not only does this passage not use that name for it, but it appears to be quite a different thing from what Paul talks about as the gift of tongues. Paul speaks of a gift of an unintelligible language that is useful in prayer but is of little or no use in communicating with people. Speaking in tongues in front of other people, he suggests, causes confusion and impedes communication; whereas what is described as happening on the day of Pentecost was something that broke down the communication barriers and enabled people who otherwise could not have understood to hear and understand. It probably doesn't help much to spend much time trying to work out how this happened – whether the miracle occurred in the voice boxes of the speakers or the ears of

the hearers. The important thing is what it is telling us about what God is like and what the Spirit is seeking to do among us.

In our first reading, we heard the story of the tower of Babel. It was read because the story of the Day of Pentecost seems to be making quite deliberate allusions to it. The Tower of Babel story tells us about the fragmentation of the human race into isolated and estranged tribes, and the consequent breakdown of communication between them. People who have been immersed in these old Jewish stories can often immediately recognise that the New Testament is portraying Jesus as saving the world by reversing the breakdowns that are described in the older foundational stories. The story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost is telling us that the social and linguistic fragmentation of Babel is being reversed. The living hell of a world increasingly divided and at war with itself is being undone. People are being reunited and ethnic and linguistic divisions are no longer going to separate them. The culture of God is emerging as a community of reconciliation where the common language of love for God and one another transcends other differences.

This is further highlighted and further expanded when Peter quotes from the prophet Joel to explain the meaning of what the people are witnessing. The particular passage he quotes is one of the most extraordinary passages in the Hebrew scriptures for foretelling a day when all our dividing lines will be collapsed and all will be one in God. It starts with God saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy." There would have been nothing exceptional about a prophesy that "your sons" will prophesy, but your daughters?! That was a scandalous overturning of the religious protocols and understandings of the day. No distinction between male and female in God's new culture? A mind-boggling idea! But it goes further. Old and young shall see visions and dream dreams. No hierarchy of age either. In the emerging culture of God, of which the newborn Church is a foretaste, old and young alike will be God-bearers. "Even on my slaves, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit." To the Jews, there was an assumption that the rich had a head start with God, because it took a lot of resources to keep all the Jewish law - to buy the right foods and prepare them properly, to wear the right things, etc etc. Slaves lacked the resources to be law-abiding and so were religious outsiders. But now God says even that social divide will not keep anyone out of the culture of God. All the barriers are broken down.

The primary message we are given about the birth of the Church is that it is formed and empowered by the Holy Spirit who breaks down every barrier that might keep people out of the life of God. The Church is a community of grace and reconciliation in which everyone has equal right of participation. So, as we gather around this table and pray for God to pour out the Holy Spirit on us and make us truly the body of Christ, we'd better be aware of what the Spirit might do to our assumptions about who we are and what makes us different from others. And we'd better be aware that when we exchange the greeting of peace, that we really are binding ourselves to one another, because the Spirit is not going to let any of the old divisions remain. As our foretaste around the table moves towards fulfilment in the culture of God, we are all being reconciled to one another in Christ, and that vision is front and centre in our foundational stories, as we heard tonight.

But let me return to those more difficult questions that Waleed Aly, among others, would ask of us, and which I think are implicit in the readings we heard too. One of the problems with too much of the talk about diversity and multiculturalism, is that they are talked about and celebrated as though they were ends in themselves. There is a rather shallow line of thought

that says that because we can walk out into the street and find restaurants selling cuisine from hundreds of different cultures, and because anglo-Australians are more and more comfortable to enjoy what those restaurants offer, we have somehow made it as a multicultural society. And if that's not the pinnacle, then giving the Gold Logie to Waleed Aly surely is. But is it?

The problem is that much of our thinking about multiculturalism tends to be too comfortable and avoids any serious conversation about our differences or any real engagement with them. This can look a lot like the paternalistic assimilation policies of the past. People are welcome to live and prosper among us so long as they become as much like us as possible, and avoid doing anything that might confront us with uncomfortable differences. At its worst, it can involve the totalitarian repression of obvious signs of difference – languages, dress styles, religious observances. But most often in our society these days, it just looks rather bland. It just takes the form of avoiding any engagement in serious conversations about the strengths and weaknesses of our respective cultures and practices. And so it asks each of us to tone down anything distinctive, and treat all cultures, all beliefs, all social systems as equally valid and equally beyond question, so long as they don't start making unreasonable claims for themselves. We still feel able to criticise those we regard as extremists, but so long as people are moderate in their cultural views and expressions, we can celebrate our multiculturalism.

Waleed Aly recently said that he finds it offensive to be called a “moderate Muslim”. He said that it is like being called a “moderate intellect”. It implies that it is okay to be muslim, so long as you are not too muslim. This is the sort of pricking of our balloons that he is really good at. He asks the questions that people on both sides try to avoid. I don't think anyone ever accused Jesus of being a moderate. He wasn't lynched for holding moderate – everything is okay so long as it is not too extreme – positions on anything. He was lynched and executed because he challenged all our cultural assumptions and called us to be bold, and even extremist, in our commitments to love of neighbours, love of enemies, mercy, forgiveness, and inclusion of those who make us uncomfortable. I don't want to be known as one who follows Jesus in moderation, although I fear that such an accusation would probably be a fair one.

The truth is that life will not be fuller and richer and more beautiful if Muslims and Christians mute our differences and only ever talk about our common ground. Life will be richer and more beautiful if we are both boldly and fully ourselves, and we unapologetically but generously and respectfully offer the riches of our respective worldviews and cultural practices to one another. All cultures and practices are not equal. Christian culture has been littered with abominable injustices, hatreds and hostilities which not only dragged the name of Jesus through the mud but did horrific damage to millions of people. When we have managed to reform any of those things, it was not because people were moderate and tolerant of them. We needed prophets to stand up with courage and risk being denounced as extremists to open our eyes to the ugliness in our midst and in our own hearts.

The Holy Spirit who was poured out on us on the Day of Pentecost is a God of wild wind and flame, not a God of moderate breezes. We are talking about a God of fiery passion and raging love who seeks to catch us all up in a whirlwind of grace and generosity. And when we can surrender to that Spirit, and allow ourselves and others to be fully and boldly ourselves, in all our distinctiveness, we will find God speaking to us through one another, and the barrier-breaking, community-enriching, communication-enabling miracle of Pentecost will truly catch fire among us.