“How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

Seems as good a question in the 21st century as in the first. We seem to have more difficulty hearing each other than almost ever before. Of course nearly every generation has felt that way, I suppose. The irony is that we have an ever-increasing capacity to hear each other—smart phones, computers, internet, email, text messages, Zoom, TikTok, SnapChat, radio, television, streaming services, and other means of which I’m totally unaware.

We also hear a great deal in our own very specific, localized, social, political language. They languages are more like dialects—conservative, liberal, Democrat, Republican, racist, antifa, and more dialects and sub-dialects than I could catalogue here.

It’s as if we’re good at the macro level (social media, for example) and micro level (niche-audience newsfeeds), but the right-sized stuff gives us fits. By right-sized I mean the kind of everyday give-and-take we used to take for granted. It seems the world is filled with coded language and symbols we must avoid (or embrace). There was once what we called common courtesy, then social sensitivity, then political correctness (and its opposite, which amounts to the same thing—a deliberate use of inflammatory language, until we arrived at a generalized anxiety about interactions with each other.

In his most recent guidelines to clergy and lay leaders, Bishop Doyle greatly eased the restrictions on in-person worship. He ended by directing us to continue to encourage everyone to be vaccinated, and I am glad to do that. It seems a reasonable request by the chief pastor of a diocese: there’s a public health crisis, and he encourages us to follow professional medical advice. There should be no hesitation involved here, but for a moment, a nano-second, I wondered if I would offend anyone by passing along the encouragement. (Of course the bishop and I and everyone else know that there are some extremely rare cases in which a person cannot or should not be vaccinated, but we all trust that such people will follow their physician’s advice.)

Back to my nano-second of hesitation: it is simply a measure of how far we have drifted from our ability to hear in our own language.

The tables have been turned, somehow, as it is easier than ever before in human history to find ways to translate from one language to another. With a computer or smart phone there is easy access to various translation applications. Imperfect, to be sure, but enough to get from, say, Urdu to English, or English to Lithuanian. Or Igbo to Yoruba for that matter.

That was the problem at Pentecost—actually, that was the miraculous solution to the familiar problem: “how can the Medes understand the Mesopotamians, the Cappadocians understand the Elamites?” in this passage a former parishioner once called the Jerusalem phone book.

No, that problem has been effectively solved in our world.

The problem now occurs when we understand each other’s words perfectly, but the political and social implications under and around the words stop us in our tracks, completely stymie us.

An aside here—a big aside, as those in some Shakespearean plays that are essential to following the story: You, the people of Epiphany, navigate those waters of language beneath the language incredibly well. To be as clear as I can: all of us together represent a pretty broad swath of the political, social, economic, and (paradoxical though it may seem) religious spectrum. And we do that with grace and respect for each other.

I know that there are inevitable moments of more heat than light, when emotions override civility—but those are very few, and vastly far between.) I was in a conversation with a member of the parish just a few days ago in which this issue of mutual respect arose—concerning a third parishioner—and we both commented on what I’ve just been discussing, the remarkable ability for all of us to work together in ministry, knowing all the while that we do not all share the same philosophical and political views. That fact is something we need to celebrate, not just take for granted. End of aside.

From the time I was a young priest I have observed that the typical parish church is one of the last remaining places in which people of widely diverse backgrounds (in all the ways we qualify that word—ethnic, educational, social, economic) come together under one roof, pray together with common purpose, and pull together for the betterment of ourselves and God’s world. There have been a few fractures within Anglicanism since I first made the observation, but I stand by it, particularly in light of a parish family such as Epiphany.

It may seem to you that I have veered rather widely from our readings this morning, on this Feast of Pentecost.

Here’s my defense of that apparent veering: It’s right there in this amazing reading from the Acts of the Apostles. There’s an undeniable emphasis on hearing rather than speaking. We (and by “we” I mean “I”) focus so much on saying the right thing that we can skip over the power of listening. There are promises of dreams and visions, and all of this is made available to every person in every nook and cranny of human civilization.

Listening to God speaking through these diverse voices, they all hear.

The psalmist hits the nail on the head: “O Lord, how manifold are your works.” Indeed!

At Pentecost we celebrate the source of this miracle of hearing and being heard. Recognizing our need to listen more than talk, Paul tells the Romans, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Have we not all been there? When all we can offer by way of prayer are sighs—sometimes they’re like tears, sometimes like sheer frustration. But this is the vocabulary of the Spirit, the lexicon that asks for better things than we know (or think) we’re asking for.

And now we live in this era of the Spirit. Jesus himself offered this explanation, an echo of what we read last week concerning his Ascension. It’s to your advantage, he tells them, that I go away, in order to send the Spirit to you, and “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.” Elsewhere he has said that the truth will make us free. Free now to hear what people are saying beneath all the slogans and coded language. If we listen closely to the human language of the heart, we will hear the universal plea for understanding, to know the love of God that connects us all and all of us with God.

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