



European Forum of Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual and Transgender
Christian Groups



European Forum of LGBT Christian groups / David & Jonathan – 2015

Theme: "Intercultural contacts: Babel or Pentecost?"

The **Babel** story is part of the Old Testament (Genesis 11:1-9). At that point, humanity is spread all over the earth but still has a certain unity: *Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*



According to a certain reading, the tower of Babel symbolises human pride and vanity, which the Lord punishes by preventing humans from understanding each other and so uniting forces. God can then be seen as a vengeful God or even as a jealous one, who punishes humans for wanting to become greater than him. In this case, the variety of languages is a curse resulting from a punishment, where the unity of language would allow peace and cooperation.

But other readings are possible. The multiplicity of languages can be seen as a gift, an encouragement to be curious about the Other: since the Other speaks a different language, I need to make an effort to go towards her/him, to understand her/his point of view. This makes me conscious of Otherness. The diversity of languages reminds me that interacting with an Other is not to be taken for granted: the various languages are carriers of richness and creativity, but also of conflicts if no-one listens enough to understand the language of the Other.

The **Pentecost** story is told in the New Testament (Acts of the apostles 2:1-13), at a time after the death and resurrection of Jesus when all the apostles are gathered together in Jerusalem: *Suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house*

where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ... Both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

The Pentecost event is often seen as representing the foundation of the Church: by becoming capable of speaking the language of their audience, the apostles have the possibility of proclaiming the Good News throughout the world.

But once again, the text can have different interpretations. One can start from a technical understanding of what a language is: each person hears the Gospel message in her/his own language (a Cretan hears in the Cretan dialect, etc.). This is a particularistic view. But it is also possible to imagine that the languages that come to the apostles are something more than just codes for expression: at Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus have their hearts so overflowing with love that their language becomes comprehensible to all, whatever language they speak. According to this more universalistic reading, it is then the power of love conferred by the Holy Spirit that is the message to which the Pentecost story invites us.

All the participants at this gathering are invited to share with each other and enrich their interpretations!

Alice