

So having had a week off for good behaviour – or rather, for Lily’s baptism last week – we now return to our sermon series on worship this week, with those three readings we’ve just heard chosen to fit the theme.

And this week’s focus is on worship and mission. Does our worship speak of God – in a way that other people will respond to?

The gospel that we’ve just heard (Acts 2:1-13) we’ve heard so many times that we probably miss just how radical it is.

It’s a very strong human instinct to assume that when we’re dealing with God we have to speak a different language, one that’s somehow divine – whether it’s Greek, or Latin, or Hebrew, or Arabic, or even English – or, in other parts of the world, other languages that are held to be holy enough to speak of God.

But what happened at Pentecost was the opposite.

It calls to mind the story of the tower of Babel, when humanity became so ambitious that God responded by dividing them by making them speak all sorts of different languages. The underlying message of Babel is that human babble, the many languages we speak, is somehow wrong. Hence our instinct to emphasise the idea of one holy language.

What happened at Pentecost subverts this. Not by reversing Babel, but by embracing Babel.

Each and every person there at Pentecost heard about God in their own language.

God had become incarnate in Jesus, who spoke human language, and Jesus left behind a legacy which meant that God could be spoken of and heard in every language under the sun.

God doesn't just speak to human diversity or rejoice in human diversity, God uses human diversity to carry out his mission – and note, it's always God's mission, not ours or the church's.

This blows out of the water any idea that worship must be expressed in one particular way, whether that means language or music or theology or any other part of worship.

The key question is not *how* worship is done, but what it is about.

Does our worship speak of God?

But that's probably misleading – it could imply that it's just a one-way thing, us explaining God to other people.

It's probably better to talk in terms of *conversation*.

In conversation with those around, does our worship speak of God?

Or even better, is our worship a conversation with God, and an open conversation other people can join in with?

And having a conversation means listening as well as talking, and when we do that we may be very surprised by what we hear and who we find we are talking to.

We see that in the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-32) – just what can happen when we go out travelling and talking about Jesus.

Think about the story from the point of view of the disciples.

They are fleeing, along a notoriously dangerous stretch of road, running away from very dangerous political events which they are implicated in, and they are traumatised, mourning the loss of Jesus and all their hopes.

So even to speak to this stranger they meet is very brave.

But despite what has happened, and their trauma and fear, they are brave enough to speak. They still revert to what Jesus has taught them, and talk to this stranger about Jesus. To this clueless stranger.

And what do they find?

They find that this apparently clueless stranger starts to explain things to them, connect things up in ways they had never imagined – but which make so much sense.

And eventually, only eventually, they realise that this is a meeting with Jesus himself.

When we get involved with God's mission, we should be prepared for things like that to happen.

We might go out very uncertain ourselves. We might think those around haven't a clue and have to be told everything.

But if we're prepared to listen, to have a proper conversation, we might find that God is there far ahead of us.

Our own uncertainty might even help. And when it comes to the question of how we communicate, we may well not share much language with the people we get into conversation with.

But we shouldn't worry about that, if the conversation is truly about God. It's amazing what can be communicated with even only a few words in common, when people want to communicate.

*We* can only communicate from our own starting point, and again we shouldn't worry about that. But if we really want to communicate we will try everything out, be prepared to adapt, and learn from the response. Our language will develop, and so will the language of the people we talk to.

All of this applies to what we do in the outside world, but also what we do in church, how we worship in church.

But what is always true is that this conversation is about the work of the Spirit. It's not dependent on us finding the winning formula that connects us with modern culture. It's about God being present at all stages in the conversation, inspiring us and inspiring others. We can't dictate or predict what language God will speak to other people in, and tell other people off for not talking the right language. All we can do is try to make our own worship, our own conversation, genuine. The rest, the translation, is up to God; and if we are really listening, we will rejoice wherever we hear of it. It's God's mission, not ours.