

## To Catch a Babel Fish

15 May 2016

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

Most of you will have heard of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a radio play by Douglas Adams, which has been made into a stage show, a series of novels, comics, a television series (which was how I first encountered it), a computer game, and a feature film. It tells the story of Arthur Dent, who is rescued by his alien friend Ford Prefect just before the Earth is destroyed by the Vogons, an alien race, to make way for a hyperspace bypass. They have various adventures as they make their way across the galaxy, meeting some unforgettable characters, such as fellow human Trillian, the two-headed Zaphod Beeblebrox, and Marvin the Paranoid Android.

They also encounter some truly bizarre creatures along the way, but perhaps none so remarkable as the Babel fish, which is able to instantly translate anything that is said in any language. "The Babel fish is small, yellow, leech-like, and probably the oddest thing in the universe. It feeds on brain wave energy, absorbing all unconscious frequencies and then excreting telepathically a matrix formed from the conscious frequencies and nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain, the practical upshot of which is that if you stick one in your ear, you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language: the speech you hear decodes the brain wave matrix."<sup>1</sup>

The Babel fish gets its name from today's Lesson from Genesis. Humankind has re-established itself following the catastrophe described in the great flood story, and has settled in a place called Shinar, which we understand to be part of Mesopotamia. But the

people become increasingly over confident. They build themselves a city and a great tower. God becomes concerned at the precociousness of these mortals, and responds by scattering them and confounding their languages, to put a stop to their arrogance.

This is an example of what is called an etiological story, which means it tries to explain how something came into being. Much of the first eleven chapters of Genesis comprises stories and traditions that helped the ancient Israelites give meanings to things they could not understand. And this particular story attempts to explain the existence of different languages and cultures in the world.

Today is the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost is Greek for “fiftieth day”, and was the name used by Hellenistic (or Greek) Jews for *Shavuot*, or the Festival of Weeks, which occurs 50 days after the Passover. To Jews, it commemorates the giving of The Law at Mt. Sinai. The apostles are celebrating the Pentecost in today’s Newer Testament reading from the Book of Acts. But this year, they have something of a surprise.

<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.<sup>2</sup>

For Christians, Pentecost has come to represent the coming of the Holy Spirit instead of the giving of The Law, and is often described

as the 'Birthday of the Church'. The Holy Spirit is the Advocate, or Helper, that had been promised by Jesus, as well as the source of our spiritual gifts and the discernment of the roles to which God is calling each one of us. There are several varying lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament, mostly in the writings of St Paul.

Members of the Church have different gifts in line with their different responsibilities. But one gift that seems to be given undue emphasis these days is speaking in tongues, or *glossolalia*. When I was a teenager, I attended a Christian youth group, where I was told things like, "You aren't a proper Christian if you don't speak in tongues!" I have been to churches where the manifestation of *glossolalia* appears to be central to worship. And I would suggest we have unwittingly overcomplicated its significance.

In our reading from Acts, the apostles are heard to speak the language of every nation, to make it abundantly clear their message of the hope that comes from the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is not for any one race or nation, but for all of humankind, making this text the antithesis of the Babel story.

But if we look at the state of the world today, there is still much strife between different peoples, much of which can be attributed to a refusal by many to accept those who are different to them. But if we look for our similarities instead of our differences, we might just find we have more in common than we think.

I am not a huge fan of war films, but one I do like is *Das Boot*, which simply means 'The Boat'. *Das Boot* tells the story of a German U-Boat crew in World War II. Not only is this a really good film with a

gripping story, but it takes a German perspective, which makes it very different to most war films we see here. I grew up in an era when war films inevitably portrayed Germans as being either bumbling fools or evil sadists, but *Das Boot* shows us that German submariners were ordinary young men who had been unwittingly dragged into a global conflict. Just like their Allied counterparts.

So my message for Pentecost is that we should remember the day the Church came into being was also the day the Apostles were empowered through language to reach all peoples. And that we should take a stand against misunderstanding of and intolerance towards those who are different to us, and accept all of humankind as being people created in God's image. As *A New Zealand Prayer Book* declares, in Christ there is no discrimination of gender, class, or race.

Jesus gave us two simple commandments: to love God, and to love others.<sup>3</sup> When we show love for others, we show love for God. But when we reject others, we are rejecting the very image of God.

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<http://theword.tk>

<sup>1</sup> The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Fit the First, BBC Radio 4 programme, broadcast 8 March 1978

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:37-40 (NRSV)