

WORD MATTERS

The gift of language given to us by the Holy Spirit enables us to share God's love for the world and its peoples.

The reading from Acts this morning tells us of that remarkable event on the day of Pentecost when the disciples were given an **extraordinary** gift of languages. What struck me most when I read this account was that the multilingual audience **heard** what was said in their **own** language.

Our capacity to understand what someone is saying to us has many barriers, never mind the differences of the language itself, as in between Swahili and English! Written words can convey meaning just by the words themselves while spoken words have the added dimension of body language and tone. How are you – fine thanks or fine thanks; the latter actually contradicts the words themselves. Words as a means of communication is often flawed and we can easily miss the point. We need to be sure that we clarify the meaning, often by just asking “do you mean.....”

As many of you will know, I love language in all its variety and complexity, while numbers turn my brain into scrambled eggs! Language has the power to move us, to inspire us, to remind us of beauty and truth. The magnificence of the King James Bible, which transformed the literary status of England, is a fine example of all three “there were shepherds”. Shakespeare of course added his significant contribution to the English language.

Martin Luther King's “I have a dream” speech in 1963 inspired a generation of people all over the world, “that my children will be judged by the content of their character rather than by the colour of their skin”. A note of caution here, as a wise person once said – dreams only work if we do!

100 years earlier, the Gettysburg Address, in all its beautiful brevity of only 271 words, has been immortalized by the phrase “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”.

And then there's Churchill “never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few”.

Language has the power to heal or hurt. In 2004 my job was made redundant after 16 years tenure. It was a difficult time, hard to avoid feeling that I myself was redundant and surplus to requirements. Many colleagues were kind and supportive and I tried to behave with as much grace as I could muster. On my last day one of my senior colleagues presented to me a cup with a picture of a giraffe on it. She said as she handed it to me “thank you for walking tall amongst us”. That gesture and those words healed a lot of pain I had felt. “We are loved even on the hardest days” are comforting words which are priceless when life deals us “trials too great to endure”.

Language can also hurt or harm and can be spoken in anger, be revengeful, spiteful or downright nasty. For such utterances good Lord deliver us. Words can be used as weapons of war, in a world where there is so much negativity, so much hate speech; or as W B Yeats put it “a world where the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Or words can promote peace. Let us affirm that the more that **we** are subjected to the worst, the more it will bring out the best in us. As a wise person once said “we may forget what people said to us, but we will never forget how they made us feel”. Baby elephant story.....

There are many hundreds of Languages and I am convinced that Annabel speaks poodle as Rupert seems to understand everything she says! I have just finished reading a remarkable book titled “Clear”. It is a story about the Scottish Highland clearances in which an English-speaking man is sent from the mainland to remove one of the Gaelic speaking crofters. Despite their language barriers, these two men actually did manage to communicate with each other and actually taught each other English and Gaelic.

While this homily discusses the gift of language, I would absolutely acknowledge that **silence** is a language too. You will all have had the profound, but sadly rare, experience of sharing a story with someone who just **really** listened and avoided interrupting you.

So, on this day, the day of Pentecost, may we be inspired by the Sacred Spirit to be more audible in expressing God’s love for the world, to listen as well as talk, to use words to heal not harm and remember how transformative a kind word can be.