

ON TUMBLING TOWERS

*Sermon delivered by the Reverend Father Bill Smith
at Holy Faith Episcopal Church, Port St Lucie,
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Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis 11: 1-9

Reading from the Psalter: Psalm 127

Reading from the New Testament: Revelation 21:1-5

Reading from the Gospel: Luke 13: 1-5

If I were to ask you where you were at 11 o'clock on the morning of the Third of September 1939, not many of you could tell me. Most of us had not been born yet! But I had been born, indeed I was a four-year old and with Mary, my two-year old sister, I was playing on the lawn at the back of our home. It was a Sunday, and Dad had been ordered to go to his office in London at the Air Ministry, and he had told our Mum to turn on the radio – in those days there was only one channel and no television – at 11 o'clock, and to make sure that we children listen in.

So, at 11 o'clock Mum called us to come to the window by the radio and we listened as Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain told us that, because the German Chancellor had not withdrawn that country's armies from Poland, which they had invaded two days earlier, a state of War now existed between the United Kingdom and Germany.

There had been no such demand when Nazi armies had taken control of Austria and Czecho-Slovakia. After all, they were German-speaking countries. But although many Polish citizens had German origins, the country itself was not Germanic. The German Chancellor had taken a step too far and had to be stopped, despite all the supposedly goodwill that Chamberlain thought he had developed with Hitler in well publicized meetings.

And so, we were plunged into the Second World War and this time around the British and their allies had to go through a retreat from Dunkirk – my uncle, an ambulance driver, was on the last boat to sail and suffered what is now call PTSD as a result. And then came the Battle of Britain when the Luftwaffe sent bombers to do as much damage as they could. And the bombs rained down on factories and dockyards, but also on peoples' homes and hospitals, on schools and churches.

Now, if I were to ask you where you were at 9 o'clock on the morning of September the Eleventh, 2001, my guess is that most of you could tell me. We were living in Port St Lucie. Paula had gone off to her place of employment, and I had ABC television on as I washed up the breakfast dishes, and so I saw the breaking news about the Twin Towers in New York City. I immediately called up Cherette, our oldest and who lived in New Jersey to make sure she was all right, and told her to turn on the TV. As a result, we both watched as the hi-jacked plane was flown into the second tower.

It would seem that September is a month when some nasty things might happen. Certainly, the events of both 1939 and 2001 saw members of my immediate family perform active military service far from home and in difficult and dangerous situations.

But the building and the violent destruction of towers is not just a twentieth/twenty-first century phenomenon. History and mythology are replete with such accounts. Nor is it a western European phenomenon. Yes, I have walked in the ruins of ancient Athens and Rome, but I have also walked in the ruins in ancient Burma and Peru and in Zimbabwe. And as our readings from the Holy Scriptures remind us, human beings have never been reluctant to try building their way into the Heavens, to be

where they have understood the Truly Divine is to be found. (But let me be clear, that was probably not what was in the minds of those who built the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center!)

The story recounted in Genesis 11, which we heard read this morning, has come into our Bibles from ancient Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq. Its conclusion, as we have it, is to explain why there is such a diversity of languages and the conclusion we might draw from the text is that it is the Will of God that there should be.

From time immemorial tribal and, later, national leaders have sought to impose their own language on outsiders, as though the outsiders' languages and cultures were somewhat inferior. The story in Genesis looks back to an assumed era in which everyone spoke the same language, and the writer appears to be having fun with that notion. He has the builders come to this site on the banks of a mighty river. They decide to build a city and a tower to reach up to the Heavens. And they built it, but they gave it no name. But the LORD Jehovah sees what they are doing and understands why they are doing it. And so, the city is destroyed and the people are scattered. But the site is given a name, Babel, which means "Confusion", and everyone ends up babbling to one another.

It is surely a nice touch that in English the name of the site is Babylon, and incorporates as its first two syllables our word "Baby", a little person who senses what he or she might need but does not know how to ask for it! It is a nice reminder, if we need it, that only God knows what we need, rather than what we want, and like a loving Mother sees to it that we babbling babies get what we need.

The passage from the Gospel is only one of four places in the New Testament where the word for “Tower” appears, and in every place, it is a word on the lips of Jesus. We cannot tell if there is any specific significance in this, but cities and towns were built with towers, usually watch towers.

In this instance, Jesus describes a tower that has fallen down and people have died. Apparently, there were those who argued that it was because they were worse sinners than others that they had died, but Jesus pooh-poohs that notion. We are all sinners, whether we admit it or not, and those who died on 9.11, although sinners, may well not have been as sinful as any one of us. Certainly, sin was committed on 9.11, but I would suggest that sin was committed before 9.11. by those who paid for the design of such buildings so that they might make enormous profits from the comparatively small site on which the Twin Towers were assembled.

Again, we might say, we have adults behaving like babies making noise to get what they want, be they the builders of the Tower of Siloam or of the Twin Towers.

When we turn to the passage in Revelation, we see how the writer is reflecting on what he sees around him. We cannot be sure when he wrote but it would seem to be after the fiery destruction of Rome in the mid-first century A.D. And he could look at the destruction of Rome in much the same way as we can look at those same ruins and the ruins of so many other cities, ancient and modern, whether through warfare or natural disaster.

If you build for the wrong reasons or in the wrong place, disaster in one shape or form is inevitable. It might not cost the builders their lives, but

peoples' lives will be destroyed, by rivals and enemies as on 9.11, or by natural disaster as we see every year at this time as hurricanes and tornadoes do their deadly work.

What John the Divine would have us do is to pray and to ascertain what it is the LORD has in mind for us to be and to do, and then let the LORD direct us still, as we seek to do things the LORD's way. And this Truth applies to everything in Life, be it building homes or businesses, be it being communities and nations, be it building a congregation of the faithful. All has to be done in the way that God would have it, in the place God would have it, at the time God would have it. It might be confusing for us at times, and then we have to babble like babies to get what is needed.

And the Psalmist warns us of all this. Listen again to what he wrote.

Unless the LORD builds the house,
their labour is in vain who build it.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
in vain the watchman keeps his vigil.
It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late,
vain too to eat the bread of toil,
for He gives sleep to his beloved.

You know, perhaps we should see those Babylonians as somewhat like children with their first building blocks, or folk building sandcastles on the beach. And we might say the same of those in our own times who build skyscrapers like the Twin Towers, or developers who build condominiums right here in South Florida and the Treasure Coast! Look at what we've done! Aren't we clever?

Oh! We love to make a noise about the big plans that we have, but really, we are but babies making a lot of meaningless sounds, a confusion of noise, a babble. And what we really need is the Motherlike Love of God who knows what we truly need. And Luke has Jesus confirm this. He rebukes the disciples when they seek to deny the mothers from bringing their babies to him. Jesus tells them that unless we accept the Kingdom of God like a little child, we shall never enter it.

There was another building in lower Manhattan that gained prominence on 9.11. It was a much older building and it dates back to the 1600s. It is a Church, Trinity, Wall Street. As soon as the tragedy that hit the Twin Towers occurred, Trinity opened its doors to minister to the victims and those involved in rescuing the victims. As it did so, it acted in the same way as Anglican parishes have done down through the centuries.

We do not start out by asking questions about who is seeking help, for as Anglicans and Episcopalians we know that we all need help, all the time, in every place, under every circumstance. In our very ancient tradition, we do not ask whether the one seeking help, physical or spiritual, has accepted Jesus as their Saviour. What we realise is that in Jesus God has accepted us and shown that He is our Saviour! It does not matter who you are. It does not matter from where you come. It does not matter what language you speak. Jesus has said and shown that he who is God Incarnate accepts each and every one of us.

And so, this morning our service is about to demonstrate that as we transition to the baptism of a wee one, whose only speech (if we can call it that) is to cry out in need or babble with satisfaction. Like Trinity, Wall Street, on 9.11, we, as Anglicans and Episcopalians welcome someone whom God has already accepted and suffered and died for.

So, as we let God take charge of the life of an unknowing little one, let us let God take charge of our lives, be it family, career, friendships, and especially the community we call the Church. In all the noise of our babbling about this, that and the other, let us listen to the one voice that truly matters, the Voice that answers our needs, even before we babble them, not because we have accepted him, but because he has accepted us, just as we are, just as each one of us is, just as I am.