



Sermon preached by Tara Qu on 24th November 2024

Readings: *I Samuel 23.1-7 and John 18.33-37.*

## The Sharing Together Time

*How many languages are there in the world?*

Over 7000

*How many languages are there in Europe?*

260 languages

*While Europe has 260 languages, which continent has the largest number of languages?*

**2,200** of the world's languages can be found in **Asia**, while 2000 languages can be found in Africa.

There are so many languages in the world, and nobody can speak all of them. Because of that, there are often difficulties when we are trying to speak to each other. These difficulties often result in frustrations. In the book of Genesis, there is a story about languages, the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9.

In this story, after the flood, humanity spoke one language and lived together on the plain of Shinar (modern-day Iraq). The people decided to build a city with a tower that reached the heavens, which symbolise their unity, ambition, and desire to make a name for themselves. The tower was meant to unify humanity and prevent them from being scattered across the earth. Their motives reflected pride, as they sought to challenge God's authority and elevate themselves.

God observed their actions. To humble them and fulfil His plan for humanity to spread across the earth, God confused their language so they could no longer understand one another. After that, the people abandoned the tower and scattered across the earth. So, from there, we ended up having over 7000 languages in the world.

The tower of Babel symbolises the big imperial power Babylon, and God destroyed their hegemony by confusing their language. Is it a bad thing to have so many languages in the world? I would say, no. To have many languages is a blessing to humanity. Although learning a new language requires hard work and could be very frustrating, the diversity of languages also enriches culture, so that we can enjoy many more interesting things.

I have another question for you.

*What is the most spoken language in the world?*

There is not a straightforward answer to this question.

By number of *overall* speakers, English is the most spoken languages. But English doesn't have the largest *native* speaker population.

*Which language has the largest number of native speakers?*

Mandarin

Today, I have the honour to introduce you a Chinese hymn, so that you know God's grace and glory also shines in other parts of the world. This is a song that reminds us that no matter what happens in our life, God is always by our side. And whatever language we speak, wherever we come from, or whatever colour our skin is, God faithfully loves us all.

## The Sermon

King David started a glorious kingdom in the book of Samuel. His son Solomon followed his steps and built an even stronger kingdom. They were at the height of Israel's political power and national glory. However, the story of glory did not continue. Soon they were conquered by the Babylonians, and the people of Judah went to exile.

### History

When Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar /,nebjʊkəd'nezə(r)/, hardly any of the national institutions of Judah survived. "National sovereignty disappeared as Judah was absorbed into the Babylonian empire." The king Zedekiah was chained to Babylon disgracefully, and the other king Jehoiachin had long been incarcerated. Also, their land, once the promised land of God, was no longer a happy place, as it became a colony under the powerful empires, first Babylon and later Persia. In Ezra 1 and 5, the people of Judah had to ask for permission to build their temple and to return to their land. This text is a testimony to their loss of freedom and agency. Furthermore, the temple, which was the centre of worship and the core of their identity, was looted and destroyed by the Babylonians. As a people, the Jews had lost it all. They've lost their king, their land, and their temple. Having experienced these detriments, they were facing major challenges to preserve their identity both during the exile in Babylon and after the return to Jerusalem.

During the exile, by living in a foreign land among foreign peoples, the people of Judah had the opportunity to learn many things from the diaspora. Among everything else, the diaspora had taught them that it was possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling a land, or to have sovereign power.<sup>1</sup> Faith alone is a **refuge** for cultural identity and spiritual heritage. From there the Jewish faith started to show some interesting changes. A particular important one was that, during the post-exilic period, there had emerged ideas of inclusion of the foreigners in the salvation of YHWH in the Bible. This was not something that should be taken lightly. In the book Ezra, there is a detailed account of the challenges that the returning community faced from foreign intervention. The first united return of the Jews to Jerusalem happened in the first or second year of Cyrus (Ezra 1-2). The first thing the Jews did was to rededicate the altar to the Lord (Ezra 3:1-6). Later, after a year or two, Zerubbabel and Jeshua began the work of building the house of YHWH, and they laid the foundation of the second temple. However, the work was soon stopped by foreign interference (Ezra 4:1-4), and the foundation they just built had to lay in waste. When the work finally resumed in the second year of Darius /də'raɪəs/, seventeen years had passed. The work had been done almost twenty years ago probably needed a re-do by that point. How discouraging that would be. However, faced with multiple sources of pressure, their theology took an unexpected turn. Instead of holding onto an attitude of hatred and resentment towards the foreigners, a kind of universalism emerged in the post-exilic community. Universalism refers to the acceptability of foreigners among the people of God.<sup>2</sup> In Isaiah 56:6-8, we can find the most inclusive passage in the Old Testament. It says, '...<sup>6</sup>All foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant--<sup>7</sup>these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. ...for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.' This is a passage that clearly stated the inclusion of all people in the faith of the Lord.

By the time of Jesus, there were nationalists like Simon the Zealot, one of the twelve apostles (e.g., Luke 6:15, Acts 1:13). The term "zealot" could indicate political affiliation. Simon may have been part of the Zealots, a Jewish revolutionary group that opposed Roman rule and sought to overthrow it. However, there is no direct evidence in Scripture that Simon actively participated in such activities. The term might also describe his fervent devotion to Jewish law or his passion for following Jesus. You see these impressions could be misleading and causing confusion for those who did not know Jesus and his followers well. Jesus was accused as the king of the Jews in John 18:33-37. However, "the King of the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993), 723.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *a Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 129.

Jews” was not the vision that Jesus had. He had a bigger broader one. Jesus answered Pilate, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’

In both passages of Isaiah 56:6–8 and John 18:33–37, it is clear that the faith in God and Christ is not only intended for one people, but for all peoples. God’s blessing is extended to all the people who accepted him. Blenkinsopp believes that by the time of Post-exilic period, Israel had developed into a confessional community, and, just like the churches and other confessional communities nowadays, it has started to open itself up to the new “converts”.<sup>3</sup> This is a remarkable turn in the Judean theology. The Judean faith has transformed from a religion that was attached to a land, a temple and an ancestral lineage into a faith that was accessible through faith for all. The universalism lays the foundation “for later development by making it possible to think of a role for Israel in the salvation of humankind”<sup>4</sup> and possibly lead to the Christian thought that salvation through Jesus Christ is intended for everyone who puts faith in God. There is a radical openness inherent in the Christian faith. It is so radical that Christian faith from the very beginning has been a translated faith. The New Testament, which is the quintessential basis of our faith, is written in Greek. However, Jesus, at the time he taught and preached among the peoples, spoke Aramaic. He did not speak Greek while he was talking to his disciples. Hence, the New Testament is a translated testimony of Jesus’ story. Language difference was never a barrier for Christian testimony, and Christianity has always strived to find ways to approach people of all languages and cultures.

As we are now living in a world full of conflict, we can learn from the exile and the testimony of the New Testament that our faith is open for all. It is not attached to any specific location, political system or cultural centralism. It is built on the faith in Christ alone. This faith transcends all misunderstandings of differences, and faith alone is the **refuge** against the uncertainties of the changing world.

*Tara Qu*

*24th November 2024*

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<sup>3</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, “Second Isaiah--Prophet of Universalism,” *JOST* 41(1988), 86.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 94