

Pentecost Tongues

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Your Chaplain invited me to preach at Pentecost. And reminded me that it would have been Oxford Pride Weekend. Could I manage both? Never one to duck a challenge, I want to travel back through time to 70BC.

The film, *Spartacus* (1960; directed by Stanley Kubrick) needs little introduction. It is based on a historical novel by Howard Fast – inspired by the real life of a Thracian slave who led the revolt in the Third Servile War of 73-71 BC. A small band of former gladiators and slaves, perhaps no more than eighty in number, and led by Spartacus, grew to an army of around 125,000, to challenge the might of the Roman Empire. Kubrick's film starred Kirk Douglas, Laurence Olivier Peter Ustinov, Jean Simmons and Tony Curtis. The film won four Oscars.

Less well-known is the film's own story of rebellion. The screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, along with other Hollywood writers, had been blacklisted for his political beliefs, and associations with movements seeking equality for coloured and black people, as well as members of the American Communist Party. Even though the age of McCarthyism was crumbling, it still took a young aspirational Senator – John F. Kennedy – crossing the picket lines to see the film, to help end Trumbo's blacklisting.

We can guess why Trumbo's script should perhaps have caused audiences to ponder some potential for subversive political messages. Much of the USA was still colour-segregated in 1960. But we are introduced to Draba, a heroic black slave, first overpowering the white Spartacus in gladiatorial combat – and then sacrificing his own life in protest at the oppression of slaves.

The film also explores different kinds of love between men: rare for the time. Some final words between Douglas and Curtis are Spartacus saying 'Forgive me, Antoninus', to which the dying Antoninus replies, 'I love you, Spartacus...'. Earlier in the film, we find Crassus (Olivier), and his then slave, Antoninus (Curtis) in a bathing scene – the slave gently sponging and washing his master. The 'sexual subtext' is pretty clear, with Crassus declaring his passion for both 'oysters and snails':

Crassus' bi-sexuality in this scene carries subtle, seditious subtexts. The film challenged the audience on many levels: issues of race, sexuality, political hierarchy and slavery are all strongly featured. Yet most cinema-goers at the time would have missed these themes, explicitly. Although when you look at a lot of half-naked men, very fit, tanned and oiled, in gladiatorial combat – you do begin to wonder...!

So much for 70BC. What about 70AD? In the early churches, we find Jews, Greeks and Romans; slave and free; male and female. All one in Christ. The children run free; the men and women mix; origin and ethnicity no longer matter, for all are one in Jesus Christ. In this radical new assembly of non-citizens, all were equal. Class, race, gender and age are all transcended. The gospel of Christ is radically inclusive.

In the Old Testament (*Genesis*, chapter 11), the story of the Tower at Shinar tells of how all the different languages in the world came to be. Once upon a time, all nations spoke with one voice. But then people got ideas above their station, and decided to build a tower to heaven, in order to get on God's level. God, who liked his privacy and primacy, sowed dissension amongst the ranks of builders by inventing new languages that hampered the construction. Shinar became Babel, from which we derive the word the English word 'babble'.

The account in *Acts* is probably an attempt to redeem and reconfigure this fable. The message is this. In the church – which is a construction of the Spirit – all languages and peoples are recognised and spoken. The Spirit is universal, not local: the gospel is for all people. So, the first act of the Spirit is to reverse the tragedy of Babel: God now speaks to everyone; and can also *hear* everyone, and the church becomes a global lingua. The language is that of the Spirit.

The message of Pentecost is that there are many tongues of fire. To paraphrase the Caribbean theologian Kortright Davis: *'[we are now re-educating ourselves] about the new theological surges emanating from the Third World. We have finally realized that there is no universal theology; that theological norms arise out of the context in which one is called to live out one's faith; that theology is therefore not culture free...Although the Gospel remains the same from place to place, the means by which the Gospel is understood and articulated (or spoken) will differ considerably through circumstances no less valid and no less authentic...'*

The lesson from Pentecost is that Christianity is *always* spoken in tongues, so that each can understand in their own language. So Pentecost is about listening to 'foreign' tongues, and seeing them as equals. There is no Christianity that "lacks a local accent"; no single 'pure' version.

So, at this Pentecost and on this Oxford Gay Pride weekend, may God give us the Big Hearts and Broad Minds to see the Holy Spirit alive and well, and speaking across and through all peoples, be they black, white, male, female, gay, straight. God loves everyone, equally. To each, the Holy Spirit comes to those who are open to receive, hear, learn, change...and to be set on fire with love for God, all our neighbours, and for this, Christ's world. **Amen.**