

Homily for Whitsunday (6.12.11)

I am named for one of my grandfathers, a man called Gerald Freeman Winfield, Jerry to his friends. He was born not too far from here, in Joshua, just over a hundred years ago. When he was young, he conceived the idea of going to China. And so he did, with a new wife, and a new doctorate in parasitology, sometime in the early thirties. In order to pursue his studies, he had to learn Mandarin. And so he did, becoming fluent and speaking with a thick Shantung accent. His family name, my middle name, as it happens is easily sinocized. Apparently, therefore, the farmers often expected a Chinese scholar, not a foreigner, when he went round to study agricultural techniques, composting, hygiene and their various relations to the life cycles of parasites. He told me once when I was in my late teens of the day he was out in the countryside and encountered an old man. After some conversation, the old man turned away and said to himself with evident amazement, “I didn’t know I could speak a foreign language.”

We all of us have lived lives in which the decisions of others, not just those who came before us as our parents and grandparents did, have given those lives much of their shape. For precisely those sorts of reasons, I’ve spent a lot of my life thinking about foreignness and about what, for lack of any better phrasing, I have often enough called the space between which comes into being in the encounters of foreigners.

As it happens, here in the United States most people are mono-lingual despite the fact that residents of this country have some 350, more or less, languages as their mother tongues. Some of these are the languages of immigrants, some the languages of the original indigenous peoples. Some of our brethren find this linguistic diversity so

disconcerting that they wish to pass English only laws, seeking to protect a way of life and to keep foreignness thereby at bay. These know nothing or, perhaps better put, wish to know nothing of the evident amazement that old Chinese peasant felt. As it happens, in much of the world really quite ordinary people often speak more than one language, though not, whatever he might have thought, that old man my grandfather encountered so long ago in Shantung.

In much of the world, then foreignness is perhaps more ordinarily found than among our English-only brethren. And perhaps not just the English-only folks, for if my American students are any guide, most people know other people speak foreign languages, but that doesn't mean my American students often put in the time, the sometimes very hard work, to learn another language. Nor would many of my students know quite what it was that Winston Churchill meant when he said of his parents respective native peoples that the British and the Americans are two peoples divided by a common language.

The world is a sort of polyglot ménage in which we seek sensibility and coherence as best we can. But we all know the expression, "That's Greek to me." And many of us have taken what seemed the path of least resistance and spoken our English slower, louder and more clearly as if that would make us more comprehensible. I include myself for back when I was a teenager trying to get through customs and immigration at the airport in Dakar, Senegal, so I could get on a smaller plane to an even smaller place, I did precisely this. The immigration agent, by the bye, spoke to me in French, no doubt his second, or third or perhaps fourth language.

This is far from a new phenomenon. In the Jerusalem we find described in chapter two of the Book of Acts, people would have heard or spoken Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin (the imperial power's language always has great presence), Greek (so too the language of the cultural elite). We should not forget just how many Jews in that era were, like some of the Romans, Hellenized ...consider Paul, the subject of much of the later parts of the Book of Acts, who, though a Jew and a Roman citizen wrote mostly, if not exclusively, in the Greek that's all Greek to me. One might have heard still other languages in those streets and markets, temples and houses. It was a human place and therefore a mixture of understanding and misunderstanding which often enough takes itself for understanding and thus has all the powers and problems of understanding. Within that place and time, some felt a powerful need for revival. Like our English-only friends, they viewed the foreign with displeasure, and those who took on foreign ways with suspicion. I use those who espouse this position more as metaphor than anything else. None of us, I've found, at least about myself, is quite as open minded as we like to think.

It was not long after Jesus, already crucified and then risen, appeared and then disappeared, the tomb empty and the hidden guest visible and identifiable only through his particular ways of doing and speaking, so tradition and scripture say. The early followers were there, together, in or about the upper room, all 120 of them Luke says, including Simon the Zealot. Perhaps baffled, perhaps frightened, suspicious of outsiders and those full of worldly power, who knows what else except expectant, for they had heard certain promises of return and of another comforter, as our Gospel reading puts matters.

I'm not sure I really can agree with our friend, Bishop Wynn, when he said to us the other week that the problem is the empty tomb, on the one hand, and that somehow everything is done for us as Christians, on the other, so that we become consumers of religion as we are consumers of so much else. According to the current, local common sense, we as consumers are free to possess or not possess, to buy or not to buy, to inhale or not to inhale, to bring within the self or not to do so as we like. This forms the basis of the market and a free society, albeit quite a different market from those ancient ones of Jerusalem, and quite a different society as well. But as we all know we are also employees, with bosses who have bosses who have to answer to yet others who have bosses, so that our voices can go seldom heard.

We are both existentially free and followers of often arbitrary rules, subject to caprice, only sometimes subject to our own self-control.

This seems to me our dilemma and perhaps that of those in that upper room as well. For if scripture and tradition speak rightly—and as I was not there I cannot say with certainty—than the empty tomb, the coming comforter, the flames about the heads and the gift of gabbing in languages other than our own are all gifts. We are not nearly so self-contained as consumers are supposed to be; so much of our lives comes to us from outside ourselves and outside our capacity to exert ourselves; we have to make our return. But how? Here we find ourselves, as those in that upper room did, with a gift we can make no real return on—that's the problem, expressed in an ancient way, expressed in a way very much comprehensible to people for whom religious activity was primarily sacrificial. G-d, or the g-ds, give so we should give back something, always something a little less alas, if and as we can.

Luke tells us they who had gathered there went out with the gift of tongues, that others, were amazed to hear everything in one's own language, like my grandfather's old Chinese farmer even if that old man thought he must know a foreign language. More usually, when we hear of language and tongues in our readings we are advised to beware the potential of the tongue to do wrong, as James put it, and of the slipperiness and clanging, gongy quality of speech without love, as Paul advises. But here, in Acts, we read of something foreign to our much of our experience. They who had been in that room and place expected the imminent return of the Lord, of the man they had known and who had died. They had been frightened and then surprised. Then they went out. For those they encountered what should have been incomprehensible, patterned noise yes, as foreign languages are, but still incomprehensible, became for each their own language, understandable speech. All were amazed.

We've been waiting a while longer. Despite what some say, it doesn't seem like the end of days is upon us. We might have to wait somewhat longer yet. Perhaps in that waiting we've grown complacent in our waiting, our consuming, our working for bosses who have bosses, a little inattentive, caught up in ordinary time and ordinary speech. We've had time to understand that the transcendental divine is just a little hard to get one's head around, to have a personal relationship with, and might well be then just a little foreign. Perhaps it would be good to think a little more on how we might make some small return on this often incomprehensible gift we just found ourselves with and within. Perhaps we might yet find a means to understand, just a bit, of what often seems the patterned noise of a foreign language.

Gerald Sullivan, Ph.D., Ordained Reader