An Ecumenical Prayer for Pentecost.

At the 2018 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Delegates were present from many parts of the world: Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, Americas, the middle East and Europe. They brought their energy and vision to the gathering. They also brought us a sense of their own traditions as well as their challenges in the contexts within which they lead their ministries. Part of sharing faith is to worship together and our liturgical traditions are rooted in our own languages – our mother tongue. At the opening worship we all spoke the Lord‘s Prayer in English.

As an anthropologist working on sensory ethnography and listening I wondered how we might hear the sounds of this prayer in the mother tongues of the overseas delegates. I asked some of the African delegates if they might speak the Lord’s Prayer for me in their mother tongue, and if I could record them. They were delighted to do so. It was immediately apparent that this saying of the Prayer in their mother tongue brought a different tone, sound and feeling to the prayer. The modulations and inflections of the prayer were musical and the rendition of it by each delegate who participated was intense and joyous. There seemed a deep sense of offering in their words, their sounds, and the way in which they spoke the prayer.

I discussed this with some of the delegates and we agreed that I would ask others to say the Lord’s Prayer is they learned it as a child at Church or Sunday School, by heart. 13 of the delegates covering 16 languages took part in the creation of a joint prayer in their mother tongues. The General Assembly was taking place at Pentecost and there was a sense of that gift of the Spirit as it is expressed in our many tongues inspiring us.

When we hold our brothers and sisters in Christ in mind, in prayer and the light we can do so by hearing them in this shared prayer and therefore also be praying with them. I have therefore presented each voice alongside an echo of the English spoken also by some of the delegates. For example we can hear Revd. Rola Sleiman from Lebanon saying the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic and also hear alongside Revd. Elina Hellqvist speaking the English. I have made a version for each delegate of their voices, then I have grouped all the women’s voices and finally I have made a sound collage of all the voices. The latter I think of as beyond Babel, as a Pentecostal prayer that transcends any language, creating the sounds as meanings beyond the words.

I have now worked with the recordings such that users of the voices can pray in any of the languages with any other language being interspersed in the sound track. It means that for example we could pray for the Sudan in both Nuer and English. I have also created a Pentecostal prayer by bringing all the voices together. This creates a moving sound collage of a text we all know but is elevated in sound beyond the specific sematic meanings of any one place or culture. It is a type of glossolalia.

The delegates who took part were:

1.Rt Rev Peter Gai Lual from South Sudan speaking in the Nuer language.

2. Rev John Gondwe from Malawi speaking the Tumbuka language.

3. Rev Agness Nyirenda from Malawi speaking the Tumbuka language.

4. Rev Ella Makunganya from Malawi speaking the Chichewa language.

5. Rev Rola Sleiman from Lebanon speaking Arabic.

6. Rev Edwin Ombuguah from London speaking Swahili and Kikuyu

7. Rev Paul Singh from India, Kerrala speaking the Malayalam language.

8. Rev Shou-Hui Chung from Taiwan speaking Taiwanese and Mandarin.

9. Rev Elina Hellqvist from Finland speaking Finnish.

10. Rev Abi Ngunga from Dem. Rep. of Congo speaking Kiyombe.

11. Mr Emmanuel Kwame Tettey from Ghana speaking Koobo and Twi

12. Rev Brian Jones from Wales speaking in Welsh.

13. Rev Ini Ukpuho from Nigeria speaking the Ibibio language.

Although I have all the participants’ email contacts I think it would be most appropriate if these recordings could be sent out to them by the Church of Scotland procedures. It may also be worthwhile producing a CD recording of all these prayers and the combined sound collage for distribution.

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