

## **“Our Mother Tongues”**

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*For the Day of Pentecost*

John 11:38-44

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Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

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I am good with computers.

My son, though . . . wow! He swipes the screen, navigates the endless Web of information and connections, and creates wonders of music and art. He does it naturally.

My mom? Hmm. She uses her computer and iPad to send emails, type committee minutes, view photos. She does those things well. More than that, however, and she is not confident.

My grandpa? He’s passed away, but if he were alive . . . forget it. He was smart and very mechanical. Yet he could not make his VCR stop flashing “12:00.”

“Computer” is like a language. Everyone in my family speaks English well. But Computer? Grandpa could not say “Hi” or “Goodbye” in Computer. Mom can carry on an ordinary Computer conversation quite well. But she does not get Computer humour. If the Computer conversation gets deep, she goes quiet. Me? I’ve become bilingual in Computer. I can translate into Computer, solve problems in Computer, and innovate in Computer. Caleb! He is fluent in Computer. He thinks in Computer. He expresses himself in Computer. English is his mother tongue, but Computer comes close.

### II

Your mother tongue is the language your mom whispered as she held you. <sup>1</sup>

In Canada, most of us have English or French as our mother tongue: about 60% English, 20% French.<sup>2</sup> About 20% of us have other immigrant mother tongues. The most common are Mandarin, Cantonese, Punjabi, Tagalog (from the Philippines), Spanish, Arabic, Italian and German. Indigenous mother tongue speakers make up only about ½ %. We spent generations trying to wipe those languages out. Yet nowadays some Indigenous languages are reviving and even thriving.

Of course, in the world Canada is small potatoes. Globally, what do you think are the most common mother tongues?

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<sup>1</sup> See the “Definitions” section on this page: [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2018001-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2018001-eng.htm).

<sup>2</sup> These statistics are from the 2016 Canadian Census. The data tables can be accessed by going to [www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Index-eng.cfm](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Index-eng.cfm) and selecting “Languages.”

In order, they are:

- Mandarin (Chinese)
- English
- Hindi
- Spanish
- Arabic
- Portugese
- Bengali
- Russian

Each of us has a mother tongue. Some — about 4% in Canada — are blessed to have more than one . . . not including Computer.

Many can speak Computer fluently with others, even when they don't understand each other's mother tongues. My friend Majd's mother tongue is Arabic. He is learning English quickly. Even when his English was meagre, though, Majd could sit with another Computer speaker and they understood each other.

Computer is like a “bridge language.”<sup>3</sup> A bridge language is one that people with different mother tongues share in common. At the United Nations, English, French and Spanish are bridge languages.<sup>4</sup> In the European Union, English has become a bridge language. (Now, with Brexit, that's ironic!).<sup>5</sup>

The biblical world had bridge languages too. In a Jerusalem marketplace, a shopkeeper might speak Hebrew (with a Galilean accent), know a bit of Latin (the bridge language of the Roman Empire), understand Greek very well (it was the bridge language of the eastern Mediterranean), and be fluent in Aramaic (the bridge language of the Middle East.) She'd speak these with customers and neighbours who had all sorts of mother tongues.

Which leads us to what happened that Pentecost morning in Jerusalem, at about 9:00 am.

### III

Pentecost is the name that Greek-speaking Jews gave to Shavuot. Shavuot is a Jewish festival that happens 7 weeks after Passover (for Christians, that's 7 weeks after Easter). Shavuot celebrates the wheat harvest. It also celebrates when God gave the great gift of the Torah. (That's the first five books of our Bible). In Torah, God speaks to Israel. That's big!

So Jews came from all over. Through the centuries, by immigration and exile, Jews established homes and communities through the known world. Still, Jerusalem is home.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingua\\_franca](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingua_franca).

<sup>4</sup> In addition, Arabic, Russian and Mandarin are also official languages of the United Nations. See <http://aboutworldlanguages.com/international-languages>

<sup>5</sup> The irony is that the United Kingdom is in the process of leaving the EU (“Brexit”). For English as a Lingua Franca in general, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_as\\_a\\_lingua\\_franca](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_as_a_lingua_franca). For the specific case of English in Europe, and how that is changing the language, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euro\\_English](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euro_English)

So for festivals like Shavuot, Jews from many races, ethnicities and nations poured to Jerusalem. This brought together their many languages.

Picture that morning in Jerusalem. Hear the mixture of mother tongues: Parthian, Persian, Akkadian, Aramaic, Armenian, Greek, Pisidian, Coptic, Lybian, Nabatean, and so on. When they needed to talk together, they'd switch to those bridge languages. Haggling might happen in Hebrew. Arguments break out in Aramaic. Voices shout loudly in Latin. Gossip shared in Greek.

#### IV

It's into this magnificent mixture that God flings the church to tell about Jesus.

Jesus had got them ready for this. In the weeks after his resurrection, Jesus promised that they will be immersed in the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit will give them power so they can tell what they've seen. So they can talk about Jesus throughout the world.<sup>6</sup> This is to a few dozen people who had meagre credentials, little experience and no power.

After Jesus left them, they stayed together and prayed earnestly for what was next.

That Pentecostal morning, God the Spirit made it happen. You heard about the sound like a hurricane. You heard about the light, like flames kissing them. The Spirit can fill us gently or wildly! This time, it was wild!

The Spirit unleashed them into streets crammed with festival-goers, those spiritual tourists who'd come back to the old country from nations all around.

And the disciple community spoke to them about Jesus.

Do you remember what language they spoke? Of all the languages available that day, what language did they use?

All of them.

Not just Hebrew, or Greek, or King James English. Not just one of the bridging languages. Not some special holy tongue made up for the occasion. No, the Spirit gave them the ability to speak with each person, in that person's mother tongue.

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:5

V

The roaring wind, wonderful. The tongues of fire, great. Obviously, those had a tremendous impact on Jesus disciples.

But the miracle of Pentecost is communication. It's communicating God's love. It's communicating God's Good News. It's communicating the Shattering and Shaking and World-Changing Report of what God has done in Jesus because of God's unsearchable, unquenchable love. To communicate this, God the Holy Spirit gives these ordinary people this extraordinary ability to speak that life-changing Announcement to each person there in their own mother tongues.

This person from Iran, his mother tongue is Parthian. So through a disciple, who might never have heard of Parthian, God speaks love in Parthian.

This person is from eastern Turkey, and her mother tongue is Armenian. So through a disciple, God speaks love in Armenian.

This person is from Africa, speaks Lybian, so through a disciple God speaks love in Lybian.

VI

This week I heard this phrase: *"The Kingdom moves at the speed of relationship."*

God's Kingdom is the full fruition, the completion, the great sigh of relief and joy, the answer to our prayers. Jesus' resurrection was, more than anything else, the unexpected sign of God's Kingdom's coming.

So after his resurrection, his disciples were saying *"Is it now, Jesus?"*

Jesus' answer was basically this:

*The time is not your concern. It's in God's hands. What you will get is power, so you can tell about me in Jerusalem, and through the land, and around the world. That power comes when the Holy Spirit enters into you.<sup>7</sup>*

God's Kingdom is coming at the speed of relationship.

Relationship is about love. Relationship forms through language.

Our mother tongue is our heart language. Someone might speak many languages, but it is probably going to be in her mother tongue that she cries, that she whispers love, that she prays.

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<sup>7</sup> My paraphrase of Acts 1:7-8.

God the Spirit forms for each of us our relationship with Jesus in our mother tongue, our heart language.

So around the world today, Pentecost, we are celebrating God in love, in English, and in Russian, Arabic, Hebrew, Inukitut, Latin, Creole, German, Xhosa, Uyghur, Swedish, American Sign Language, Greek, Oji-Cree, Sinhalese, Dutch, Pashto, Mi'kmaq, French, Mandarin, and many, many more.

We are celebrating the Good News of Jesus, because the Holy Spirit is filling us.

That's the way God works! Praise be to God!! Amen.