

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. Amen.

It's a great honour for me to be here with you today in the Cathedral and to preach on this high feast day. Thank you very much, dear John, for your invitation!

Dear sisters and brothers,

you cannot *not* communicate.

Everybody who has ever studied the basics of human communication realises this basic statement. People are *always* communicating, talking even when they are silent, sending signals through facial expressions and gestures. Even someone who freezes into a pillar of salt speaks volumes.

You cannot *not* communicate. And misunderstandings run their course...

A gesture that expresses recognition in southern Italy should be avoided at all costs in northern Italy, as it is perceived as insulting there.

Being called a camel in Germany is not very flattering, but in the Orient a human camel deserves great respect because the four-legged creature of the same name is considered to be persistent, frugal and adaptable.

But I love this diversity. Even if I struggle with them: I love languages and the way they sound and I love listening to the air buzzing with different languages, voices, dialects and speech melodies in holiday regions or at international airports.

I'm happy that the world is bigger than my everyday life. That there is a tangible sense of the one big and colourful world.

And when I observe people communicating with each other in foreign languages, I realise that the content is similar.

They talk about business matters.

Quiet words are accompanied by tears of farewell.

People have very emotional discussions with each other.

Others look at the travel guide together and discuss their next stage.

But I also know the other phenomenon:

due to various circumstances, I was separated from my travel group in the depths of Egypt. I was supposed to be taken to our next accommodation by taxi by the travel company and meet up with the group again there. I wasn't quite sure whether I would ever get there, because the taxi driver only spoke a few words of English and couldn't clearly tell me whether he had really been hired by the travel company...

It all went well - I'm standing here in the cathedral today, but I still had weak knees back then because my knowledge of Arabic was limited to "please, thank you, good day and goodbye".

In this case, language had no unifying function.

On the contrary: the foreign language triggered mistrust and trepidation.

In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the consequences of different languages are even more far-reaching – based on the side effects that a standardised language can have.

But listen for yourself:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

**²And as they migrated from the east,
they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.**

**³And they said to one another,
'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.'
And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.**

**⁴Then they said,
'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens,
and let us make a name for ourselves;
otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'**

⁵The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

**⁶And the Lord said,
'Look, they are *one* people, and they have all *one* language;
and this is only the beginning of what they will do;
nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.**

**⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there,
so that they will not understand one another's speech.'**

**⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth,
and they left off building the city.**

**⁹Therefore it was called Babel,
because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth;
and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.**

We think we know this story so well.

Whenever there is talk of gigantic projects that are all about "higher, further, faster, bigger" for mankind, there is still a warning reference to the Tower of Babel. Beware, God will not be challenged! Beware of overconfidence!

But on closer inspection, I discover that this is not the "main artery" of this story. Something *else* drives the people together – into the walls of a city to be built with a very high tower. In the previous chapter, the diversity of the peoples is still praised.

But now it leads to the very human fear of losing significance, security and common strength. To become unrecognisable in a colourful community.

Fear is always a bad counsellor, because it leads to narrowness. People close themselves off and insist on speaking with *one* voice and in *one* language. – In their *own*, of course. They want to remain recognisable and do everything they can to make a name for themselves. But if *everyone* makes a name for *themselves*, as the Babel story says, then who are they making a name for themselves *in front of*? Or rather: *against whom*?

The request is directed against God. Because he is not trusted. "He has thrown us out of the protection of the garden simply because the trees of knowledge and life have so enticed us. He has exposed us to diversity. But that only leads to quarrels and fratricide."

We prefer to take matters into our own hands: "I am the Lord *my* God. I will not tolerate any other god beside me - and certainly not *above* me!" They shall speak of *me*. The top of the tower will reach up to heaven. – God's *vicar*? In *his* name cultivate the earth? No, God himself! - This arrogance becomes demonic. The beginning of the end.

Fear of abandonment. The gift of freedom that causes fear: an age-old theme whose treatment still leads in the same direction today:
to populism and hatred of all things foreign, to marginalisation and sworn slogans, to thinking in black and white.

"Well, let us build: narrow walls that lull us into a sense of security and borders that fence in our hearts to protect them from merciful attacks. With our towers we can reach heaven even *without* God."

God has to bend down very low to see what's actually going on. In any case, the tower builders still have a lot of room for improvement.

And God sees two things. On the one hand: the dream of all dictators. *One* language – *one* city or land area – *one* idea – *one* action. What a catastrophe!

If the world had only one language, what a poverty of beauty, spirit and joy: every language is a *world*, but every single language is also a *prison*.

God created diversity and he rejoices in polyphonic praise. God wants faith to think and sing, different songs, different thoughts.

On the other hand, God sees how people lose all measure and humility. - So as not to be misunderstood: People *should* build, research, cultivate and be progressive. But things go wrong when God is supposed to admire people and not the other way round.

The service and humility of God's children includes praising the Almighty: Nothing is impossible for Him alone!

Let man remain a man - and act like one. He is a being of limits and boundaries. He aligns his actions with God's will. God now intervenes in this action:

⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.

Now people have each found their own language – and are directed to each other when they want to meet, understand each other and shape the earth entrusted to them.

Have you noticed, dear congregation? God does *not* punish: the tower is not destroyed, the city is not dismantled, the people continue to live.

God does not punish - he *protects*! He protects us from one-sidedness and compartmentalisation in our thoughts and actions. He protects us from ourselves!

He sends us out into the open, sets our feet in a broad place (Psalm 91:8).

He gives us responsibility for his earth. We cannot and do not have to make a name for ourselves through our works, which would always be paid for with blood and violence.

The diversity of languages, the richness of humanity, the breadth of thought remain with us. This doesn't change with the first Pentecost in Jerusalem, which we heard about earlier in the

Acts of the Apostles. There is no new unified language, but everyone continues to speak in their own language. The Holy Spirit unites people across all language barriers. For God's spirit gives understanding, it is a spirit of love. Fear is no longer the counsellor, but love.

The Church of Our Lady in Dresden was destroyed in February 1945. The rubble lay in the centre of the city for more than five decades. Sixty years later, the rebuilt church was consecrated.

Since then, we sometimes say that it is an "Easter church" because it has been resurrected to new life.

But it is also – and perhaps even first and foremost – a "church of Pentecost". Just imagine what would be missing if God had left this building to one-sided and fearful builders.

The Frauenkirche in Dresden thrives on diversity and through the diversity of languages and peoples.

The new Tower Cross by the British people would not be there.

The Cross of Nails, the associated work of reconciliation with former enemies – wouldn't stand on the altar table of the Frauenkirche today.

A place of encounter and understanding between East and West, North and South - it wouldn't be there. We'd miss many a donated pillar or door and even the Strasbourg organ in the building!

The whole architecture might not have been modelled on Italian examples.

Not to mention the international variety and beauty of the music.

Not only, but especially in this church, we celebrate the richness of languages and diversity and the spirit of love that unites us all and banishes fear.

I feel the commonality with *this* church. St Michael's Cathedral - like the Frauenkirche, also a church of Pentecost.

God's spirit doesn't build towers that reach into heaven.

He builds *community* among us.

He gives an *understanding of hearts*.

He works reconciliation and peace.

The Holy Spirit encourages us to embark on a new life.

A happy and blessed Pentecost to you all!

AMEN

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.