

In his great essay “On Fairy-Stories”, J.R.R. Tolkien coins the term “eucatastrophe” which comes from the greek words meaning “good” and “sudden turn”. Tolkien proposes that fairy stories have a common element of an unexpected and delightful reversal in the story by which the villain is undone and the good arises victorious. Tolkien describes it: *I coined the word 'eucatastrophe': the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). And I was there led to the view that it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives – if the story has literary 'truth' on the second plane (...) – that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made. And I concluded by saying that the Resurrection was the greatest 'eucatastrophe' possible in the greatest Fairy Story – and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love.*

Tolkien points out that the resurrection is the greatest eucatastrophic moments, but in truth, the whole of the New Testament is filled with these unforeseen reversals. So many of the events of the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles recapitulate tragic and sorrowful events of the Old Testament but in a joyful and glorious twist.

This is true of the feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the occasion of the coming of the Holy Ghost to indwell the followers of Christ and strengthen and instruct them that they might become mighty warriors for His Kingdom. The name Pentecost comes from the Jewish feast upon which this event occurred. The Jewish feast of Pentecost was also known as the Feast of Weeks. It was ordained by God to commemorate the giving of the law of Moses and the establishing of a covenant with Israel. It had also become a harvest festival in which sacrifices of the first grains of wheat were offered in thanksgiving to God for his provision.

The Jewish people gathered from East and West, North and South from throughout the nations to which they had scattered, to be in Jerusalem at the Temple for the feast of Pentecost. On this day, as the disciples were gathered in fear, the promised Holy Ghost came upon them. They were given understanding and began to preach to all who passed by the gospel of Jesus. They explained the truth of the Kingdom of Christ and His resurrection. Miraculously, each man heard the words they spoke in his own language. This diverse group from many nations and peoples, each heard the Good News of Christ in words they could understand. They were united by their ability to communicate with one another, and that day 3,000 souls were added to the number of the disciples of Jesus.

It can help us to understand the significance and glory of this event as a reversal of the events surrounding the Tower of Babel. In the generations that came after Noah, there arose a leader named Nimrod. He was a powerful man, and sought in his pride to build a tower to the heavens, as a monument to mankind's power and glory. However, God in his grace, recognized that the power of man and the exaltation of man could not affect his redemption. And so he confused

their speech, gave them all different languages and they divided and dispersed, and the Tower was left incomplete.

The Tower of Babel is the story of mankind's attempt to exalt themselves as gods. It was an attempt to place humanity in heaven by the strength of his own power. This ambition was the basis of their unity. However, because their combined effort was based on pride and self-exaltation they were dispersed.

The day of Pentecost reversed these events. First, Christ ascended into heaven, taking his human nature into the very throne room of God. The prideful notions of Nimrod and his followers was taken up and subsumed by God's grace. Jesus through his life and death redeems mankind, and takes the resurrected humanity into glory. The men of Genesis could not stand in the throne room of God for they had not been redeemed. The temptation of mankind has always been to exalt himself. This is what the serpent told Eve in order to tempt her, "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." And it was this temptation which persuaded Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. You will be as gods. In truth, in order for mankind to be united to God and stand in the heavens, it first required that God will be as you. God would take on Humanity in the incarnation, and by his perfect life and sacrificial death, he glorified mankind to sit on heavenly thrones and to stand in judgement over even the angels. This was God's plan.

After accomplishing this redemption, God now reunites humanity. The dispersion which occurred by the confusion of language is undone by the Holy Spirit, and all are invited into the Lord's church. It is important for us to realize the historical uniqueness of the church. Previous to the Christian Church all institutions were either ethnically or geographically based. Customs, cultures, religion and government, all these were based on ethnic heritage. The Romans had their gods, the Egyptians had theirs and the Israelites had theirs. Even the empires which spanned many nations and peoples, did not include them all on equal footing. The Roman empire incorporated many different peoples, but even in Jerusalem, only the Romans were afforded the rites of citizenship.

The Christian church is the first institution that was not based on ethnic or geographic boundaries. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This is the radical message of the Christian church. A new kind of union since the Tower of Babel is being created. One that is not dependant on common custom and language. Rather, this new unity is founded on our common unity with Christ.

And this is the great work which The Spirit accomplished on this day. The gift of languages was merely a representation of a much deeper union which the Holy Ghost effected. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are united to Christ and therefore united to God. This is what Christ says in our gospel lesson, "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth... ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and

shall be in you... At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you." And all who are united to God in Christ through the Holy Spirit are also united to each other. This was manifested on that day by the ability to speak in many languages and the reversal of Babel. We are joined together insofar as we are joined to God.

Where the Tower of Babel sought to unite man under man's power, Pentecost united men in their common union with God. This is a greater union for it is not bound by time and space, neither the selfishness and pride of human leaders. The church is the only institution that we are assured will last. Our country, political party, rotary club, all these things will pass away in time. But God says the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. No matter the persecutions and trials, the church is built on a foundation which cannot be shaken.

We are all branches of one vine, members of one body – Christ Jesus our Lord. And now we approach the altar upon which sits both the symbol and cause of our unity. As we partake of Holy Communion we are united to the life of Christ. The grace which God gives to us at his table is to participate in sinless and resurrected life of His Son. And if we are all joined to Christ, we are also all joined to one another through this sacrament.

This is why Paul is so adamant that one cannot come to communion while harboring resentment against a brother. He writes to

To approach communion while nurturing a grievance, is to functionally deny the unity which Communion affects. It is to partake of the sacrament while in practice working against it.