At first glance, our readings this morning seem to address diametrically-opposed understandings of God. The narrative about the tower of Babel takes us back to the mythological, pre-historical parts of the Bible that record the stories ancient Israel invented to explain aspects of human existence, this one seeking to account for the cultural and linguistic differences that separate peoples. At its most basic level, this story sets God against the human race; the whole earth (which had one language and the same words), is pitted in conflict with God and the heavenly community. And, inevitably, God triumphs, and the human plan is thwarted: ‘So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.’ (Gen 11: 8)

But while our reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans began by stressing the dichotomy between flesh and spirit, associating the former with death and the latter with life, the heart of the passage looked forward to God’s final triumph, assuring believers that no struggle can separate us from God. ‘All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God; …. when we cry Abba, Father, it is that very Spirit bearing witness that we are God’s children.’ (Rom 8: 14-15) This text is prescribed in the Eucharistic lectionary for Trinity Sunday, yet, although it incorporates much of Paul’s theology of the Spirit, and so could be used to help discuss the meaning of the Trinity, its essence lies in Paul’s explanation to his readers of how they belong to the family of God and how the Spirit draws believers home to God, to share with Christ in his glory.

How are we to find one overarching message to take away from such outwardly divergent passages of Scripture? It may help if we recognise that they are linked by a sense of anxiety and the human need to find a home.

The Eucharistic lectionary appoints the story of the tower of Babel for the day of Pentecost, setting its narrative in direct contrast with that in the Acts of the Apostles about the coming of
the Holy Spirit to the disciples in the upper room. Patristic and medieval commentators frequently linked the two passages together, interpreting the events at Pentecost as undoing, or repairing the sin of Babel. With that in mind, we might reflect a little more on the meaning of the Babel story.

As on other occasions that are recorded in the Old Testament, when Israel rebelled against God, this narrative begins in apparent innocence. The people, who all shared one language and the same words, used their capacity for co-operation to undertake an enterprise in the land of Shinar that they thought would be for their mutual benefit. Having no stone for building, they made bricks and burnt them, and built them into walls using bitumen instead of the more usual cement for mortar, yet their activities at first provoked no heavenly response. Nor was the fact of their building a great tower that would reach as far as the heavens of itself something to which God objected. It was their attempt to make a name for themselves to prevent them from being scattered over the face of the whole earth that caused God to come down from heaven.

The people’s rebellion lay in this attempt at self-sufficient independence, taking from God his power to grant a name. Their assumption that if they adopted a common name, they could thereby form themselves into a single, unified identity was what called down God’s punishment. As he observed them starting to evolve into one people, all having one language, he feared that this would only be the beginning of what they could do: ‘nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them’. (Gen 11: 6). So, God scattered the people, confusing their language to prevent them from further communication and collaboration, and so the whole building project was abandoned. The city that they built was called Babel, or later Babylon, a name that means confusion, that would become of course a synonym for iniquity. In their anxiety, the people at Shinar had sinned in their belief that they could assume God’s power of naming. Therefore, God permanently prevented them from unifying by creating the diversity of languages and so of separate peoples.

Like many stories in the Old Testament, the story of Babel pits a rebellious (and anxious) people, prone to idolatry, against a fear-inspiring and vengeful God. Yet the God whom we worship, thanks to our knowledge of the teaching and promises of his incarnate Son, is a gentler God, more compassionate towards our manifold failings and weaknesses. We should now understand that we do not have to make name for ourselves because, as Jesus told the disciples, our names are already written in heaven (Luke 10: 20). We are called and empowered to use our lives to bring glory to God. And, in order to assist us in living out that calling, God sent us the gift of the Spirit.
It was on the day of Pentecost, you will recall, when the disciples were all together in one place. ‘And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.’ And the great crowd of devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem were amazed when each one heard the disciples speaking in their own native language (Acts 2: 1-5). The coming of the Spirit in this way marked the birth of the church and launch of its mission to the world. As the Venerable Bede explained in his Commentary on Acts, ‘the gift of tongues indicated that holy church, when had spread to the ends of the earth, was to speak in the languages of all nations.’ Bede made explicit the connection between this event and the sin of Babel:

The church’s humility recovers the unity of languages which the pride of Babylon had shattered. Spiritually the variety of languages signifies gifts of a variety of graces. Truly therefore it is not inconsistent to understand that the Holy Spirit first gave to human beings the gift of languages by which human wisdom is both learned and taught extrinsically so that he might thereby show how easily he can make men wise through the wisdom of God which is within them.

The extended theological reflection on the Spirit that Paul provided in this chapter of the letter to the Romans shows how he understood the three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son and Spirit) to work together; further he explored the implications of the gift of the Spirit for the way in which we live out our lives as Christians. Paul wrote confidently about God as Father, literally Abba; the first person of the Trinity is our divine parent. All who follow and believe in him are his sons and daughters, and thus joint heirs with Christ not only in his sufferings, but also in his glory. Why? Because of the Spirit.

The Spirit lives in us (v 9) and testifies with and through us. The indwelling of God’s Spirit within us means that we are no longer bound down and limited by the things of the world, the flesh, but through the Spirit’s work we are brought into God’s family. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God (v 14). Paul here speaks to one of the most fundamental of all human needs: the basic psychological need for security, to know whom to trust, where to feel safe, where is home. And as spirit-filled children of God, Paul promises us that we have a home, a home where we may be glorified with Christ and dwell with the triune God: Father, Son and Spirit.
And this is what fundamentally links together our two readings this morning. For the people at Shinar had started to build the huge tower of bricks and tried to create for themselves a unitary identity because of their longing to create, and name, a community to which they could all belong, with which they all identified. They tried to make themselves one home, a home that had a link with the heavenly world through its great tower. Their sin lay in their over-reaching themselves and trying to assume something that ultimately only God could grant. So, he prevented their unification and divided them by language.

But that sin is past, and the church has recovered the unity of languages, thanks first to the saving work of the Son and then, crucially, to the inspiring (inbreathing) work of the Spirit. Now that the Spirit dwells within us, God has called us to be his children. When we call to him, our Father, Abba, the Spirit within us testifies that we are his children, his children whom he has called home.

While we need not doubt the promise that as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ we may ultimately be glorified with him, we still have need of consolation as we labour on our earthly pilgrimage. And this we find, not by building cities of brick, or great reaching towers, but by sharing in the fellowship of Christian worship within the home that we inhabit as the body of Christ: the church.

One of my favourite post-communion prayers addresses directly our anxiety to know where we belong, our hope of being home. I adapt it slightly for this non-eucharistic context:

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying and living, he declared your love,
gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.
May we who gather in this house of Christ
offer him our acceptable worship in Spirit and in truth.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.