The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn’t be any of this.”

If you’ve not read Markus Zusak’s “The Book Thief”, I do recommend it. In the midst of the haunting story of a child refugee in WWII Germany, it is also a profound reflection on the use and abuse of language. And it is very appropriate on a day when language is very much to the fore in the Pentecost story of the multilingual speaking and understanding of the early disciples, and the pairing of that story with our Genesis reading this morning; the Tower of Babel – the confusion of human language.

Language – Prof Graham Ward had the patience to teach me most of what I have rather carelessly forgotten about the theology and philosophy of language. It’s a privilege that he’s here today…although I suspect rather more of a privilege for me than it is for him!

What is our language for? How does it work? What forces are at play when we speak or attend to speech? The experience of being the principle witness in a criminal prosecution in the past few weeks means I’ve found myself pondering such questions afresh. There’s not much like 3 days of intense cross examination to get you thinking about what you’re saying and how you’re saying it, and the purposes and impact of that.

Trying to enable 12 good people and true with no particular Church connections to gain some understanding of the indelible character and implications of holy orders was a challenge. I was very struck throughout the trial that the whole enterprise was actually about language, the meanings of words in specific contexts and their connections with a web of expectation, belief and behaviour.

But what was most obvious was that the primary use of language in that context was to assert certain things, indeed to assert an identity and what that entailed for the understanding of words and behaviours.

This was an exercise in tightly controlled aggression over the meaning of words.
And this sense of self-assertion blows strongly across the plains of Shinar where the story of Babel is located.

“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 will be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

The enterprise of Babel is one of self-assertion, self-establishment, and this is in sharp and I guess deliberate contrast with the story of Noah adrift upon the waters that precedes it and that of Abraham the wandering nomad that follows it.

The claim, or aim of bene ha Adam, the children of Adam, is to reach the heavens, the domain of God, and so their ziggurat rises in the midst of the city.

Not unlike my court trial, this is a people who are engaged in the assertion of an identity, and the claim to state conclusively what that identity means.

The thing is that, despite the monumental effort involved, it’s completely unsuccessful. Verse 5 says, “The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of Adam had built.”

The Lord came down. Despite what they claimed and may even have believed, there is no way that this tower actually reaches the heavens. Perhaps it was extraordinarily tall by the standards of the age, but still God has to come down to take a look at it.

One can almost hear the much later Isaiah chuckling away in the background;

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth
and its people are like grasshoppers.

What does this God get up to upon seeing what the children of Adam have done? He confuses their language and scatters them.

Now many have read in this a vindictive and mean-spirited divine judgement, like that meted out to Prometheus in the Greek myth for the theft of fire from Mount Olympus. You might be expecting me to say that, no, it’s not like that at all, but in all honesty there is something of the kind going on here.

The people in the story are engaged in something improper, but it is not trespassing on the domain of God. Remember, the tower doesn’t actually work, still God has to “come
down”. So, this lot haven’t committed the Promethean misdemeanour because he actually got into Olympus and nicked the fire – Babel doesn’t even come close!

What I see in Babel is not a trespass into heaven, but rather that aggression of self-assertion.

Now the philosopher Wittgenstein (note how the preacher skilfully tosses a bone towards his old teacher to try and reassure him that his time wasn’t completely wasted), the philosopher Wittgenstein ushered in a view of language that was very different to the idea of words as tools by means of which we labelled the things of the world. Instead Wittgenstein brought language itself into focus. Language a whole system of signs and symbols, that embraces our being as fully as the sea surrounds a fish. According to him, it is because life equips us with this surrounding symbolic sea that we have a life at all, that we develop as people who can experience and interpret life and the world in the ways that we do.

I can go quite a long way with this kind of thinking, but it does have an aspect that I find troubling, and that goes to the heart of the Babel story. This is the sense that language gives us a world, hands it to us; and further that it gives us ourselves. Although I don’t think that this was Wittgenstein’s point, it is perilously easy to slide from there into an understanding of language as the medium and the capacity to assert ourselves, possess ourselves and name and take possession of the world. And that is what we have seen going on with Babel.

This is where the Feast of Pentecost addresses us. Does it not strike you as odd that having gone to all the trouble of confusing human language, seemingly to save us from ourselves, at Pentecost God undoes all the good work and enables people to overcome the barrier of different languages?

So, what’s the big difference between Babel and Pentecost? Simply this: that language in Babel is all about possession, domination and assertion, but at Pentecost it is all about self-offering.

The message the disciples proclaim is of God the Word, and how in Jesus Christ this God has offered himself, given himself away for the sake of the world. As they proclaim this message, because of the risk of doing so, the disciples are also giving themselves and their lives away.
The difference between Babel and Pentecost is between receiving language as a gift and then using it to possess and assert myself, or using it as something that enables me to give myself away to others and for others.

In a way this takes me back to where I began and Markus Zusak’s story, “The Book Thief”.

“The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn’t be any of this.”

The words…the words that rang out in Nuremberg were of the same language in which a struggling family received a refugee child and gave shelter to a young Jewish man in flight.

• Is the gift of language there to set a world before me to possess it, or to help me to set myself before the world to serve?
• Is the way I or we use language about aggressive self-assertion that can only end in division and loss, or is it used to seek connection and mutuality?

These are questions that the conjunction of Pentecost and Babel set before us, and in these days of forceful public rhetoric, they are questions worth pondering.