

Keeping faith above the babble

Thought for the Day

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Last week I was invited to join a delegation of faith leaders to the European Community in Brussels.

It was, by chance, a particularly interesting time (in the sense of the old Chinese curse)! The rift between the pro and anti-war factions within the EU had boiled over at their summit, and tens of thousands of demonstrators were still on the streets.

The contrast was stark: on the one hand an institution originally founded to make war impossible again in Western Europe, and now about to enlarge to help stabilise the east; and on the other hand an unresolved dispute, still on the very edge of toppling over into a bloody war.

And the irony: an institution designed to help nation speak peace unto nation - already home to 12 languages, and about to enlarge to 18 - contemplating the fact that words have been exhausted in the standoff with Iraq.

That irony is compounded by the realisation that Iraq is the biblical Babylon, home of the Tower of Babel in the Hebrew Bible, where humanity overstretched itself, seeking to reach to the very heavens, and was punished by discord. Each no longer understood the other; so that one asked for bricks and was given water, one asked for water and was given sand. Thus the project collapsed into chaos and misunderstanding.

In today's enlarged EU, it could require 306 teams of translators to bring mutual understanding between 18 languages. Of course there will be misunderstandings and mistranslations, but these can be overcome when the worthiness of the shared aims far outweighs the frustration of the system.

So it was for us, eighteen leaders and representatives of the many faiths. We have our differences, theological, moral and practical, but what holds us together is far greater and more important than what separates us. What prevents the metaphorical Tower of Babel collapsing like the biblical Tower is our shared recognition of our responsibility, even at times like these – indeed especially at times like these – to rise above our differences.