

The Tower of Babel – Leandro Bassano (1600; National Gallery)

[https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/leandro-babel](https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/leandro-bassano-the-tower-of-babel)



- Is this a modern building site or an old one? How do you know? **It is clearly from a long time ago. There are no modern tools, machines or vehicles. The people are dressed in very old fashioned clothes.**
- What different jobs can you see the builders doing? **Brick-carrying and -laying, cement mixing (spot the man pouring water into it at the front right) and stone masonry are the main jobs. There is an overseer on a horse making sure people are working hard. There is also a smartly dressed man in the background who looks as if he is giving orders.**
- How does the builders' health and safety compare to that of modern building sites? **There are no helmets (apart from the horse-rider) or Hi-Viz jackets. Everyone is very close to everyone else. The scaffolding does not have a safety rail. And there is a glass and bottle of wine that belongs to one of the builders!**
- How does the artist make sure that the viewer does not stay looking at one area but moves around the whole painting? **The colours gently change throughout the painting from dark to light and everything in between. In particular there is a triangle formed by three people**



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wearing pink as well as small areas of red. Even though the painting is busy it is not frenetic, the colour changes are subtle rather than stark.

- What do you think they are building? **A tower or some kind of grand building.**
- Is this simply a painting of construction work or do you think there is a story taking place? **There does not appear to be a single focal point. None of the characters particularly stands out. It just looks like a building site from 400 years ago.**
- Have you heard a famous mythical story about an attempt to build a tall tower to reach heaven? **This is in fact the story of The Tower of Babel, a story from the Hebrew Bible (also known as the Old Testament). The smartly dressed man at the back is called Nimrod and is the great-grandson of Noah (of the Flood fame). He wants to build a tower to reach heaven.**
- In the story, how do you think God felt about when he saw what was happening? **Not happy to say the least!**
- What punishment does God inflict on the human race? **He makes them all speak different languages so they cannot communicate with each other. So on one hand the story is about how humans cannot go and visit heaven while they are alive whilst on the other it is an origin story – not of people but of languages. The moral is that we all need to communicate with each other to achieve anything successfully. But the painting also gives us a glimpse of what building sites looked like 400 years ago.**
- What sounds would we hear if we were there?
 - **The stone mason chisel carving the stone**
 - **Water pouring into the cement**
 - **The mixing of the cement**
 - **Hammers banging**
 - **Men shouting**
 - **Orders being given**

Follow on ideas

- *Either paint or make a collage (using photos from magazines or newspapers) of a modern day version of this painting. Take into account all the things we would have now that they did not have or use 400 years ago.*
- *Imagine you are one of the builders after God has made everyone speak a different language. Think about the confusion you might be feeling. Write a letter to a family member or friend (we have to accept that they would still be speaking the same language!) to express what you witnessed and how you felt about it.*
- *Life in Lockdown discussion: This is a painting about communication and working together. How and why do people need to work together more than ever at the moment?*

Topic Links

- *Myths/Stories*
- *RE/Bible Stories*