

Pentecost Sunday – Year A

The feast of Pentecost is celebrated around 50 days after Easter (*pentecostos* is Greek for fiftieth). It preserves the Jewish festival of Pentecost which occurred fifty days after Passover. In England, this day was confirmation Sunday and was known as Whitsunday (White Sunday) after the white garments worn by candidates for confirmation. Pentecost has traditionally been called the birthday of the church, which is true enough if we look upon the church as an evangelising organisation. However, when we consider that the aims of Jesus were to inspire his fellow Jews to bring about the centrality (reign) of God in their lives through the cultivation of solid relationships with God, fellow human beings and a healthy relationship with self and the environment in which we live, we can see that the organisational church is a human layer that has been added to the work of Christ. The birth of a community that follows Jesus as their way to God happened some time before Pentecost.

So, what is Luke doing with his story of Pentecost that we read in today's liturgy? After the death of Jesus, his followers had virtually gone into hiding, fearing that they might also be arrested and perhaps condemned. They began wondering if following Jesus was going nowhere since the Master had been shamefully executed as a criminal, a fact that would disqualify him from being Israel's messiah. This means that the hopes placed in Jesus by his friends were not about to be realised. Remember how Luke put all these fears and disappointments in narrative form when he told of the two disciples' meeting with Jesus on their way to Emmaus. The point of the Emmaus story was to illustrate the reality that Jesus was not dead but alive and his presence in spirit was fully appreciated when the community met in unity and hospitality to pray and celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Luke begins his story of the deeds or acts of the Apostles with a narrative of spiritual awakening and realisation that led to determination and action. His tale of Pentecost shows how the disciples, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were fired with enthusiasm and a sense of mission to bring the good news about Jesus to as many people as possible. In Jewish literary tradition the divine presence was usually represented by extraordinary phenomena, such as, thunder, lightning, fire, strong wind, and Luke follows this convention by describing a sound *like* the rush of a violent wind, but was not a wind (remember the Hebrew *ruach* means breath, wind and spirit, and the Greek word *pneuma* likewise means breath, wind and spirit). The wind metaphor here is a clear symbol of the Holy Spirit. Luke also writes that there appeared individual tongues *like* fire, but not real fire, that rested on each of those present in the room, not just the Twelve. The tongues are symbolic of the call to speak out the good news. Luke's metaphorical language is conveying the sense of two realities, i) the Spirit of God fills and galvanises the disciples and ii) they are empowered to spread the message of Christ to peoples of all tongues and cultures.

It is good to keep in mind that these Jewish men and women disciples emerged from their spiritual experience with the courage and resolve to broadcast the message of Jesus to their fellow Jews. The Jesus movement at this point was thoroughly Jewish and yet it is easy for us to forget that when Peter stood up to speak he was neither Catholic nor pope, but a Galilean fisherman on fire with the love of his Lord. His passionate address was designed to convince his audience that Jesus was truly Israel's messiah and that the way of Jesus the Christ would lead to quality life here and now and ultimate unity with God. Luke then describes how the Jesus people attracted followers from all over and he emphasises that there is no stopping a movement that is backed by the Holy Spirit. In the rest of his book of Acts he will illustrate this with details of signs and wonders in the form of cures, the calming of troubled spirits and the swelling numbers of believers eager to join the people of the way.

In time, of course, the Jesus people began to make claims about Jesus that mainstream Judaism could not handle and so the two groups parted company, and Christianity as a separate religion was born in the last decades of the first century.

It takes maturity to appreciate difference

The main point of today's first reading is that Luke wants to stress the universal nature of the new Jesus movement. It was not bound to any ethnic group, as Judaism was, but invited all kinds of people into its midst. Luke's list of places in this reading reminds us of the harmony that can come about when we learn to appreciate difference. Even a superficial glance at the world of nature and humanity can help us recognise something of

the immensity of the God of variety. It takes maturity to allow other people and cultures their own space and then love the difference. The great pity is that the rise of nationalism in today's world has led to a virtual zero appreciation of difference and individual character in cultures and faiths.

The psalmist sings in praise of the immense variety in creation. There is a note of true acknowledgement here of the fact that all life is sustained by the spirit of God. Take away that spirit, he sings, and they die. The hope is that the Lord may take great delight in the works of creation, but how can this happen if there is war and strife brought on by the lust for power and the inability to recognise variety and difference?

There is wisdom in naming our gifts

In his letter to the Christians in Corinth Paul makes a plea for the recognition of variety in the community. The entire twelfth chapter is taken up with the analogy of the human body as Paul points out that every part of the body has an important role to play toward the smooth functioning of the whole organism. Based on this analogy he strives to show how every person in the community has unique gifts that ought to be exercised for the benefit of the entire group. While there is a variety of gifts there is only one Spirit working in us all, inspiring us to realise our potential and give full reign to our gifts for the service of others. There is great wisdom in the old saying, 'count your blessings,' but there is also great wisdom in counting our gifts and naming them so that we may exercise them positively and contribute to the human family.

The Sequence that we recite or sing at today's liturgy is a remnant of a number of such religious poems that were commonly sung before the gospel on Sundays and feasts. This tradition goes back to the 8th century in Europe. Today's sequence sings of the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit and asks that we may be faithful to our baptismal commitment.

My peace I give to you...do not let your hearts be troubled

The gospel reading comes from John's description of Jesus' appearance to the disciples after his resurrection. Notice how Jesus reinforces his greeting of peace by saying it twice, although in this context it is no ordinary greeting. In Aramaic it is *shlama lamkhood* where the Aramaic *shlama* is related to the Hebrew word *shalom*. In both these languages the word 'peace' refers not just to the absence of war or turmoil but to the state of peace that comes with being at ease in oneself, in harmony with one's surroundings, in health of mind and body. There are no recriminations from Jesus over the disciples' poor performance in deserting him in his suffering and death. Jesus' gesture of breathing on his friends is symbolic of his passing on his very life to them. It reminds us of God breathing life into the first human in Genesis 2:7. Ideally, they would now think and act like Jesus, being infused with his spirit. Notice how Jesus was the quintessential man of action and in this scene inspired his friends to continue the action of taking the good news to all people.

Jesus' statement regarding the forgiveness of sin has clear Jewish overtones that are echoed in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 where Jesus talks about the power of binding and loosing. The Jewish Rabbis were the guardians of the Law of Moses and were relied on to declare to ordinary people what was sinful and what was legitimate. They used to declare certain patterns of behaviour sinful or otherwise for the guidance of the people. Jesus is most likely telling his disciples that they should make the requirements of Christian commitment so clear to people that they would know what was right and what was unacceptable. They would also have the power to declare that divine forgiveness had taken place when genuine repentance was demonstrated.

Finally, it is worth remembering that the key idea behind the coming of the Spirit is that God is with us, providing us with strength and courage to live out our baptismal commitment and to be ambassadors for Christ to others. A by-product of this enterprise is deep and enduring peace



When your life is governed by the divine nature instead of the self-centred nature you have found inner peace.

Peace Pilgrim



Michelle, making her way to the wedding, was stopped by an usher at the entrance to the church.

The usher asked, 'Are you a friend of the bride?'

Michelle snapped a quick reply, 'No, of course not. I am the groom's mother.'