

Pentecost 2020



Reading *Acts of the Apostles 2.1-13*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

Gospel *John 20.19-23*

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Homily

Dear Friends, today we celebrate the great feast of Pentecost, an ancient Jewish feast which like Passover fifty days before has its roots in the exodus of God's ancient people from Egypt. It commemorates the culmination and completion of that journey from slavery to freedom, in the covenant that was received by Moses in wind and fire on Mount Sinai. It became a *Christian* feast because of what happened in wind and fire on that day fifty days after Jesus' passover from death to new life.

Pentecost is a *culmination* – not a beginning. It's neither the *first* appearance of the Spirit in the history of salvation, nor the *beginning* of the Church.

The Holy Spirit had been at work since the creation of the world. But his presence is a *hidden* presence, invisible, uncontrollable, uncontainable, like wind blowing as it will. Sometimes gently, even playfully; sometimes forcefully, even ferociously. Like the breath of God in creation, speaking in and through the prophets, and supremely in and through Jesus: the 'inseparable companion' (as St Basil calls the Spirit) of the Word of God himself. As to the beginning of the Church, surely that is either the birthday of the Lord, when Christ first began to be visible in the world. Or it is the moment of his *second* birth, the resurrection, as Jesus's reconciled community began to gather around the *risen* Christ.

No: Pentecost is the culmination and completion of Christ's earthly mission. His life and teaching had prepared the disciples for what he called his 'hour'. That hour had lasted from the moment of his betrayal through his passion and death to the moment we celebrated ten days ago when he was taken up in the clouds. Now is the moment for the outpouring of the Spirit he had promised – and he told them to be together, and to wait for that promise.

2

One of the ancient teachers of the Church, St Athanasius, wrote, 'God became flesh, *so that* human beings may receive the Spirit', or, better, that humanity might 'bear the Spirit', carry it. (*De incarnatio* PG xxvi, 996). This was what Christ's whole mission was for.

And if all that Christ had said and suffered and revealed on earth had made *that* possible then Pentecost was not simply a culmination, but *more* than a culmination. Then, something essential and *very new* about the reality of the infant Church as the story is told to us in the *Acts of the Apostles*, had happened.

We read there that the disciples were praying all together in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit descended upon them powerfully, as wind and as fire. They then began miraculously to proclaim in many different tongues the Good News of Christ's resurrection. This was the 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' which had been foretold by John the Baptist, when he said, 'He who is coming after me is mightier than I ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (*Mt* 3: 11, *Lk* 3.16, *Mk* 1.8, *Jn* 1.33, *Acts* 11.16, *Tit* 3.5; cf *Acts* 1.5 and 8).

Pentecost then is the culmination of Easter, and *more* than that. 'God became flesh, *so that* human beings may receive the Holy Spirit'.

Some years ago, a famous French theologian of the last century, who made a huge profound impact on the Catholic Church, Yves Congar, once said that the Church's teaching gave the impression that Holy Spirit's work was sprinkled here and there 'like sugar sprinkled on top of pastries without, however, being part of the recipe itself'. Of all the images of the Holy Spirit, sugar sprinkles are not something you will find in the scriptures! But his point was that the presence and work of the Spirit were too easily presented as a kind of afterthought, a sweetener and a decoration, not a deep and permeating ingredient. Whereas Pentecost tells us that making human beings capable of bearing the Spirit, and giving them the Spirit to bear was the *purpose* of God's will, because, as Jesus explained before his ascension, when 'the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem ... and to the ends of the earth'.

It is because of *Pentecost* that the earliest Christians really begin to understand that what they say about Jesus, what they do for Jesus, what shines out of them because of Jesus, and what they suffer in loyalty to him, can be communicated to absolutely anyone, to every human being, 'to the ends of the earth' (*Matt* 28.16). They would be witnesses.

3

Before ending let us spend a moment thinking about that. As we heard in the reading from *Acts* the gift of the Spirit took the form of tongues of fire, which rested on the heads of the apostles (tongues because they were about to testify to God's wonders; fire because God is like a consuming fire). Those flames that rested on their heads seemed to grip them, to take hold of them, to transform them. As a bishop, when I'm confirming or ordaining, I'm often reminded at the moment of the laying on of hands of those tongues of fire, gripping, taking hold, like my hands the heads of those upon whom, through my prayer, the Holy Spirit promises to descend. A fire, a grip, that takes hold of the person, and begins a transformation. 'O let it freely burn' we sing so often in church, 'til earthly passions' ... whether pride or anger, corruption, laziness, despair, obsession, self-centeredness ... 'turn to dust and ashes in its heat consuming. And let thy glorious light *shine* ... the while my path illuming.'

Another ancient teacher of the Church, Origen, attributes a saying to Jesus (which sounds like him even if it is not in the scriptures): 'Whoever is near to me, is near to the fire' (*Homily on Jeremiah, 50*). The Holy Spirit is a fire that blazes but doesn't burn, that transforms but doesn't damage. Through fear we draw back, afraid of giving up something which gives us pleasure or security or identity, afraid that Christ deprives us of freedom, of certain experiences, of a part of ourselves. On the one hand, we want to be with Jesus, to learn how to follow him closely; but on the other, we are afraid of the consequences if we do, afraid of the demands of faith, afraid of the demands of others upon us. This fear is as true of churches as it is of individuals or groups within the church, and it's all around us at the moment as we face life after the virus. It's a fear that paralyses and distorts and makes us protect what we have; rather than finding the maturity and total dependence of being witnesses of Christ, and witnesses of his cross as the path to life.

'We shall have to learn to overcome fear if we are to live fully; fear of personal injury, of loss of reputation, or property, fear of death above all. ... To come to terms with death we have to know where we hope to end; because all else depends on the goal: eternal union, in truth and love, together, with God.' (Fr Anthony Ross OP)

So we must learn to let every aspect of our lives, each moment, each encounter, each fear, each challenge, become an occasion to invoke the Spirit, so that we can become Christ witnesses wherever we are, to the ends of the earth.

COME DOWN O Love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

Prayer

Almighty Father, send your promised Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who is seated with you, and with your only-begotten Son. He spoke through the Law and the Prophets. He descended upon Mary to make her God-bearer and mother of your Son; and upon Jesus to anoint him, resting upon him; and upon his apostles, resting on them; and upon your whole Church, to make us one body one spirit in Christ. And on me, Lord, send your promised Holy Spirit ... that I may shine with your Son, Jesus, and give you glory. Amen.