

Pentecost Sunday – Year B

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Saint John (Jn. 20:19-23)

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, 'Peace be with you,' 20 and, after saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord, 21 and he said to them again, 'Peace be with you. 'As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.' 22 After saying this he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained.

The Gospel of the Lord

We celebrate today the second most important day in the liturgical calendar – the feast of Pentecost. Easter and Pentecost are the two oldest feasts celebrated in the Church, and the two are intimately connected.

Let us explain the meaning of today's feast that we may derive the greatest possible fruits from its celebration.

To start with, the word "Pentecost" is a Greek word which means 50th, in our case the 50th day. For the Jews it meant the 50th day after the feast of the Passover. For us Christians, it means the 50th day after Easter.

So, like Passover, it was originally a Jewish feast, one of the three main festivals, - the feast of Passover, of Pentecost and of the Tents -, which the Jews celebrated under instruction from God Himself (Ex. 23:14-17).

The three were called "pilgrim-feasts" because adult males living within reasonable distance from Jerusalem were bound to attend the worship in the Temple during those days.

~~1. God's wisdom in saving us is made clear from the way He linked His saving deeds to the various festivals He himself had established in the Old Testament~~

God chose the Pentecost day to send the Holy Spirit on the apostles thus bring the Church to life. Pentecost day has been called the *Birthday* of the Church.

- On Pentecost day the Jews celebrated the establishing of the *Covenant* between God and the people of Israel in the desert. God chose precisely that day to inaugurate His New Covenant which Christ had already sealed on the Cross with his own blood. This same covenant is sealed by the Holy Spirit in the heart of each Christian at Baptism.

- On Pentecost day the Jews celebrated the *giving of the Ten Commandments* by God on Mount Sinai. God again chose the Pentecost day to promulgate the “New law of Love” which Jesus had established, a law consisting of a single command: “*Love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn. 13:34). This new law will be written by the Spirit in the heart of each believer in Christ, as the prophet Ezekiel had foretold (Ez. 36:27).
- Finally, the Jews celebrated on Pentecost day the *completion of the grain harvest*. That was the day that God chose to gather an abundant harvest of souls who, moved by the preaching of Peter, joined the Church. And this harvesting will go on until the end of the world.

We must admire the wisdom of God and his love in planning every detail in his work of saving man; we must also appreciate the way He helps us to understand those plans.

2. In the readings of today we hear about a double outpouring of the Spirit:

While the first reading of this Sunday, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, narrates the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles which took place on Pentecost day, the Gospel, taken from Saint John, sends us back to what had taken place in the evening of the day of Jesus’ resurrection.

a) The first communication of the Spirit

We see Jesus communicating the Spirit to the apostles at this first meeting with them after rising from the dead. He seemed so eager to do that, to give them the “new wine”. Jesus could not delay even for a moment to communicate the Spirit to the apostles.

It was his own Spirit, his own divine life, which the Jews could not destroy on the Cross. For the apostles, it was a most precious treasure, a unique gift which Jesus had obtained for them and for all men and women at the price of his blood.

Together with the gift of the Spirit, Jesus presented his apostles with all the gifts which the Spirit brings:

- First of all the gift of FORGIVENESS. What Jesus did at that moment was to baptize the apostles with the Holy Spirit, as John the Baptist had announced (Lk 3:16). And as light dispels darkness, so the Spirit wiped away every stain of sin from the souls of the apostles. They had to be forgiven first, before they could make use of the power to forgive the sins of others.
- And with forgiveness, *peace*. Not just any peace, but Jesus’ own *peace*, which he had bequeathed to them after the Last Supper (Jn. 14:27).

- And then JOY – a joy, the like of which they had never experienced before; the joy Jesus himself was experiencing within his heart at that very moment.

Jesus proved generous with his apostles; at that moment they could hardly imagine the change that was taking place within them.

b) The communication of the Spirit on Pentecost-day

In the narration of the events on Pentecost-day, as given by Luke, Jesus doesn't appear anywhere; neither is any voice heard speaking from heaven: the *wind* is God's language, and the *flames*, the sign of his presence.

Yet the effects of the Holy Spirit on the apostles are there for everyone to see:

- It is seen in the *wisdom* communicated to the apostles. One cannot be surprised at the assuredness of Peter in his discourse; a man almost illiterate speaking as no theologian ever could!
- It is seen in the urge moving the apostles to announce Christ. They could not keep the secret of the resurrection of Christ to themselves; they were compelled to announce him. Astonishing also is the courage displayed by the apostles in doing so; they, who only moments before, had been a group of frightened people! It was for them like the sacrament of Confirmation for us!

~~3. WE should always be in Pentecost in our communities~~

The book of the Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that Jesus did not limit the communication of the Holy Spirit to his apostles to the two occasions of Easter and Pentecost. As the Church was born on Pentecost-day, the parable of the vine and the branches explained by Jesus to his apostles after the Last Supper (Jn. 15:1-8) became a reality; a continuous flow of life was established between Jesus, the trunk of the tree, and the branches, which is what the apostles were.

Similarly, the communication of the Spirit by Jesus within our community is not limited to the occasions when Baptism and Confirmation are administered in our midst; there is a flow of life between Jesus and us, which saint Paul compares to the communication of life between head and members in a human body.

Time and again throughout his letters, Saint Paul makes use of this symbol of the human body to express what Christ and the Spirit are for us and for our Christian community: Christ is the head, Christians are the members, and the *Spirit is the life-giving soul* of the Church in general and of our Christian community in particular.

No other comparison – head, body, life that keeps them untied - could better express the work which the Spirit is carrying out within us at this very moment as we are gathered for Sunday service.

- The Spirit is *cleansing* us of our sins; he keeps on doing it at all times, since sin clings to us in a thousand ways.
- He is restoring our *peace*, peace within our hearts always torn by anxiety, and peace among us which selfishness threatens at all times.
- He is putting *joy* in our hearts, the true joy which replaces the sadness that the empty joys of sin leave behind.
- He is giving us *light* that we may understand God's word, and true *wisdom* to help us discover God's plans of love for us.
- And he is giving us *strength*, strength to witness to him around through a true Christian life, and strength "*to forgive sins*", the inevitable wounds which unfortunately we inflict on each other. Only the Spirit can lead us to forgive each other sincerely.

In this communication of the Spirit to each one of us there is a particular aspect which shows both, *Jesus' love and the wisdom of the Spirit*: the Spirit communicates himself to us "in our own language", that is, keeping in mind our individual needs, and adapting himself to our situation at all times.

Jesus is not less generous to us than he was with the apostles; He keeps on offering us the Holy Spirit at every moment.

~~4. Though the Spirit is given to each one individually, it is given for the sake of the Body, that is, for the sake of the Christian community.~~

The important lesson Saint Paul means to communicate in the second reading of this feast is this: Though the Spirit is given to each one individually, it is given for the sake of the Body, that is, for the sake of the Christian community. The Spirit is a precious gift, but receiving him imposes on us *obligations* which are very serious:

a) First and foremost the Spirit demands that we be at all times healthy members of the Christian community, of the body to which we belong.

Dry branches are destined to be burned (Jn. 15:6), and dead members have to be amputated for the sake of the body. Anything that we do against the Holy Spirit, even our most secret sin, puts in danger the life of the community to which we belong. The mere fact of being slack in our Christian life is already an offence both against the Spirit and against the community.

*b) The Spirit demands that **we share the gifts** we receive:*

The early community of Jerusalem went to the extreme of sharing whatever they possessed among the members. This is not always feasible, though the Spirit does demand also in our own days that we come to the rescue of the poorer members of the community. Concern for the poor and the needy around us will always be a sign of the presence of the Spirit in us.

But there should be no limitation in the sharing of the spiritual gifts which the Spirit brings:

- A sharing within the Christian community: we must share **our faith, our prayer, our knowledge, advice, encouragement, peace, joy**; nothing should be kept selfishly away from our brothers and sisters. A true Christian is one who considers himself permanently at the service of the community.
- A sharing with non-believers and non-Catholics: the example of Peter on Pentecost-day speaks by itself; he started **announcing Christ** the moment he received the Holy Spirit.

Faith in Christ is a treasure, but quite different from earthly treasures. In the case of earthly possessions, the more you share, the less you are left with. Not so with Faith; it has to be shared, and the more generously you do it, the stronger it grows within you.

If we do not feel the urge of communicating to others the gifts of the Spirit, we should start questioning ourselves whether they are still with us or not.

*c) Each and every Christian is called to **contribute to the welfare and growth** of the Christian community.*

Doctors are not yet sure of the real reason for certain organs in the human body. But no doctor is so foolish as to cut away any part of the body. This is still truer of the body of Christ to which we belong: let no one think himself useless or of little value. We all should be conscious of two things: **of our sinfulness and of our great worth**;

We all should feel:

- Sinners good only to burn in hell as long as we persevere in our sinfulness
 - Yet precious to God after having been redeemed through Christ's death.
- Merchants do not pay a high sum for a worthless thing; we must be of great value to Christ since as Peter says, he ransomed us at the price of his blood (1 Pet 1:18). If so, we must be very precious in God's eyes.

We are called to contribute greatly to the Christian community from the very moment the Spirit is given to us. God does not measure our usefulness or uselessness by human standards; it all depends on the vigour of the life in the Spirit within us.

There is no alternative in Christian life: we will help or harm the Christian community, depending on whether we are healthy or sickly or dead members in the body of Christ.

These are serious considerations; we should praise Christ daily for the gift of the Spirit, and strive daily to maintain and increase the life in the spirit within us.

Let us pray:

Father in heaven, we thank you for having sent your Son to communicate to us the Holy Spirit. Make us active members of our Christian community, that your Spirit may take possession of every heart around us. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen