

Today the Easter and the Paschal celebrations and feasts reach their denouement with the celebration of Pentecost, Jesus first return to his disciples as he had promised. Ten days ago, they saw him depart after his last physical manifestation to them, that was the Ascension. Since then they have waited for His promised sign and today it was given to them. As familiar as the word "Pentecost" may be to us, it is still mysterious. It comes from a Greek word meaning 50 ie 50 days after Easter. St. Augustine, well-versed in interpreting the meaning of numbers taught that the number 50 is that of the Holy Spirit at work in human history. Perhaps that is why today is both an anniversary and a plan of action. It is an anniversary commemorating the first coming of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. And it marks the start of a new world which we hear about in Scriptures. We marvel at the rich content of today's Scripture lessons and now we want to explore some of the most important features of that content, which is why we must read our Bible daily and come together to share its meaning in our worship.

Among the spectacular events of the first Pentecost, the transformation wrought on the descent on the Apostles themselves is certainly one of the most evident. The account in the Acts of the Apostles alludes to rather mysterious phenomena. A violent wind fills the whole house. Tongues of fire separate and settle on each individual. They suddenly have the capacity to speak in different languages. Here we have three impressive signs: the wind, the tongues of fire, the different languages.

These three signs are important, traditionally indicating manifestations of the Almighty. Wind and fire often accompany the presence of God in the Old Testament. We recall the Burning Bush out of which God spoke to Moses. And there were violent storms on Mount Sinai when the tablets of the Law were promulgated. The gift of tongues and languages is traditionally associated with prophetic inspiration. The prophets often expressed praise of God in a language that was unintelligible to their immediate audience, and the latter saw that as a sign of being possessed by the Spirit. To the rationalistic mentality such as ours may be, that may seem odd or even suspicious. But it is not because a person babbles in an unintelligible language that they are inspired by the Spirit of God. To an outsider, what we speak of, even in words understood by them, does not make sense, so

they might as well leave us to continue with what they might say, is our babbling. A lot of students feel that their teachers just babble on, children think that parents babble on, in both cases, either if they do not really understand just what is being said or they just plain and simple do not want to hear anymore.

The important thing here is that the Jewish mentality recorded this incomprehension as signs of possessing the Spirit, some perhaps with awe, while others with a sense of rejection (crazy). And these signs are brought up again at Pentecost to persuade those witnessing the event that a divine reality was involved in what was taking place. In any case, the sign of tongues is one that has been discussed greatly throughout time and I hope in some small way the passage from Acts will take on some import today. The Jews who had gathered around Jerusalem from every country around the Mediterranean heard the Apostle's message in all vernacular languages. It is a replay and reverse of the language confusion that arose when the people were trying to build the tower of Babel. Dispersed at that time because they no longer understood each other, human beings are now invited by the Apostles to reunite again. The gift of languages or tongues bestowed upon the Apostles is something that proclaims the principal role of the Church that was born on this day, to speak to human beings in their own language so they might be able to truly understand.

The wind, the fire, the gift of languages, are signs of the Spirit's presence in the Apostles. In today's Gospel, Jesus indicates how much power they will derive from that presence. After breathing on them, again the sign of the wind, He said, *if you forgive people's sins, they will be forgiven them: if you hold them bound, they are held bound.* The Apostles became recipients and bearers of the power to effect reconciliation between God and human beings. Jesus leaves it up to them to decide whether people, like us, will or will not share in the power of the resurrection, but we need to know carefully here, and this is where some denominational differences are allowed to creep in, it is not that the Apostles make these binding decisions, but it is the Apostles who have been filled, or blessed with the Holy Spirit. It is the power and the authority of Jesus Christ working through the instrument of the human who has been chosen by Christ and who in turn has obeyed Christ. The thin edge of separation here is to clearly understand the human element that is present, but also to see that it is not merely a human element and it is this that becomes the manifestation of what Pentecost is. The Apostles, after being filled with the Spirit, have at their disposal the power to accelerate or hold up God's work, the power to affect the destiny of the world. If we ponder the fact that the same powers now

belong to those who form God's Church, we might be less inclined to engage in criticism of the Church or be in outright contempt for her. What is God's Church? It is the body of Christ represented in the world. It is you and me. It is the collect of the confessing. It is the Union on earth of the believers who honoured the grace that is extended from God the Father and Christ His Son. As Christ, God's own Son was allowed to be tempted by Satan, so too is the temptation present to the Apostles, those original ones and us today, to be tempted and broken by Satan. Thus is the freedom of God's dominion allowed on earth. It is important to note that the disciples, those first Apostles, remained members of the humanity into which they were born. The gift of the Spirit made them special but not removed from what or who they really were.

The Spirit did not manifest itself only to the Apostles. All present in Jerusalem were profoundly impressed by the uproar taking place in the room where the Apostles were located. The violent wind therefore was not a collective illusion afflicting the Apostles. It was noted by the crowds in Jerusalem gathered around to see what was going on.

The Apostles spoke to each other and they spoke to the crowd. They understood what was said. Each heard them speaking in their own language – about the marvels God had accomplished. So, it was not just the noise that attracted them, it was also the message of the words. The Scripture states that the crowd understood those words. We know that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit must be at work for human beings to recognize the Word of God in the speech/language of another person. As the Apostle Paul put it, *no one can say, Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit*. Hence the Jews who heard the Apostles that first Pentecost must have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

It is important to grasp the fact that Pentecost did not just happen to the Apostles, to men convinced ahead of time who might use this event in some way to solidify their own popularity. Pentecost was a happening that affected countless people who had come from afar and who probably had not lived through the death of Jesus with passion and emotion.

This indicates a second aspect of Pentecost. It is not just a birthday remembrance of the Church by virtue of the power transmitted to the Apostles, it also marks the universal revivification of the world through the Spirit's work on that portion of humanity which did not yet believe in Christ. The Spirit prepared humanity to accept Christ's Revelation and to move towards recognition of his Lordship,

thanks to the signs given to the Church. The latter bears witness to the Spirit of Christ. As we have seen in the Gospel, the Apostles received the power to reconcile human beings to the Lord through the Sacrament of Baptism. This fact had profound consequences on the future development of human history and on the course of interpersonal relationships. This social program of the Holy Spirit is indicated by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians and I commend it for your reading.

If the Holy Spirit enables human beings to recognize Jesus Christ as Lord, then the Holy Spirit brings unity to the world. We cannot help but be struck more by the differences between human beings than by the resemblances between them. At heart, we all are racist, sometimes to the point of violence. We find it difficult to acknowledge the differences between members of the human family and different branches of the family. We instinctively tend to take individuals according to our own model.

Today we receive a revelation that unity, the production for peace, is truly possible. First of all, we must accept the fact that the Holy Spirit gives different gifts to different individuals. The gifts are different even as there are various functions i.e. organist, minister, plumber, farmer, teacher, cook, etc. The gifts are different even as the functions and the needs are different. But these different functions exist only because the Spirit makes them so. Diversity then is the work of the Lord. To reject this diversity, such as having a racist outlook, is to be an unfaithful servant. At the same time however, this diversity is legitimate only insofar as each individual is willing to shoulder and his or her gifts from the Spirit and use them in the service of others. Our unity is effected by the Holy Spirit, who is the source of all these capabilities and who gears them in a specific direction. He gears them toward service to others because we are baptized into one body.

Today we have an opportunity to consider and meditate on the importance of the Spirit's activity. Let us then be wise enough to turn to the God who loves us enough to be ever present with us through every circumstance of every day. If we can permit the Holy Spirit to speak to us and guide us, we will have recourse all the time with our Father and we will find the meaning to live continually in peace with the Lord and with other human beings.

Prayer: Mighty God, by the fire of your Spirit you have welded disciples into one Holy Church. Help us to show the power of your love to all people, so they may turn with one voice and one faith, calling you, Lord and Father, through Jesus Christ. Amen.