

“The New Wine of the Holy Spirit and the Universal Language of Holiness”

Homily for Pentecost Sunday, Year “A”

Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption

May 31, 2020

Introduction

On this Pentecost Sunday, we once again find ourselves sheltering in place with the apostles. I say “once again,” because our Gospel reading for this last day of the Easter season is the same that we heard way back on the Second Sunday of Easter. To be more exact, today’s Gospel is the first half of what we heard on that Sunday, and the difference shows the difference in emphasis.

Gift of the Spirit

The Gospel readings at the beginning of the Easter season place the emphasis on the bodily Resurrection of Jesus: the very physical body in which he walked the earth was the body in which he rose to a new glory. The second half of the Gospel reading for that Sunday in the Octave of Easter is the account of St. Thomas doubting and then encountering the physical risen Lord, who invites Thomas to place his hand into his wounds.

Here on Pentecost Sunday, logically, the emphasis is on the gift of the Holy Spirit. We see here St. John’s interpretation of how our Lord sent his Spirit to the Church: it is intimately connected with his Resurrection. It shows the continuity of

the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit. The Father sent His Son into the world to accomplish the work of our salvation, which he did through his saving Passion, death and Resurrection. But the grace of that saving action needs to be communicated to the whole world, through space and time. The work that our Lord accomplished through his physical body is now communicated to the world through his Mystical Body, the Church: thus his gift of the Spirit to the Church, which animates the Church, and guides the Church in the way of truth so she can communicate God's saving truth and grace to all peoples throughout history, until he returns at the end of time. One might say that in John's vision, the moment of Pentecost is the moment of the passing of the baton from the Son to the Spirit.

In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we see St. Luke's interpretation of Christ's gift of the Spirit to the Church. Here we see that the community of disciples had stayed together. We know from a few verses before where the reading begins that there were about 120 disciples altogether gathered in that same Upper Room. This is the community that would become the first members of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. And St. Luke makes very clear to us the effect that the gift of the Spirit had on them. While the ending of sheltering in place for us is a gradual process, with restrictions being lifted little by little, in the case of those first disciples the gift of the Spirit immediately empowered them to go forth from that Upper Room to proclaim the Good News, all the way, literally, to the ends of the earth (that is, of the known world at that time). You might say that this was

something like the Big Bang effect. The Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe holds that the entire universe began from a sort of explosion of an originating singular point and continued to expand and expand into space and time. So with those first disciples: the gift of the Spirit was their, one might say, "big bang" that sent them scattering throughout the world evangelizing and forming new Christian communities.

The description of the Spirit's descent upon them symbolizes this effect. The fire is reminiscent of the fire of the burning bush which appeared to Moses, the manifestation of God Who gave to Moses the law. Now God gives to the Church the law of the Spirit. The form of tongues means that the Church will embrace all peoples of all nations and of all languages: thus the meaning of the apostles' speaking in the languages of all of the people gathered there in Jerusalem from all over the world for the great feast of the Jewish Pentecost.

Effects of the Spirit in Us

A couple of verses after this reading ends St. Luke tells us that some of these people scoffed, claiming that the disciples were filled with new wine. Apparently, new wine has an even stronger effect than aged wine (I suppose because of the higher sugar content). But an African preacher way back in the sixth century sees in this remark the fulfillment of our Lord's promise that, "No one puts new wine into old

wineskins. New wine is put into fresh skins, and so both are preserved.” As he goes on to say:

So when the disciples were heard speaking in all kinds of languages some people were not far wrong in saying: ‘they have been drinking too much new wine.’ The truth is that the disciples had now become fresh wineskins renewed and made holy by grace. The new wine of the Holy Spirit filled them, so that their fervor brimmed over and they spoke in manifold tongues.

Just who is this Holy Spirit that so filled those disciples with such fervor?

Today’s Mass is one of the few during the year in which a special hymn called the “Sequence” is assigned before the Alleluia verse prior to the Gospel. A Sequence is found in Masses of the highest solemnity related to our Lord’s Paschal Mystery, including Easter, and today, Pentecost Sunday, and the Solemnity we will be celebrating in two weeks, the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Corpus Christi). We heard the description of this Holy Spirit there: “Father of the poor”; “of comforters the best”; “the soul’s most welcome guest”; “solace in the midst of woe”; and so forth. But one might ask, where is this Spirit of solace and comfort now? We see so much violence and disregard for human life, in every stage and condition. We are witnessing riots in Minneapolis and across the country because of the choking to death of a man pleading for his life, that was apparently racially motivated. A consistent pattern of this and other such injustices leads to outrage that, at a human

level, leads to even greater violence when it stretches beyond the limit of what is humanly bearable.

What is more, those of us who are people of faith have our concerns about the treatment of religion as society begins to reopen in the midst of this current pandemic. We leaders in the faith community have striven to cooperate with our government officials in their efforts to stem the spread of the coronavirus. As we now see county officials across the state making different judgments on when and how to reopen society, the great variety of these judgments makes clear that it is more than the science that they must consider. They must also consider the economic, social and political consequences of their decisions. We leaders in the faith community must consider all of this, along with the spiritual consequences. The complexities are much greater than meet the eye. I ask you to please pray for us, your bishops, as we have to make very delicate decisions about how best to provide spiritual care for people who have endured a doubly long spiritual lenten fast this year.

We can, though, take courage from our first ancestors in the Christian faith. Just imagine the world that was facing them when they rushed out of that Upper Room, the "Big Bang of the Holy Spirit," to fulfill the Lord's Great Commission of proclaiming the Gospel to all the earth. This was a world so hostile to the Christian faith that most of them were put to death for their loyal adherence to their faith. Sadly, this still happens in many parts of the world today. For us in the West, though,

it is a different kind of spiritual disease that affects us. We need, then, to respond in a spiritual way. If we remain at the purely human level, we will only contribute to the increasing violence, aggression and discord we see happening all around us. To be spiritual means to live by the Spirit, our best comforter and our soul's most welcome guest. This is the solution. Pope Francis told us as much in his homily for Pentecost last year:

Repaying evil for evil, passing from victims to aggressors, is no way to go through life. Those who live by the Spirit, however, bring peace where there is discord, concord where there is conflict. Those who are spiritual repay evil with good. They respond to arrogance with meekness, to malice with goodness, to shouting with silence, to gossip with prayer, to defeatism with encouragement.

Conclusion

These are the ones who are filled with the new wine of the Holy Spirit, poured into "fresh wineskins renewed and made holy by grace." Thus filled with this spiritual new wine, we will speak in the manifold tongues discernible to people in our own time: the language of compassion, meekness, goodness, prayer and encouragement. Like those first ancestors of ours in the Christian faith, may others say of us that we are filled with such new wine.