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"Christ Appearing to the Apostles" (1656), Rembrandt van Rijn (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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At the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus urges us in a very special way in this Gospel lesson to work for peace. When you think about it, the disciples gathered there in the upper room, obviously, most of them were not aware of the extraordinary thing that had happened early that morning: Jesus had risen from the dead. They heard stories. The women came, saw the empty tomb, and ran and got Peter and John. They came and saw and John believed.

Later, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb and Jesus speaks with her. Later on in the afternoon, some disciples see Jesus on their way to a town called Emmaus. So there are all kinds of excitement and probably a kind of fear on the part of the disciples. What's going on? They come together in the evening and they gather in that upper room where they had been on Holy Thursday for the Last Supper. As they're there, I'm sure they're wondering what's going to happen.

Pentecost Sunday

June 9, 2019

Acts 2:1-11

Psalm 104

1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 or Romans 8:8-17

John 20:19-23 or John 14:15-16, 23b-26

Some of them probably are worried because they had betrayed Jesus (or, in the case of Peter, denied Jesus). All of them except John had run away.

But when Jesus comes in their midst, he comes with a gift of forgiveness and love and offers them peace deep in their spirit and their heart. "Peace," he says twice.

But then what's very important (and this is why we use this Gospel on the feast of Pentecost), Jesus speaks to them: "As God has sent me, I send you." Then he breathes on them.

That reminds us of creation when God breathed on the form of Adam and gave life. This is a new life. Jesus breathes on them and gives them life. Then he tells them (and this is what is so important for us), "As God sent me, I send you." Each one of us — I send you. For what? To bring reconciliation and peace. "As God sent me, I send you. The evil you forgive it's gone. The evil you restrain, it will be restrained."

But we have to take this seriously and forgive and try to block evil from our lives and from our world. That's why Jesus gives us his Spirit. So we can carry on his work: the work of peace, forgiveness and love.

The first lesson today reminds us (if we remember our Scripture) of what happened in the prehistoric times that are revealed in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis when the people of Babylon began, out of pride, to build a tower that was going to reach to the heavens. That tower was destroyed by God and the people were dispersed because their language became confused. It's a myth of course, it's not historical, but it shows us what has happened within the human race from the very beginning almost: strife and conflict, Cain and Abel, but then later on, the people of Babylon and many others.

All that's reversed on Pentecost when, according to Luke's version of the sending of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit comes on the disciples when they're gathered together. It comes as a driving wind and flames on the head of each.

Then as they begin to speak and spread the good news, everyone hears them in their own language. Jesus is bringing reconciliation through the Holy Spirit, drawing the human family together once more because everyone is one family. That's the lesson we need desperately to learn.

We just celebrated last week — I'm sure we're all aware of the invasion at Normandy in 1944, the beginning of the end of World War II. At the time that happened and as the war finally ended, there was great hope for peace and reconciliation in the world, but it's gone the other direction. Within 10 years, we were engaged in supporting a war in Vietnam that enlarged into a war that went on for many years,

killed hundreds of thousands of people. We've been at war almost without interruption ever since.

We haven't really accepted the fact that we are human family and we're killing our brothers and sisters in war. That has to be something that goes deep into our minds and our hearts. We are one human family, called to love one another, to bring peace, forgiveness, and love wherever we are.

In our own country, in our own society, we have a terrible culture of violence. We know the killings that take place, it seems almost on a regular basis. But there are some people who understand deeply what Jesus is asking. I'm thinking of the young people in these schools that have been attacked.

In two instances now, the students themselves have struggled with the attacker and brought the attacker down, not by using a gun, but only by surrounding the person and holding him from doing harm to the rest. One of those students gave his life in that effort. The other did not; he survived and saved both of them, saved their fellow students out of the desire to end violence, but not through violence, only by defending themselves in a nonviolent way. That spirit has to permeate our whole society.

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How can it be that we're still at war in a country that has never attacked us: Afghanistan, the longest war in history. Somehow, we seem to think violence is going to solve our problems, but that's not true. It's not the way of Jesus. As we learned in today's Gospel, Jesus came to bring peace.

In fact, a Scripture scholar tells us about Jesus, "If Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus." In other words, it was the most important thing he taught in words and actions.

Think about when he was being arrested. They're coming at him with swords and clubs. Peter gets out his sword and tries to defend him with the sword. Jesus says, "Put it away. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Instead of using violence, he takes a moment to heal a person wounded by Peter. He brings forgiveness and love.

As we celebrate this feast of Pentecost, I hope we can really learn, and take to our heart, and make part of our lives this message that comes to us so clearly in that first lesson and in the Gospel lesson, the lesson that Jesus rejects violence and so must we.

Work for peace, forgiveness and love in every level of our lives, within our families of course first of all, in our communities, within our country and throughout the world. We start wherever we can to have that spirit of bringing love, not hatred or violence.

Peace, forgiveness and love — these are of Christ, only these. That's the message we learn today in the Scriptures, and I hope we take into our hearts and try to live out more fully every day. Peace, forgiveness and love — these are of Christ, only these.

Editor's note: *This homily was given June 9 at St. Ann Church, Frankfort, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*