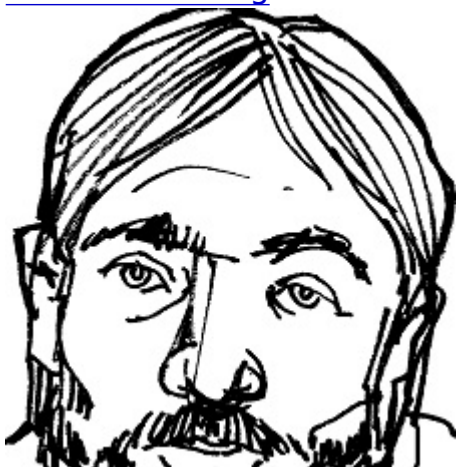


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by Pat Marrin

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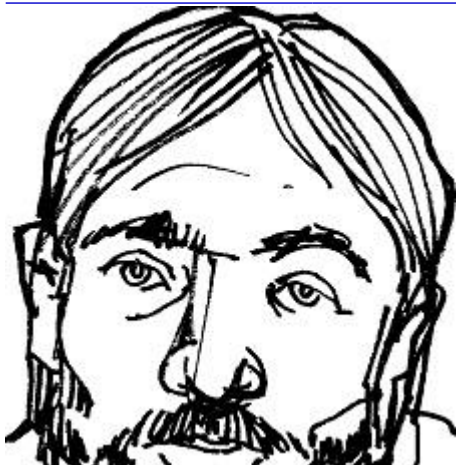
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“Now you are talking plainly, and not in any figure of speech” (John 16:29).

Acts 19:1-8; John 16:29-33

“Make it Plain” is the title of a 1994 PBS documentary about Malcom X, the 1960’s activist who first promoted militant self-defense and black nationalism espoused by the Nation of Islam before evolving into greater openness to all races after a visit to Africa and Mecca. At the time of his assassination in 1965, he had evolved into an international advocate for all oppressed people. When speaking, he asked to be introduced to audiences without hyperbole or grandiosity; “Make it plain.” The phrase also conveyed the urgency and directness of his warning to a world slow to address the explosive nature of racial and economic inequality.

In today’s Gospel the disciples realize that Jesus is no longer using metaphors but is now talking plainly. Toward the end of his long discourses at the Last Supper, Jesus is speaking clearly of his impending death and predicting their failure to stand by him in his hour of need: “The hour is coming when you will be scattered, each to his own home.” The discourses are filled with figures of speech, comparing his relationship to them as vine to the branches, and their coming crisis as like a woman in childbirth. But soon they will leave the glow of candlelight in the upper room and face the dark night of his betrayal, abandonment and death on the cross.

Jesus’ purpose in foretelling their failure was not to shame them but to reassure them in their recovery that he had known their weakness. Their grief will turn to joy and their cowardice to courage when they understand that by his death he has overcome the world. The directness and urgency of his message will be sealed by his crucifixion. They, too, will find trouble in the world, but they will share in his victory.

How often for us even the Word of God becomes just words and figures of speech? The story of Jesus is self-contained and assures of us of ultimate victory. But what if it is open-ended and passed on to us to continue with urgency and directness? Is today’s passage in the Acts of the Apostles an ancient account of believers who had never heard there was a Holy Spirit, or is it an invitation to us to admit the same? Are we ready to move on from the baptism of repentance, the leaving behind of sin, to the baptism of the Spirit, full availability to grace and to the adventure of embracing the cross of Christ and the power of his resurrection to be advocates for all oppressed people?

Is Pentecost a refresher course in theology or a breathtaking call to deepen our commitment to Jesus, alive in us and in the world? Have we stopped evolving or is there still a growing edge and a longing in our hearts to be more courageous, more faithful and more engaged in Jesus' redemptive mission?

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