

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2007

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 31, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned before, I'm very, very happy to be able to celebrate this Feast of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all of us today, and I'm very impressed with how many are wearing red -- the sign of the tongues of fire that came down upon the first disciples. So thank you for inviting me to be here and especially for confirming some of the people from the community. It's very important, though, that we first of all have the candidates presented.

[The candidates for confirmation are presented to Bishop Gumbleton and he addresses them about the significance of confirmation being a commitment to follow Jesus.]

We listen, then, to the Scriptures today and they help us in a very special way -- because this is the Feast of Pentecost -- to understand very clearly, deeply, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Perhaps you noticed, and if you did maybe you were a bit confused by it -- in the first lesson today, when does St. Luke say the Holy Spirit came? Fifty days after Easter, right? Pentecost. John's Gospel -- did you listen? Easter Sunday night. Jesus came to the disciples, breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit. Well, when did it happen? Was it Easter Sunday or was it 50 days later?

It doesn't make any difference really, but Luke describes it one way and John another way because John is simply telling us the fact that it happened, that Jesus gave the disciples his own Spirit to carry on his work, but what Luke does is present it, as he does in so much of his Gospel, like the Christmas story and so on, where he develops a whole framework so that we understand more deeply what is happening and so we especially need to look at how Luke describes it.

First of all -- that driving wind. It shook the whole house. The disciples probably were totally frightened, but what Luke is drawing your attention to is in the Book of Genesis, where there was a driving wind in the description of Creation and that driving wind drove out the chaos and brought about the order of the universe. That was creation -- God's power. Now, *this* driving wind is a *new* creation. It's just as powerful as when God first drew forth into being all of the universe and so what happens to us is that we become a totally new creation when we're filled with the Holy Spirit. Or we can be if we open ourselves to that Spirit.

Then Luke says it was Pentecost -- 50 days after Easter. Well, in the Jewish calendar there was a feast at Pentecost, a very important feast. See, Passover is what we celebrate at Easter -- Jesus passing over through death to new life; the Jewish people passing over from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of being God's People. Passover is very important; that was Easter. Then, 50 days later in the Jewish calendar, what they celebrated was what happened at Sinai, when they were traveling through the desert after they had been freed. Now, they came to this mountain and there's where Moses had that extraordinary experience of God, and God, at that moment, through Moses, makes this band of fugitive slaves -- that's what they were traveling through the desert -- and God draws them together and makes the covenant with them. "I am your God. You are my

people.? That?s what the Jewish people were celebrating at Pentecost -- this covenant with God.

So what Luke is telling us is now there?s a new covenant, a new covenant between God, and not just one group of people, but with all people. The whole human family enters into a new covenant with God. That?s what again we celebrate today at Pentecost. Luke helps us to get a deeper meaning about what happens today. We?re a new creation. We have a new covenant with God. We?re God?s new people.

The tongues of fire had a special meaning, too. A very powerful symbol of inspiration -- being ?fired up.? We use that term, don?t we? You get ?fired up.? Well, Luke was saying these disciples got ?fired up? by the Holy Spirit and they went out and they began to preach and proclaim, ?Jesus is alive! That marvelous, beautiful, joyful message! They were all ?fired up,? and they went out and said it, and what happened, and this is a very important detail of this, they were talking, as Luke said, to people from all those -- they?re strange names to us -- but it was every part of the known world. So it?s the whole world and all of them understood the message. God?s message is for the whole human family.

The disciples, ?fired up? with the Spirit, go out and begin to proclaim that message. That?s what Pentecost is, and that?s what?s happening now in this Sacrament of Confirmation. See, God?s Spirit comes upon you -- you?re ?fired up,? you?re filled with this new Spirit, you become part of God?s Chosen People. Enter into this new covenant with God and all the rest of us who have already been confirmed, at the moment when we renew all of these gifts within ourselves.

So that?s the real understanding of Pentecost that Luke helps us to come to. But then, in John?s Gospel, there are a couple of points that are very important also. First of all -- and it?s true of the disciples in the upper room that Luke describes -- it?s the whole community that is empowered. The whole community is empowered. Not just bishops. Not just the apostles. No, it?s the whole community. Everyone receives the Spirit! Everyone is empowered by God!

What we heard in the second lesson today is St. Luke describing those different kinds of gifts. You have a gift -- every one of us -- many, many gifts, and it?s up to us to begin to discern what those gifts are. It?s the whole community that is called and empowered with the Spirit of Jesus.

Then, the other thing that happens there in John?s Gospel -- ?As God has sent me, I send you.? You have to listen to that. ?As God has sent me, I send you.? That means everybody in this church. Every one of us is now gifted with the Spirit of Jesus. Whatever special gift each of us has, we?re gifted, and Jesus is saying, ?I?m sending you.? Why? You?re gifted to make a difference in our world, to transform our world into the Reign of God. That?s why we?re gifted. We have to commit ourselves to do that, and that means every one of us in this church is now commissioned -- or gifted first and now commissioned -- to carry on the work of Jesus.

There are all kinds of ways in which we must do that, but it?s always important, of course, for us to look at the circumstances in which we live. What?s happening in my life right now? Each of us asks that question. What?s happening in the life of this community right now? Ask that question. So then how do I use my gifts to make my life a life of service to God and to others? How do I make this parish community a community carrying on the work of Jesus? Each of us has to do that. How do I make sure that this parish community continues to be here and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus and to carry on the work of Jesus? How do we work together to do that? All of us have to ask that kind of a question and come up with our answer, and then together we make it happen.

And so, first, I think, we could talk about our individuals lives -- ?How do I carry on the gifts and use the gifts I have and the gifts of the Spirit and make my life and the life of my family, my community better?? -- but then as a community -- ?How do we reach out and make this whole community better? How do we make sure we stay there?? Those are the questions you need to ask, but then Jesus doesn?t commission us simply to look into our

own lives, to look into our own community. It's to change the world around us, and there are so many, many different ways in which we have to do that.

But one of the things that, right now, if you're following what's happening in our society at all, following the news, one of the big issues is immigration -- the 12 million people that they talk about that are *illegal* people. How can somebody be illegal? But that's how we describe them. Our government is working out how to do it, what to do with these people and how to keep others out by building a big wall. Now, gifted with the Spirit of Jesus and commissioned to carry on his work, how do you think we should respond to that issue? I don't think it's the way our government is doing it because how does our government look upon these people? To me, it's mostly as if they look upon them as if they're tiny cogs in the economic system. "How are they going to effect our labor force?" You know it's only 12 million out of almost 300 million of us and yet we're so concerned about them -- that they might disrupt our economic order somehow, instead of thinking of them as brothers and sisters.

What if we as a people just thought about them as brothers and sisters? Don't you think we could find a way to welcome them? Or maybe to look into why are they leaving the countries they're coming from. What's happened there -- maybe that we've had some responsibility for -- that forces them to flee, to try to find work somewhere else, to separate their families and so on? What if we really acted like a community of disciples of Jesus? Now we can't force this on our whole nation, but we, if we really understand the way of Jesus, we can help to influence what's happening and perhaps develop a different attitude. These are human beings. They're brothers and sisters in the human family and in fact, most of them are brothers and sisters in the community of Jesus. Why don't we reach out to them with that attitude?

You see, when you begin to look at what it means to be empowered with the Holy Spirit, commissioned by Jesus to carry on his work, it becomes something very real and very practical and so in a few moments, when I invite everyone to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on these candidates, I urge you to pray with great fervor today that the Holy Spirit will really come upon them but also upon all of us who are the disciples of Jesus -- that we'll be "fired up" with that Spirit of Jesus and that every one of us will be ready to reflect on what gifts we have, how we can use those gifts to build up our community, to do the work of Jesus in the world around us and I know that if we pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us today, it will come upon us in a very powerful way and we will leave this church "fired up," ready to go out and use the gifts God has given to us to make our world more like the Reign of God.

[Editor's Note: Bishop Gumbleton was back in the pulpit at St. Leo Parish in Detroit.]

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