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Pentecost Sunday

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

There is one line in the gospel today that is very important, and yet it's very easy for us to overlook it. Jesus tells his disciples and is telling us that Jesus has many things that we need to know. He was speaking to the disciples at the Last Supper. Many things that they had to know, but they couldn't hear them all now, so that is why Jesus tells them, "I will send you the holy spirit and the spirit will make known to you all that has been revealed to me."

Now when we think of the Feast of Pentecost, we think of it as an event that was extraordinary, of course, but we think of it as an event that is over. It happened that one time; 50 days after Easter, the whole community was gathered together in the upper room. They were living in fear and doubt, not knowing what to do. Then there was the extraordinary experience that St. Luke describes in the Acts of the Apostles, and he makes it very clear that this is something special.

Today's Readings
Genesis 11:1-9
Psalms 104:1-2, 24, 25, 27-28, 29, 30
Romans 8:22-27
John 7:37-39
Full text of the readings

In fact, when we call it the Feast of Pentecost, we are recalling that 50 days after the Passover, which is the day in which those disciples were gathered together, was when the Jewish people celebrated what they called the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks after Passover, and they were commemorating the time that they were in the desert, being formed into God's people. Then at Sinai, Moses had that extraordinary experience of God and, in behalf of the people, entered into a covenant. God said, "I will be your God, you will be my people."

So St. Luke places this event 50 days after Easter to show us that God is forming a new people. We are now bound together with God in the new covenant of God's love that is made present for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is what binds us to the new covenant so that we become God's people; God is our God.

Luke uses a couple of other things that are just important for us to perhaps reflect on briefly that remind us of how this event that happened on Pentecost is really a renewal, a giving of new life, because when Luke talks about the wind that came through that house where they were, he uses the word that is used in the book of Genesis -- wind, or spirit, that hovered over the chaos and drew all of creation into being. So this is the wind of the spirit that now makes a new creation, we, who are God's people.

The tongues of fire are reminiscent of what happened at Sinai, where some descriptions of that event were that fire broke forth upon the mountain. So again, Luke is saying this all is connected with how God drew the people together, made them God's people and again, now we are God's people. But the event is not over.

The spirit continues to live in the church, in all of us, and the spirit, as Jesus promised in the gospel, makes known to us what we need to know in order to continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus, about the reign of God. Jesus, through the spirit, continues to instruct us. It didn't all end on Pentecost Sunday 2,000 years ago.

This week as I was praying my Office prayers, you know the priest has what we call the Divine Office, and on Wednesday of this week, there is a passage from one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. That passage speaks to all of us who are here today:

"The spirit dwells in the church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple."

That spirit that came down in Pentecost dwells in the church, in us. "The spirit prays in us and bears witness in us to our adoption as sons and daughters of God. The spirit leads us into all truth and gives it unity in communion and service.

"The whole company of the faithful, all of us who are believers, who have an anointing by the Holy Spirit, cannot err in faith. They manifest this distinctive characteristic of theirs in the supernatural instinct of faith of the whole people when, from the bishops to the most ordinary lay person among the faithful, they display a universal agreement on matters of faith."

What this is telling us is that Jesus, through his spirit, is still speaking to us today, speaking through the church, in order that we can respond to the needs of the church and of the world in which we live.

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Pentecost didn't end, or the coming of the spirit wasn't a one-time event. Jesus sends that spirit into us right now, the people of God, the church.

"This instinct of faith is awakened and kept in being by the spirit of truth. Through it, the people of God hold to the faith once delivered to the saints, penetrated more deeply by means of great judgment and apply it more perfectly in their lives."

This is very important for us because it reminds us that as the church is confronting problems in the world today, problems within the church, Jesus is speaking to all of us, showing us how to go, what the church must do.

It happened in the very beginning after those first disciples had received the gift of the holy spirit. They began to go out into the world to carry on the message of Jesus, to proclaim it everywhere. They ran into difficulties. So what did they do? They gathered the church together. They prayed together -- the whole church, not just bishops or hierarchy in the church, but the whole church.

They didn't have a blueprint on how to do what Jesus had sent them to do. They had to follow the guidance of the spirit, so that's what they were doing when they confronted the problem of welcoming Gentiles into the church. In the beginning, it was all Jews. They continued to worship in the temple. Then it became more clear -- they had to go out, break apart from the Jewish rules and customs, become this new people of God. That caused a lot of struggle in the church.

There were those that said, "No, you must first become a Jew before you become a disciple of Jesus." That would have hindered the growth of the church, so through the people coming together, listening to the spirit, they received the guidance that Jesus gave them. So the church began to spread marvelously throughout the world. There were other things that they had to confront, and they always gathered together and let the spirit speak through them.

Obviously, in our church today, we confront problems, big problems. People are leaving the church in huge numbers. We have to wonder why. In fact, I read a report recently of a poll taken that found that the second largest denomination of Christians in this country are Catholics who have left the church. One out of ten people in the United States is what we sometimes call a "fallen-away" Catholic. Obviously this is a huge problem. We as a church should be talking about this, trying to do something about it.

One of the reasons, I think (perhaps you would agree with this), is highlighted by something that happened today. This morning, Archbishop Vigneron ordained young men to the priesthood. Now our diocese is larger today than it was when I was ordained. When I was ordained, there were 29 of us ordained -- a smaller diocese. Today there were five ordained. That's a problem, obviously. Why do you suppose we're closing parishes?

Why? Because we don't have enough ministers, priests. But there was also a group of people there at that ordination today who were carrying out, I would think, exercising the gifts that they have received through the Holy Spirit. When we talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we usually think of seven of them: wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, love and fear of the Lord. But those are gifts that come through the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Here are the gifts that Jesus gives to the church -- there is a diversity of gifts. The spirit reveals the spirit's presence in each one of us, which is a gift, which is also a service; here they are: one is to speak with wisdom through the spirit, another teaches according to the same spirit. To another the gift of healing and it is the same spirit. Another is a prophet; another recognizes what comes from the good or evil spirit. Another speaks in tongues; another interprets tongues. And all of this is the work of the one and only spirit who gives to each one of us as the spirit desires.

Those are the gifts of the spirit that Jesus is pouring forth upon the church right now, and the group of people who were there at the cathedral today standing outside, asking for ordination, were women. Is it not possible that they were being prophetic, exercising the gift of the spirit?

We're at a new time in the church. Just as the early church had to let go of its customs and the culture in which it grew up and had to break out into new ways, perhaps the spirit is telling us today we have to do things differently; we have to listen to what God is saying. At the time of Jesus, it was unthinkable for women, because of the culture, to have a role of leadership, but that's not true anymore. So women could be leaders in our church as well as men.

Isn't it possible that the spirit is telling us this?

I hope and pray that we will understand more fully than we ever have before, that Jesus continues to speak to our church today through the Holy Spirit, and as that was made clear in that document from the Vatican Council, that spirit is speaking to every person in the church. We all have the opportunity to listen and to make clear what we have heard, to promote what we understand as the way the church should act today.

Perhaps if we are daring enough to let the spirit, with that power the spirit has that was manifested by the wind and the fire, let that spirit work within us, work within our church. We will confront the problems that face us and we will be able to be revitalized, renewed, and become the church of Jesus, the community of disciples of Jesus that were called to be, and that we can once more be a church that will loudly and clearly everywhere proclaim the good news.

We will have enough priests and teachers in the church to carry out the work of Jesus. Jesus told us, "I have many things that I can't tell you now, but they will become clear through the Holy Spirit." You and I must listen deeply to that spirit and then make known what the spirit says so that our church can be the church that Jesus calls us to be, and go forth and be the witnesses of Jesus in our world everywhere.

[This homily was preached at St. Alphonsus Parish, Dearborn, Mich.]

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