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Pentecost a time to awaken excitement, joy about Jesus' message

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned in introducing the Gospel and as you noticed when you listened, St. Luke tells us Pentecost Sunday happened 50 days after Easter. St. John tells us it was Easter Sunday night. You might wonder, "Well, how come such a clear discrepancy?" But it's a reminder to us -- and it's a very important reminder -- of how the Scripture writers were not writing history as we think of it, were not writing the biography of Jesus.

<p>They each had a perspective, a theological perspective, and they were writing in order to back up their perspective: what they had experienced with Jesus, and how Jesus had lived in their midst, and what Jesus had commanded them to do. So John probably is giving us what really happened on Pentecost Sunday night. Jesus visited those very frightened disciples, who had abandoned him, and came into their midst and says, "Peace be with you," and then gives them a charge: "As God has sent me, I send you."</p> <p>But Luke was writing 50-some years later, and by that time, probably what had happened was that the original enthusiasm that the disciples felt at the resurrection and then being in the Holy Spirit, it had begun to die out, and soon it was time to show them the importance of Pentecost Sunday. Full outpouring of the Holy Spirit.</p>		<p>Acts 2:1-11 Psalms 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34 1 Cor 12:13-14 John 20:19-23</p>
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So that's why he says -- first of all, he connects it with the feast of Pentecost, which, for the Jewish people, was connected with what had happened at Mount Sinai hundreds of years before. ... Pentecost was the feast of weeks, and they made a major celebration of this, remembering the time when God had appeared to Moses and made that covenant by which God said, "I am your God; you are my people." So Luke connects the coming of the Holy Spirit with that event.

So what he's telling the people then, and telling us, "You are a new people. This was God's people. Now you are a new people, the people who are the community of the disciples of Jesus," and so we should take that seriously. Just as the chosen people at the Mount Sinai began to understand themselves as God's people, so we, too, have that privilege of being the people of God, with community of disciples of Jesus.

And at Sinai when that happened, there was an outbreak of fire, and so Luke brings in the tongues of fire that descend on the people, but then also the great wind that shook the very walls of the house. This would bring to mind what happened as recorded in Genesis at the beginning of creation, when there was this terrible wind over all of the chaos before creation, and God brings creation out of the midst of that terrible and strong, frightening wind.

So again now, Luke is saying it's a new creation. Everything is different because now the Holy Spirit has come upon us through Jesus, who died and rose from the dead and is now living at the right hand of God in heaven and sends forth his spirit upon us. Maybe if we reflect on that, we might get a little bit more of the excitement that those first disciples felt because after Jesus said, "As God sends me, I send you," they began to go out and spread the good news everywhere.

Later on in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes how in one town where the disciples had preached, the excitement was what he called "a fever pitch." Everybody was awakened and alive and alert and joyful because they heard this good news -- Jesus had passed through death to new life. It's showing us a whole new way of how to find our way to God because he is the way, the truth, and the light.

We need, I think, to awaken that excitement, that joy, because I think most of us kind of -- well, we celebrate Easter and we celebrate Ascension and we celebrate Pentecost, but we don't have that sense of excitement when something really new and extraordinary has happened in our world and is transforming our world. And because we kind of take it all for granted and don't get excited, we don't really do what Jesus says: "As God has sent me, I send you."

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"As God has sent me, I send you." That means each one of us to be those who witness to this good news, who bring about and work with Jesus to bring about the change in creation -- in our world -- that will transform our world into the reign of God.

Last summer, Pope Francis made his first international trip [to Brazil], where a World Youth Day was being celebrated, and he said something when he spoke to the thousands, tens of thousands of young people there, many of whom probably were just there out of curiosity and maybe ordinary life -- they were kind of bored, you know, religion is boring, that sort of thing.

But Francis spoke to them and challenged them to be these witnesses to Jesus, and he told them, "You do not need to read anything else," he said. "If you want a plan of action" -- because they're going to go out and witness to the good news -- "if you want a plan of action, then you should read the beatitudes and Matthew 25, and you do not need to read anything else."

So what Francis was challenging them to do, and I think we all know Matthew 25 and the beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who are gentle and peacemakers," and so on, but Matthew 25: "When I was hungry, you gave me [something] to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me [something] to drink. When I was in prison, you visited me. When I was a stranger, you took me in," and so on. Then

they say, "Well, when did all that happen?" "When you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." You witnessed to Jesus.

Wouldn't that be an extraordinary plan of action for us, to begin to live out the beatitudes, to take it as our plan of action, or Matthew 25 [as] our plan of action? How we're going to witness to Jesus? "When I was hungry, you gave me [something] to eat." You know, there are a lot of places around our metropolitan community where the hungry -- those who are homeless, without resources -- come to eat.

Manna Meals at Day House, over on Michigan Avenue across from where Tiger Stadium used to be -- every morning, hungry people are fed. Volunteers come and help. St. Leo's on 15th and Grand River still has a soup kitchen. ... All of them looking for volunteers, looking for resources. Maybe that's one of the things we could do.

Yesterday, I read in the paper about something which -- I think this comes up because, "When I was in prison, you visited me." This is an article about the inmates of a prison in California known as the toughest prison in our country. More than 300 inmates have spent over a decade locked in windowless 8-foot by 12-foot cells for 22 hours a day or more, and then dozens have been there more than 15 years in solitary confinement.

Do you know what that does to people? It destroys them. It's a form of torture. But our prisons are for-profit prisons, and they don't care about the prisoners. They're making money. Don't we need to reform? You know, we may not go and visit people in prison, but maybe we ought to be alert of what's happening in our country, where we have percentage-wise of our population more people in prison than almost any country in the world. We have people in prison for the least crime because three strikes and you're out -- they go for life.

That's not the way it should be if we're really witnessing to Jesus. "When I was in prison, you visited me." That's a call to us to do something. Or being peacemakers. This weekend, Pope Francis is having a very extraordinary meeting in the Vatican garden. It's on Sunday, so it will be tomorrow. When he was in the Holy Land a couple weeks ago, on the spur of the moment, he invited the president of the Palestinian Authority and the president of Israel to come together to be with him at the Vatican to pray.

He wasn't being political; he said, "If we're going to heal the divisions here and the danger of war, and the injustices that are going on in the Holy Land where Jesus was born and lived his life, something has to be done to have a breakthrough." Our secretary of state has been trying to negotiate with the Palestinians and Israelis but has given up. Maybe this is like a last chance, where with Pope Francis, these two leaders come together and pray.

Maybe God will soften their hearts, find a way to mediate the differences, and bring about peace. It's something that is desperately needed in our world. So at the very least, we could be aware of that tomorrow and pray together in spirit with Pope Francis, with the presidents -- President [Mahmoud] Abbas and President [Shimon] Peres -- that somehow they'll find a way to treat each other as fellow human beings and to bring their two nations to peace.

There are so many ways in which we could continue to look at the beatitudes and to listen to Matthew 25 and discover our plan of action for being witnesses to Jesus and to the good news that he proclaimed the last Sunday. On the feast of the Ascension, Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth."

That's the call Jesus gives to us -- to be those witnesses to the ends of the earth by living according to

what he taught us that is captured so well in those two Scripture passages. As Pope Francis says, "That's all you need. Reach those, pray those, follow those, and you will be a witness to Jesus."

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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