

Pentecost (May 15, 2005)

Did you notice what the three readings have in common? Besides, of course, the fact that they all talk about the Spirit – fittingly enough on this Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate the coming of the Spirit on the disciples, on the Church, and on all of us. They all talk about community, the unity that the Spirit accomplishes in all of us, the bond that makes us one and brings us all together into the Body of Christ.

Consider for instance what we read in the Gospel. It's Easter Sunday evening, that first Easter when Jesus first appears to his disciples. What is the first thing he says to them? "Peace be with you." Peace. They have been afraid. They are locked in for fear. They are near despair, their fondest hopes dashed to pieces – and suddenly there He is, alive beyond anything anyone expected, and he says, "Peace." In the midst of sorrow, turmoil, dejection, the presence of the risen Lord brings peace, a good thing for all of us to remember when we are feeling down.

But then Jesus breathes on them, like God breathing life into Adam at the dawn of creation. They are the new creation, the new Adam, the new community, the new people of God who will be his witnesses and tell the world what they have learned from him. He says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," the Spirit, the breath of God, which gives, not just life, but courage, knowledge, some understanding, and recalls to them everything that Jesus had told them. He says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He missions them to his own mission. And what is that mission? "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." The mission is forgiveness. I can't imagine there is anything that Jesus would not want them to forgive. So we are talking here about reconciliation, about bringing together those who had been separated, about fulfilling the prayer of Jesus, "That they may be one, Father, as you are in me and I am in you, that they may all be one in us."

The first reading tells us much the same thing, but in a very different way. Luke's imagination runs wild here to help us understand that we are dealing with mystery. There is a great wind. There is fire – both signs of the presence of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. And then, we are told, the

disciples, themselves, catch fire, and in their zeal with their new-found courage, a result of the Spirit's inspiration, they go out, in spite of the danger, and begin to preach about the marvels God has accomplished. But who is their audience? People, we are told, who have come from everywhere, from every known country of the ancient world, who all speak different languages, yet they all understand what Peter is saying to them. It's a marvelous image of the reconciliation that God has accomplished through the Spirit. Preachers often call it the reversal of Babel when people's tongues were confused and they were scattered throughout the world. Now people of different tongues come together in mutual understanding and community

It is in contemplating this truth that Paul in the second reading tells us, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." "There are different gifts," he says, "but the same Spirit, different ministries, but the same Lord, different works, but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."

And it is out of reflections like these that Paul comes to his grand image of the Church as the Body of Christ "The body is one," he says, "and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body; so it is with Christ. It was in one Spirit that all of us, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free (and in another letter he would add male or female) were baptized into one body. All of us have been given to drink of the one Spirit."

This is why we sometimes hear Pentecost called the birthday of the Church. It is after Easter the most important celebration in our liturgical year. It tells us who we are as followers of Christ, but also who we are in relationship with one another. We are members of the same body and just as, according to Paul, no part of the body can say to any other part, "I have no need of you," so no one of us can say to anyone else, "I have no need of you." The fact is we are all in relationship, to God, to one another and to all of creation. Throughout the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Christian Scriptures, God, through the prophets, then through His Son, Jesus Christ, then under the inspiration of the Spirit through the disciples and their followers, God has continually reminded God's people and us,

that we are all in relationship. And those relationships entail responsibilities. We are all responsible for one another. The Spirit enlightens us to understand this and strengthens us to live this.

There is much more that can be said about the presence of the Spirit in our world. Let me finish with just one other instance. The Holy Spirit cannot be separated from God, being as we know the third person of the Blessed Trinity. Therefore wherever God is, there also is the Spirit, and as we all learned from our catechism days, God is everywhere. So also is the Spirit at work among all our brothers and sisters who are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and so on and so on. So the Spirit does not only create relationships among all baptized Christians as members of the Body of Christ, but it extends our relationships to all people of other faiths and cultures. In this complex and chaotic world of ours it is crucial that we think, reflect, pray – especially pray and pray very hard – about the responsibilities that those relationships entail. We have brothers and sisters in Iraq and Afghanistan, among Israelis and Palestinians, in Uganda and the Sudan, in Europe and Asia and Latin America, in short, wherever God is present in our world, wherever God's children live, suffer, and die.

The fact of globalization which has both good points and bad points makes it imperative that we recognize the interdependence that now exists on an international level. We are in Washington, D.C., and decisions made in this city have repercussions all over the world. The majority of people making those decisions call themselves Christians. We can only hope and pray that they heed the message of this feast and listen carefully to the promptings of the Spirit whose coming we celebrate.