

Pentecost Sunday - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Pentecost is an Israelite-Jewish festival. In Exodus 23:14-17 it is called simply the harvest festival, the feast of first-fruits of the grain harvest. In Exodus 34:22 it is called the feast of weeks, the first-fruits of the grain harvest. In Leviticus 23:15-21 the feast is reckoned by counting seven weeks from the beginning of the grain harvest; it is a day of Sabbatical observance. In Numbers 28:26-31 it is called the feast of weeks, the day of first-fruits. In Deuteronomy 16:9-12 it is the feast of weeks, which occurs seven weeks after the beginning of the grain harvest. It is one of the three major festivals in all the older lists of feasts.

It is probable that it was later in origin than Passover and did not take form until the Israelites had become a primarily agricultural community in Canaan. The time of the festival in its original celebration must have been indefinite, since the beginning of the grain harvest can't be put at a certain day in the calendar. The beginning of the grain harvest corresponds with the feast of Matzoth (unleavened bread). When Passover and Matzoth were combined and set on the 14th of Nisan, the festival of weeks received a regular date in the calendar seven weeks (fifty days) after Passover.

As a major feast, all Jewish males over the age of twelve were expected to try to celebrate it in Jerusalem.

1st Reading - Acts 2:1-11

The setting is fifty days after the first Easter, ten days since Christ has ascended and left the disciples with responsibility for administering His Church. Before He ascended He had told them "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4-5). So, after the ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and the Upper Room. While there, the eleven selected by lot Matthias to take Judas' place, showing that the office of Bishop is to be a perpetual office [as Acts 1:20 (KJV) says, quoting Psalm 109:8, "and his bishopric let another take"].

^{2:1} When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together.

120 people (Acts 1:15) in the same house? Must be a big place. Remember, there was no indoor plumbing in those days.

² And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were.

There is a phonetic relationship in the Greek between “*pnue*” (wind) and “*pneuma*” (spirit). In Hebrew the word “*ruah*” is the same for “wind”, “breath”, and “spirit”.

³ Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them.

Compare with Isaiah 66:15-20. With storm wind and fire the heavenly origin of the Spirit is expressed, and with its division, its destination in all members of the assembly.

⁴ And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

The tongues of fire yield foreign tongues.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem.

A startling change from the confines of the house to the surrounding area. The Jews represent the ingathering of Israel from their dispersion among all the nations. Recall this is one of the feasts where one ventured to Jerusalem.

⁶ At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

The miracle is not in the hearing; the Spirit is in the speakers who speak in these foreign tongues. The root of the word translated as “confused” is the same as the word used in the Septuagint to describe the effect of the tower of Babel. The effect is reversed here.

⁷ They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, “Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans?”

Note the change in attitude of the crowd; from confused, to astounded, to amazed.

⁸ Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? ⁹ We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene,

A more or less geographical sweep from east to west. Gives the impression of universality.

as well as travelers from Rome,

Breaking with the geographical sweep, Luke moves to the center of the Roman empire; perhaps to prepare the way for Peter and Paul to settle there.

¹¹ both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs,

As a conclusion to the list, western-most and eastern-most.

yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God.”

This is what the disciples “expressed themselves” and “made bold proclamation”.

Thus was the Church born. In one fell swoop, the disciples are transformed from timid persons holed up in a room to proud proclaimers of the marvels which God has accomplished.

2nd Reading -1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13

This reading should sound familiar to us as we heard the first half of it the 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time and the remainder of it the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Cycle C). Paul is advising the Corinthians about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and how these gifts are to be used to promote the common good.

^{3b} [N]o one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the holy Spirit.

The Corinthians had inquired as to which gift of the Holy Spirit was greater than another and had probably stopped living the Christian life as they became concerned about their own image and status. Paul undermines any spiritual elitism by reminding them that they had all made this baptismal confession (Romans 10:9).

⁴ There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; ⁵ there are different forms of service but the same Lord; ⁶ there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.

The three-fold comparison of “different” - “same” contrasts different actions with the same common origin to emphasize that all, no matter how great or small they are perceived to be, have the same origin and therefore the same value.

⁷ To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.

These gifts are not for us to hold but for us to share. If we do not share the gifts, then the common good suffers.

¹² As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ.

Paul continues this comparison by pointing out that the human body needs different parts to perform different functions; all of which benefit the whole. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, it too is formed of many different members which are to work together for the benefit of the whole. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

The diversity of the Church is rooted in its unity. The Spirit is within the Church and we are called

to share a common existence in Christ.

Alternate 2nd Reading - Galatians 5:16-25

The Roman province of Galatia was established in 24 B.C. and included the regions of Pisidia, Pamphilia, and part of Lycaonia. During his first missionary journey, begun in A.D.47, Saint Paul established Christian communities in the southern part of Galatia. These communities were in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Derbe and Lystra (Acts 13:14ff). He visited these communities again during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-5); a journey which started in the year 50. At the beginning of his third journey, around the year 53 (Acts 18:23) while again visiting these communities, he was very surprised to find that the Galatian Christians, most of whom came from a Gentile background, had been led astray by “false brethren,” Judaizers, who made out that Christians should conform to the Mosaic law and, therefore, be circumcised. Saint Paul did not remain in the area and settle the matter but when he reached Ephesus he wrote the Galatians a letter refuting the errors involved. In this letter he addresses the whole question of the relationship between the Gospel and the Mosaic law, between the Old Covenant and the New.

The section of this letter which we hear today gives instructions for the correct use of our Christian freedom; a freedom which did not exist under Mosaic law.

¹⁶ I say, then: live by the Spirit

Literally, “walk by the Spirit,” which in the Semitic sense means “conduct oneself.” The Spirit that is the principle of Christian sonship must also be the principle of Christian conduct.

and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want.

The Christian in union with Christ and endowed with the Spirit still struggles with the temptations of “the flesh.” The term “the flesh” is used as a symbol of all that is man in his opposition to God.

¹⁸ But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The Christian under the influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit has an interior principle to counteract “the flesh,” and is no longer merely confronted with the extraneous norm of the Mosaic law.

“The body . . . is not an agent but is acted upon. For desire is not of the body but of the soul. . . . How then does Paul say ‘the flesh has desires against the Spirit’? By ‘flesh’ he means not the physical body but the evil choice. . . . What then? Ought one to suppress the flesh? Was not the one who said this himself clothed with the flesh? . . . By ‘flesh’ here he means earthly thoughts that are apathetic and heedless. This is not a condemnation of the body but a reproach of the apathetic soul. For the flesh is an instrument, and no one repudiates and hates the instrument as such, but only the one who handles the instrument badly” [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 393-397), *Commentary on the Epistle To The Galatians*, 5,17]

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness (lust), ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, ²¹ occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

We are given a catalog of vices which the Christian must avoid if he would share in the blessings of the kingdom of God, our divine inheritance.

²² In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

we are now given a catalog of virtues (see also 2 Corinthians 6:6; Colossians 3:12-15; Ephesians 4:2; 5:9). Notice how Saint Paul speaks about the “works” of the flesh and the “deeds” of the Spirit but this does not exclude the performance of “good deeds” which are a necessary part of the Christian life. There is no need of a law to be enacted against such virtuous actions. But the Law was “added because of transgressions” (Galatians 3:19).

²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ (Jesus) have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit.

The Christian, crucified with Christ through his faith and baptism (Galatians 2:19), has died not only to the Law but also to his “self.” He has died to “the flesh” with all its earthbound, limited, and degrading tendencies.

“What he means by ‘follow the Spirit’ is ‘let us be content in the power of the Spirit, and let us not seek to augment it with the law.’ Then, having shown that those who introduce circumcision are doing this through ambitious motives, he says, ‘Let us not become proud, which is the cause of evils, calling one another out of factiousness and strife, in jealousy of one another. For jealousy comes from vainglory, and from vainglory all those other evils’” [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 393-397), *Commentary on the Epistle To The Galatians*, 5,25]

Gospel - John 20:19-23

This reading should also sound familiar as we heard it last on the 2nd Sunday of Easter (Cycle B). What we hear about is Jesus’ first appearance to the apostles.

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week,

The first Easter Sunday. All Jesus’ appearances after Easter which are dated (time coded) are on a Sunday.

when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst

Through locked doors. The disciples had barricaded themselves in the Upper Room because they were afraid that what had happened to Jesus would happen to them also. After all, they had been His followers.

and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Shalom. An ordinary greeting which the Israelite conceived as a gift of Yahweh. The word “*Shalom*” does not translate well; peace is usually used in English translations but it does not connote the rich meaning: completeness, perfection, a condition in which nothing is lacking.

²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

The wounds of crucifixion. There is no indication that, like Thomas, the others probed the wounds with their fingers.

The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

All was not lost after all; their leader had returned.

²¹ (Jesus) said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Jesus was sent with authority to bring about healing and repentance; to heal the Church through forgiveness of sins. The sinful nature of man is what had kept him from God all through the Old Covenant. He is sending them with the same authority with which He was given.

²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit.

There is a beautiful play on the Hebrew word *ruah* which is the same for breath, wind, and spirit. If you recall the Baltimore Catechism definition of a sacrament, what we have here is a sacrament in one verse: an outward sign (He breathed on them) instituted by Christ (He who did the breathing) to give grace (receive the Holy Spirit).

²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

The disciples (and their successors by extension) have the authority to forgive sins in Jesus' name. The mission of reconciliation was so important to God that He sent His Son to institute the practice. Only through reconciliation with God can we act as His sons and daughters; including eat the family meal (Eucharist) which binds us all together.

“I don't go to a man to confess to my sins; only God can forgive sins” says the Protestant. “Neither do I” responds the Catholic, “I go to God's duly appointed and commissioned representative who was given the responsibility of forgiving (or binding) my sins as God works through him. James 5:13-16 says “*Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders (presbyters) of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*”

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.” Notice that you are to call the presbyters (this is the root word for priests) and confess your sins to him. Why do I confess to a priest? Because the Bible (and therefore, God) tells me to!

Alternate Gospel - John 15:26-27; 16:12-15

What we hear as our gospel reading is a discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the glorification of Christ.

15:26 “When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. ²⁷ And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.

One of the functions of the Holy Spirit will be to continue the witness of Christ. The disciples too, by living the life which Christ has made possible – by being the Church; the continuation of Christ in this world – will be a continuing witness to His work. The witness of the disciples is also the witness of the Spirit (Acts 5:32) since it is the Spirit sent by the Son from the Father who is the “soul” of the Church.

16:12 “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. ¹³ But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming.

Even now, at the very end of His public ministry, there is much which Jesus cannot say and which must await the enlightening activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will not “speak on His own” just as Jesus did not speak “on His own” but did the will of the Father.

¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you.

The glorification which the Son has from the Father and which is, in turn, the glorification of the Father, is continued in the Church through the activity of the Holy Spirit which continues the work of Christ. As the existence of the Church is the result of the shared life of the Father and the Son (John 3:35; 5:20; 10:30), so its continuance is the result of the shared life of the Son and the Spirit.