

Pentecost Vigil Mass

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

On Pentecost we celebrate the birth of the Church founded by Jesus the Christ on Peter, the Rock. Pentecost means "50th day" and the celebration was one of the mandatory feast days of the Old Testament for which all Jewish males over the age of 12 were expected to journey to Jerusalem and the Temple. It was on this day, 50 days from the Last Supper, that the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in the Upper Room; having returned there after the Ascension and busying themselves in prayer (the first novena) and choosing the successor of Judas: Matthias.

There are four readings to choose from for the first reading of this Mass, all are discussed here.

1st Reading (1) - Genesis 11:1-9

This reading takes place after the great flood. Noah's sons have gone their separate ways to settle the world: Japheth, the Indo-Europeans; Ham, the Egyptians and Africans; and Shem, the Orientals and Jews. Shem was blessed by Noah in Genesis 9:26 as the firstborn son. It is from Shem that the Jews are descended; the Shemites (Semites).

^{11:1} The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words. ² While men were migrating in the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

The people are Hamites. Genesis 10:10 tells us that the sons of Ham settled in Shinar.

³ They said to one another, "Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire." They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

The common building material of Mesopotamia (Babylon/Shinar).

⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky,

Temple designations in Mesopotamia contain phrases like "reaching the heavens". From a distance they may have appeared to do so.

and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth."

The Hebrew word for "name" is "Shem". As the one who has received the blessing, Shem is the leader of the descendants of Noah. By "building a Shem for themselves", the Hamites are saying "we won't serve, we won't follow God's plan." This is the sin of pride.

⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men had built. ⁶ Then the LORD said: "If now, while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have

started to do this, nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do.

It is not that God is powerless, but He has given everyone a free will. If mankind doesn't see the result of disobedience of divine intent, they will never learn.

⁷ Let us then go down and there confuse their language, so that one will not understand what another says." ⁸ Thus the LORD scattered them from there all over the earth, and they stopped building the city.

Since they are so prideful of what they can do together, God destroys their unity which was directed against Him.

⁹ That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world. It was from that place that he scattered them all over the earth.

This scattering contrasts to the casting out of the Garden of Eden, also a result of pride. By scattering them, God fulfills His directive to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it."

1st Reading (2) - Exodus 19:3-8,16-20

This reading is from the book of Exodus. In our reading today Moses and the Israelites have just arrived at Mount Sinai.

³ Moses went up the mountain to God. Then the LORD called to him and said, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob; ⁴ tell the Israelites: You have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians

They have seen, now they must act by deciding to be God's people by obeying and keeping His commandments.

and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself.

Deuteronomy 32:10-14 develops the imagery presented here.

⁵ Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant,

A covenant is offered. The Hebrew word *shammar*, translated here as "keep" can also mean "guard" (keep out) (see Genesis 2:15).

you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. ⁶ You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

Sacred among the nations just as priests are among the people. Yahweh has defeated the great power Egypt and its gods and has brought them to the safety of His precincts; to His holy mountain,

the same mountain upon which He appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-2).

That is what you must tell the Israelites." ⁷ So Moses went and summoned the elders of the people. When he set before them all that the LORD had ordered him to tell them, ⁸ the people all answered together, "Everything the LORD has said, we will do."

We accept your offer of a covenant; the blessings are great.

Then Moses brought back to the LORD the response of the people. ¹⁶ On the morning of the third day

The third day after the acceptance of the offer of covenant. In the intervening time they were to stay off the mountain. Moses consecrated the people and they washed their clothes (symbolic of turning away from the old life and entering into a new one) and they were to abstain from sexual relations. **there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast,**

God had said to Moses that He would come in a dense cloud and when the ram's horn sounded a long blast the people could go up to the mountain.

so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Not with anticipation, but fear. The implied meaning here is that they have not abstained as Moses instructed.

¹⁷ But Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stationed themselves at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke, for the LORD came down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. ¹⁹ The trumpet blast grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking and God answering him with thunder.

God had told Moses that the people would hear Him speaking with Moses so that they would always put their trust in him. They have already disobeyed and so only hear thunder.

²⁰ When the LORD came down to the top of Mount Sinai, he summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up to him.

1st Reading (3) - Ezekiel 37:1-14

This reading is from the book of the Prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel prophesied from 593 to 571 BC with Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, capturing Jerusalem and destroying the temple in 587 BC. All the people of Judea, except the poorest and the few who had managed to flee to neighboring lands, were carried away to Babylon in exile. The exiles were treated very leniently by their Babylonian masters, they had been allowed to take their families and all their movables with them, and they were permitted to dwell in communities of their own. Still, the torturing consciousness that they were captives never left them. They longed for the temple of Jerusalem and many felt that they had been unjustly dealt with by Yahweh, or that their punishment far outstripped their sins. After

all, hadn't they faithfully offered sacrifices to Yahweh? They were convinced that Yahweh would not abandon the Temple, His dwelling place, to the heathens; they expected a speedy end to their captivity [In 538 (49 years after the beginning of their captivity)] Cyrus, King of Persia captured Babylon and allowed the captives to return to Judea]. Ezekiel's mission was to drive home the all-important truth that the people were not suffering for the sins committed by their forefathers, but for their own. Yet, he also had words of comfort and hope. When the dispersed children of Israel have been gathered once more and led back to their homeland, the Messiah will appear. He will be a descendant of David's house and will walk, as David did, in the commandments of Yahweh.

Considering the desperate condition of the people of Israel; without a king, without a Temple, captives among a heathen people; they found it hard to believe the prophet's rosy picture of their future. "Our bones are dried up," they said "and our hope is lost and we are cut off." To reassure these disappointed and hopeless ones Yahweh showed Ezekiel in a grandiose vision that He could endow even the dry and bleaching bones of the Hebrew nation with fresh life.

37:1 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he led me out in the spirit of the LORD and set me in the center of the plain, which was now filled with bones.

Notice how this vision starts with a contrast between the *ruah* (spirit, breath, wind) of God and the dry dead bones of Israel. Bones are often associated with the stamina a man needs to stand up to difficulties (Job 4:14).

2 He made me walk among them in every direction so that I saw how many they were on the surface of the plain. How dry they were!

These bones have long been lifeless.

3 He asked me: Son of man, can these bones come to life? "Lord GOD," I answered, "you alone know that." 4 Then he said to me: Prophecy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: See! I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life. 6 I will put sinews upon you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put spirit in you so that you may come to life and know that I am the LORD. 7 I prophesied as I had been told, and even as I was prophesying I heard a noise; it was a rattling as the bones came together, bone joining bone. 8 I saw the sinews and the flesh come upon them, and the skin cover them, but there was no spirit in them. 9 Then he said to me: Prophecy to the spirit, prophecy, son of man, and say to the spirit: Thus says the Lord GOD: From the four winds come, O spirit, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life.

Ruah means "wind", "spirit", and "breathe"; a remarkable word play in the 9th verse. Again, the contrast between the dead house of Israel and the life of God.

10 I prophesied as he told me, and the spirit came into them; they came alive and stood upright, a vast army.

This conjures an amazing image in the mind.

¹¹ Then he said to me: Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They have been saying, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off."

An explanation of the vision is given. The discouragement of the people is to be met by the powerful word of God who alone knows that they can live.

¹² Therefore, prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel.

The metaphor shifts from "bones" to "graves."

¹³ Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! ¹⁴ I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am the LORD. I have promised, and I will do it, says the LORD.

The aim of the prophecy is to give the captives new spirit to rise from their captivity (see Hosea 6:1-2). Although not far removed from it, this passage does not refer to the resurrection of individuals.

1st Reading (4) - Joel 3:1-5

The name Joel means "Yahweh is God" in Hebrew. Joel prophesied in Judah, in Jerusalem, and most scholars think that he operated around the year 500, after the return from exile. The book's main doctrinal contribution is its prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit, who will descend on all the people of God in the messianic era. This is our reading for today. St. Peter actually quotes this text on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21), asserting that this prophecy has come true in the Church. These verses are Joel 2:28-32 in all translations except the New American and New Jerusalem where they appear as Joel 3:1-5.

^{3:1} Then afterward I will pour out my spirit

By His Spirit, God creates, vivifies (Genesis 1:2; 2:7; Job 33:4; Psalm 104:29-30), communicates creativity (Exodus 31:3), propels men to leadership (Judges 3:10; 6:39; 1 Samuel 16:13; Isaiah 61:1), and stimulates religious enthusiasm (Numbers 11:25; 1 Samuel 10:10; Acts 2:4-13; 10:44). It is no wonder that Moses desired all Israelites to be filled with the breath of Yahweh (Numbers 11:29), and Joel here predicts the fulfillment of Moses' desire. A universal and manifold outpouring of the Spirit is foretold in Isaiah 32:15; 44:3-5; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26-27; Zechariah 12:10. No longer will Israel lean upon an occasional hero or prophet. The whole nation will possess their charisms, and Judah will emerge an ideal community.

upon all flesh.

Frequently, when Scripture wishes to describe man as weak, perishable, or perverse, it describes him as flesh (Genesis 6:3; Psalm 78:39; Sirach 14:17-18; Mark 14:38; Romans 7:18). The Spirit of

God revives the dried bones of Israel.

Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; ² Even upon the servants and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. ³ And I will work wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood, fire, and columns of smoke;

The Exodus, climaxed at Sinai, was marked by wonders (Exodus 7-17), blood (Exodus 24:4-8), and fire and smoke (Exodus 13:21-22; 19:16-18). Judah's coming delivery will be a new Exodus.

⁴ The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, At the coming of the Day of the LORD, the great and terrible day.

God's intervention will shake the cosmos. The sun and moon were worshiped as deities throughout the Gentile world. God's intervention will cast such "gods" into everlasting shadow. Another possible meaning is that the regular transit of sun and moon will abruptly cease with the commencement of God's eternal day (Zechariah 14:7).

⁵ Then everyone shall be rescued who calls on the name of the LORD; For on Mount Zion there shall be a remnant, as the LORD has said, And in Jerusalem survivors whom the LORD shall call.

These expressions refer to Judah and possibly to the Israelites of the Diaspora. Paul did not interpret this verse in so narrow a sense. In Romans 10:12-13, he quotes verse 5a and gives it a universal scope: The day of the Lord brings salvation to Jew and Gentile. Acts 2:17-31 interprets the whole chapter in the same way and points to Pentecost as its fulfillment.

2nd Reading - Romans 8:22-27

Our second reading also points to the future glory that is to come through the help of the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant.

²² We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now;

Greek philosophers often compared the spring rebirth of nature to a woman's travail of childbirth. It groans in hope and expectation, but also in pain.

²³ and not only that, but we ourselves,

Not only material creation bears testimony to the Christian destiny, but Christians themselves do so by the hope that they have, a hope based on the gift of the spirit already possessed.

who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,

The Spirit is compared with the first fruits of the harvest, which, when offered to God (Leviticus 23:15-21) represented the consecration of the whole harvest.

we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved.

The past aspect of salvation already accomplished by Christ's death and resurrection.

Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance.

Hope enables the Christian to bear with the sufferings of the present, and it also makes him a witness to the world of a lively faith in the resurrection.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings.

A testimony to the new life and glorious aspirations of the Christian. Human aspirations risk being weak because of the weakness of the flesh, but the Spirit adds its intercession, transcending such weakness. The result is that the Christian utters what otherwise would be impossible: to pray "Abba, Father", the Spirit must assist the Christian.

²⁷ And the one who searches hearts

An Old Testament phrase for God (1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39; Psalm 7:11; 17:3; 139:1).

knows what is the intention of the Spirit,

Only God Himself comprehends the language and the mind of the Spirit and recognizes such Spirit-assisted prayer.

because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will.

It was part of God's plan of salvation that the Spirit should play such a dynamic role in the aspirations and prayers of Christians.

Gospel - John 7:37-39

Our reading takes place in Jerusalem where Jesus has gone to partake in the feast of Tabernacles (Booths, Ingathering). The time is about six months prior to Jesus' passion, death and resurrection.

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the feast,

On the seventh day of the feast of Tabernacles, the priests took water from the spring of Siloam and circled the altar seven times. The crowd carried branches of myrtle and willow twigs tied with palm in the right hand and a citron oil lemon in the left as signs of harvest. After the circling of the altar the priest went up the ramp to the altar and poured the water through a silver funnel into the ground.

This was done in remembrance of the water which sprang up miraculously in the desert, asking God to send rain in plenty. Meanwhile, a passage from the prophet Isaiah was chanted (Isaiah 12:3) which told of the coming of the favor and of the outpouring of heavenly gifts that would accompany him. Ezekiel 47 was also read, in which it spoke of the torrents of water which would pour out of the temple.

Jesus stood up and exclaimed, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'"

Nowhere in the Old Testament do we read this phrase. Several explanations of the Biblical source for these words have been attempted. For instance, the incident of the "following rock" of Exodus 17:6 and Psalm 78:15ff is given a messianic interpretation in 1 Corinthians 10:4. In eschatological Old Testament literature the theme of Jerusalem as a source of living waters is common (Zechariah 14:8; Ezekiel 47:1-12), and this figure could easily have been extended to the dweller in the eschatological Jerusalem. These interpretations would place either Christ or the Christian as the source of the living waters.

³⁹ He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

In any event, whether the reference is intended to be Christ or the Christian, John points out that it is the era of the Christian church, the era of the Spirit.