

PENTECOST SUNDAY

May 20, 2018

First Reading – Acts 2:1-11

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 104

Second Reading – 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7,12-13

Gospel – John 20:19-23

My dear people of God:

It would not be wrong to say that today, the Church is celebrating her wonderful and spectacular beginning, when the apostles preached the Gospel to the people gathered in Jerusalem in different languages. So, allow me to say, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” to all of us.

The Second Book of Chronicles, chapter 8, verse 13, describes three major feasts that became part of the Jewish annual calendar, each having its own unique theological significance for the community. These three major feasts mentioned in 2 Chronicles 8:13 include the following:

1. Feast of Unleavened Bread (Pesach/Passover)
2. Feast of Weeks (Shavout/Pentecost), and this is our Feast today
3. Feast of Booths (Sukkoth).

Although other festivals or holy days are mentioned in the Old Testament, for example; the Purim, the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah/New Year), the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and the Day of Assembly (Azaret), these are the three major festivals.

Why did I mention these two other feasts? Knowing these major feasts will give us an idea (1) why there was a huge crowd in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and (2) why the apostles preached the Gospel in different languages.

But before that, it would benefit us to know what the Feast of the Pentecost was to the Jews of old. It was a feast after the period of seven weeks from

the Pasch or Passover. It was also called the Feast of Weeks. All male Jews were obliged to celebrate in Jerusalem. It lasted but one day, on which they offered to God bread made from the grain of the new harvest and some sacrifices.

The Book of Exodus, chapter 23, verse 16 clearly mentions it as The Feast of the Grain Harvest. The main ceremony was the offering to God of two leavened loaves of the finest flour made out of the wheat just gathered in, and called the first-fruits of the harvest. The festival lasted only a single day; but it was one of a peculiarly social and joyful character as mandated by Yahweh in the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 16, verses 9 to 11.

“And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a mighty wind coming, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting”.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles viewed the action of the Holy Spirit similar to a wind; very similar to what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John’s gospel chapter 3, verse 8. We must realize that in the Old Testament, wind often symbolized the presence of God as described in the second Book of Samuel, chapter 5, verse 24; and in the First Book of Kings, chapter 19, verse 11.

At our Lord’s baptism the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove; at the Transfiguration, in the form of a bright cloud; and here, during Pentecost as a FIRE, to purify, warm, and enlighten the Apostles. The Apostles were moved, therefore, not only by the sound, but also by the appearance, under the form of FIRE, of God’s Holy Spirit; and this FIRE had the semblance of tongues, like a candle flame, which settled down on each one of them.

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in different languages. This signifies the abundance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which the Apostles received. Among these gifts was that of tongues, which enabled the Apostles at the time to speak all

languages, and which signified that the Gospel was to be preached to the whole world. The Apostles, however, did not possess this power of speaking different languages as a permanent gift.

This shows that the power to speak these strange languages, of which they were ignorant before, was a gift of the Holy Spirit, and not a personal acquisition.

Now, to the question: Why were there a lot of Jews in Jerusalem at that time? The answer is now clear in view of the foregoing: Devout Jews, living in Palestine, and devout Jews, out of every nation under heaven, and Jews of the Dispersion, had come to Jerusalem to take part in the religious festival of Pentecost. It is no exaggeration to say they were people from every nation under heaven, for the Jews were in truth scattered throughout the then known world, (but not the world as we know it today. The Apostles preached to these Jews in their new different adopted languages.

Returning Jews were all amazed, and wondered, saying: *“Are they not all Galileans? How come we hear every man speak in our own language?”* The author, St. Luke, enumerates fifteen different regions from which the dwellers or visitors then in Jerusalem had come; they were all witnesses of the miracle of Pentecost. The enumeration begins with the Parthians, from the Far East, who lived in what is now Afghanistan, Beloochistan, Chorasán, and Turkistan. The Medes were inhabitants of Media, bounded on the north by the Caspian Sea, on the south by Persia, on the east by Parthia, and on the west by Syria and Armenia. The Elamites occupied a territory south of the Medes and near the Persian Gulf. The Parthians, the Medes, and the Elamites spoke a dialect of the Persian language. Mesopotamia was the country lying between the Tigris in the east and the Euphrates in the west. The inhabitants of Mesopotamia spoke an Aramaic dialect. Cappadocia was a Roman province of eastern Asia Minor. Pontus was north of Cappadocia. Asia was a Roman province comprising a great part of western Asia Minor.

Phrygia and Pamphylia were two central provinces of Asia Minor. Different Greek dialects were the languages of Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia. Egypt, especially around Alexandria, where the Jews were very numerous. Libya, the present Tripoli west of Egypt. Cyrene was the principal city of Libya, where there were many Jews. The Greeks had brought their language into Egypt, but the people there doubtless continued to speak their Egyptian tongue as well as Greek. Jews who lived in Rome, were visitors in Jerusalem. They spoke Greek and Latin.

Brothers and sisters, that very day, God renewed the world. We may no longer observe in our time now, how spectacular that moment was, but we are happy to repeat our Responsorial Psalm: “Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth**”.**

Now, let us go to our Second Reading: The community at Corinth came from different backgrounds. The Corinthians challenged Paul; they offered their own ideas about his gospel and defended their interpretations at least as passionately as Paul argued for his own. We could assume that their community had plenty of people feeling like they brought something special to the life of the Church: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Because of such diversity of gifts, there seemed to have been some cheap talk among the Corinthians about whose gift was best.

Brothers and sisters, we know that the Holy Spirit is a uniting force. Paul declared that the body has many parts and that each part is as important as the other parts. Charisms are given not for the benefit of the recipient, but for the community. To lose sight of this principle would lead one to pride and to indulge in self-grandeur. The Holy Spirit provides a unifying force behind the various gifts of the community for the benefit of the same community.

Please note that Paul succinctly declares that it is the same Holy Spirit who directs and acts in everyone, thereby, stressing that not one gift is superior compared to another gift. He refuses to say that one gift is better

than the other and insists upon the unity forged by the spirit, which permits him to describe the community as one unified body (1 Corinthians 12:12-14).

My dear people of God, we could learn a lot from the second reading. We must never belittle one gift nor exalt another gift. Rather, we must concentrate on the manner by which every gift is used so that the entire community can remain united. We cannot say that we have a higher and a more special value because of our own particular gifts, nor can we think that our involvement is better and more effective than that of our neighbor. Christ has leveled the playing field. As I said last week, the ground under the cross is level.

Now, let us go to the Gospel. Please do not be surprised to realize that the Gospel we heard today, on this Feast of Pentecost, was about the appearance of the risen Lord to His apostles.

The truly Risen Christ appeared to His apostles despite locked doors. They locked the doors for fear of the Jews. It is worth noting that the evangelist John emphasized the “locked doors” in order to highlight the **glorified body** of Christ; that because of His ability to penetrate locked doors, He is definitely the **Risen Christ**. That was a spectacular way to appear to them. Then, He showed His disciples His hands and His side showing the wounds. Again, it was proof that it was He Himself, and not a phantom/ghost.

After that spectacular sudden appearance, He gifted them with His Peace. It was a Healing Peace. They (except John) needed to be healed of their action of deserting Him during His passion. They needed to be healed from their fears. In the mind of the evangelist John, Jesus is indeed the embodiment of the prophetic message of peace and salvation which we can read from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 52, verse 7.

After that, Jesus commissioned His disciples to proclaim the gospel and to fulfil the Father’s mission in the world in a manner so akin to that of God breathing life into man in the Book of Genesis, chapter 2, verse 7; or in the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 37, verses 9-10, where he prophesied that Yahweh could breathe life into the dry bones. This action of Jesus, breathing **new life by the Holy Spirit** into His disciples, (20:22) is to recreate them into new beings who would inaugurate the Father’s Mission.

And after being recreated during His appearance, they would be empowered by Holy Spirit after fifty days. These newly empowered proclaimers/missionaries were timid and non-trained before, but they would now embark on that mission. That is why today's feast would endow these uneducated apostles such wisdom and courage that they boldly proclaimed the gospel to those people in Jerusalem which we heard in the First Reading.

How do we appreciate today's feast, then?

By embracing the identity of Jesus and His Mission. The impending mission of the disciples is implicitly mentioned in John's Gospel, chapter 17, verse 18, and finally made explicit to the disciples in today's Gospel (chapter 20, verse 21), that Jesus has sent the disciples (and that includes us today) into the world. We are an apostolic people. We are a people who are being SENT.

If we are being sent, then, it behooves that we must live out our role within the MISSION of GOD. While Jesus' words in John 20:21 do not offer an explicit ministry methodology, nonetheless, when integrated into the teachings of Christ, we understand that we are sent to proclaim and embrace the life, death, resurrection and glorification of Christ and all that that encompasses for us and the individuals, cultures, and institutions in our world. We are the new missionary disciples that Pope Francis is looking for. And the Church has high hopes that Jesus Christ has called us to live out His exciting mission in the world.

As we celebrate the Church's birthday today, which is also our birthday, let us say Yes to the invitation of Jesus to become missionary disciples. Amen.