

Pentecost Sunday - A

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).

“If no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Spirit, what can we say about those who do name His name but do not have the Spirit? Here we have to understand that Paul was not talking about catechumens who had not yet been baptized but about believers and unbelievers.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 29,3]

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.

“Each person receives a gift to that, governing his life by divine constraints, he may be useful both to himself and to others while presenting an example of good behavior.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366 - 384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

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.

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 God) tells me to!