

Pentecost (Whitsunday)

Acts 2:1-11

1 Cor 12:3-7; 12-13

Jn 20:19-23

Today we do not celebrate the birthday of the Church so much as celebrate the day that the Church's mission was launched. St John describes the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church taking place on Easter evening when Jesus breathed on His disciples - strengthening and commissioning them to become His agents in the world and grow God's Kingdom. In St Luke's account, the disciples received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost accompanied by wind and tongues of fire.

The Hebrew word for breath is *ruach* which is also translated in Scripture as wind and spirit.

When I was preparing this homily, I stumbled across a Pentecost sonnet written by Malcolm Guite, an Anglican priest who is also a songwriter, author, and jazz singer. Here it is: -

Pentecost

*Today we feel the wind beneath our wings
Today the hidden fountain flows and plays
Today the Church draws breath at last and sings
As every flame becomes a Tongue of praise.*

*This is the feast of fire, air, and water
Poured out and breathed and kindled into earth.
The earth herself awakens to her maker
And is translated out of death to birth.*

*The right words come today in their right order
And every word spells freedom and release
Today the gospel crosses every border
All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace
Today the lost are found in His translation*

Whose mother tongue is Love in every nation.

In his cycle of sonnets called, 'Sounding the Seasons', the author reflects on the traditional 'four elements' of matter, namely, earth, air, water and fire. In Scripture we read that God's Spirit is found in the air as breath and wind – in the story of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, God promised to put His Spirit into His people Israel, but they did not live until the wind put breath in them. The Spirit is given through water – at the baptism of Jesus, and as the spring of water welling up to eternal life that Jesus promised to the woman from Samaria (John 4). The Spirit comes through fire at Pentecost, as a cleansing and purifying fire redeeming the faithful from the fire of destruction (Isaiah 4:4).

But what about the Holy Spirit and the earth? We go back to the story of creation. In Genesis 2:7 we read, "Then the Lord formed man of the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." When God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, they were told to toil the earth and eat its bread and that they were taken from the dust and unto dust they would return (Gen 3:19).

We humans are the earth, created to express the Spirit of God in our lives and we can only become fully alive when the Holy Spirit comes to us, clothed in the three other elements and so become who we truly are. He comes in the waters of our baptism; He comes when we open our hearts and minds to listen and receive the wind of His voice. He comes when we eat the bread and wine, the fruits of the earth in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The fire of God, the fire of the Holy Spirit, is like the bush that burned without being destroyed when God called Moses to accept the cost of being transformed into His servant. We too must be prepared to suffer the process of being transformed by the flame of the Spirit by rejecting the garbage in our life that hinders our relations with God and others. The suffering that accompanies this transformation is the reality of the Cross, without which Christianity does not exist. Yet we must always remember that God's mother tongue is Love.

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