

Pentecost

June 4, 2006

Pentecost is one of the three most important feasts of the Church year. We know Christmas is one of the three. It's easy to get excited about the birth of a baby, especially when the baby is God's Son and his mother is the Virgin Mary. We know the feast of Jesus' resurrection is the most important feast of all, because if there were no resurrection, we would have no faith or hope at all. But Pentecost, the third most important feast, seems like another ordinary Sunday.

Let me give you a little history of Pentecost. It was not invented by the Church. The Jews were celebrating Pentecost 3000 years ago. It was one of **their** three most important feasts. It was originally a harvest feast on which the first fruits were offered in gratitude to God. It later came to be celebrated as the anniversary of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The word itself means simply 50th, the 50th day after Jewish Passover. The Jews were celebrating that feast when the Spirit came on Jesus' followers. And so Pentecost is still celebrated, but we who are Christians celebrate it as the day on which God sent his Holy Spirit upon the Church.

Pentecost isn't just the celebration of a past event. It is important for us **today**, because the Holy Spirit is important for us today. The Spirit is hard to picture because the Spirit is **within** us when we are in God's grace. The Spirit is like the air we breathe, the light that goes on when we have an idea, the fire that burns in our heart. And so the Scriptures use these symbols help us know the Spirit; in the first reading the Spirit is a strong driving wind whereas in John's gospel the Spirit is the gentle breath of Jesus who breathes on his apostles and says "Receive the Holy Spirit." In either case, whether as a powerful wind or a gentle breath, the Spirit is like the invisible **air** we cannot live without. The Spirit is like the **light** that goes on in our mind when we have an idea: Jesus tells us in the gospel "he will guide you to all truth." Jesus couldn't explain everything to the apostles that he wanted them to know, but the Spirit turned on the light in their minds to be able to understand all that he had been teaching them. The Spirit also appeared to the apostles as tongues of **fire**, a fire that started burning in them to proclaim Christ with courage and conviction.

God wants us to know him and love him and the Spirit helps us to do that. But because the Spirit works within us, we are not aware the Spirit is even there. I would like to share with you some thoughts from C.S. Lewis about how we grow in knowledge things, people and God. If we want to know something about rocks, for example, we go and we find rocks. They won't come to us, they won't run away from us. In no way do they cooperate with us in getting to know them. The initiative is all on our side if we are to know rocks. If we want to study wild animals, that's a little different. We have to go find them and if we're not really quiet they probably will run away from us (or eat us alive). The initiative is mostly on our part if we are to know about wild animals, but they could prevent us from knowing them. If we want to know another human being, and they are determined for us not to know them, we probably won't. We have to win their confidence if they are going to open up to us. The initiative is equally divided: it takes two to make a friendship. When it comes to God, there is no way we could find him or know him if he didn't show himself to us. And he has done so in Jesus Christ. But we cannot

not know Jesus Christ without the help of the Spirit. As Paul tells us in today's second reading: "No one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit." Without the Spirit God is totally unknown to us. The Spirit makes the Scriptures alive for us and helps us to be aware of God's presence with us and God's love for us.

When we have this kind of a relationship with God it spills over into everything else we do. So St. Paul tells us in Galatians: if we live by the Spirit, the Spirit will produce in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control." Most of us also are familiar with Paul's description of the greatest gift of the Spirit: "I may be able to speak the languages of men and even angels, but if I have not love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell...Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous, etc, etc.

One last point: it was on the Church, that God sent his Spirit. As the first reading tells us Christ followers were all together in one place. The Spirit gives different gifts to different members of the Church so we can help each other to know and experience God and God's love. If we want to experience the fullness of the Spirit, we need each other, we need to come together, to worship together, to share our gifts with one another. Without the Spirit we are trying to breathe without air, think without light, love without fire.