

Come Spirit, breathe on us, set us ablaze!

Pentecost Sunday – Cycle C – 9 June 2019

Readings: Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13; Jn 20:19-23

“Something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire and rested on them” (Acts)

Three Scriptural Signposts

Pentecost marks the birthday of the Church. While the focus of today’s feast is the Holy Spirit, the stage can also be set for forthcoming Trinity Sunday – by looking at a couple of triads, as follows:

- Three traditions appear in today’s readings: (a) Lucan – 1st reading; (b) Pauline – 2nd reading; (c) Johannine – 3rd reading, gospel.
- The presence of the Holy Spirit is seen in three symbols: (a) wind; (b) fire; (c) tongues.

1. The first reading tells us that, when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus’ disciples in the form of a ‘rush of a mighty wind’ and ‘tongues of fire’, a band of fearful fishermen is transformed into a community of fearless followers. Thereafter, there is no looking back. They will all live and die to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The day that God chooses to send the Spirit is significant: Pentecost. Literally meaning ‘50th day’, ‘Pentecost’ was originally a Jewish feast of thanksgiving for the harvest celebrated seven weeks after the Passover. For us, Christians, it marks the 50th day after Easter. Anyway, it’s important to note that Pentecost attracted thousands of Jews to Jerusalem. These were not only from Palestine but “from every nation under heaven”: the diaspora. It seems that God chooses a *kairos*, a special, auspicious time for the public outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In this Lucan tradition, Jesus already instructs the disciples to stay in Jerusalem (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4) and await the “promise of the Father” (ibid.), that “power from on high” (ibid.). Moreover, there is indication that the apostles have been staying in one place — probably the Cenacle of the Last Supper — “constantly devoting themselves to prayer ... along with Mary, the mother of Jesus” (see Acts 1:14). The stage is now set for the outpouring of the Spirit.
2. The three symbols of the Spirit—wind, fire, and ‘tongues’—are very evocative in the Biblical Tradition. God creates the world with *ruah* the ‘wind’ also regarded as ‘spirit’ (Gen 1:2), and when God reveals Godself on Mount Sinai, there is smoke since “the Lord had descended upon it in fire” (Ex 19:18). The ‘tongues’ – Greek, glossa – can be understood both, as ‘tongue’ as well as ‘language’. Thus, upon receiving the Spirit in the form of a ‘tongue of fire’ the apostles begin to speak in ‘tongues’ which, interestingly, are intelligible even to those from the diaspora, including Romans and Gentiles. Each one hears the good news in his/her own language. The apostles’ ability to effectively communicate the good news is incredible since they were known to be simple men, with little formal education. From where did this courage come? Who was behind this ‘miracle of tongues’? The Pentecost, in the Lucan tradition, will be the triggering event for all the events to come in the mission of the apostles, their coworkers and successors.
3. The gospel passage from the Johannine tradition also marks the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—not as public manifestation [like we saw in Luke/Acts] but as a private ‘*com-mission*’ to the apostles who are locked behind doors “for fear of the Jews”. Jesus’

breathing on them, suggesting vivifying breath or wind, is sign of the giving of His Spirit. Notice the Trinitarian dimension: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you ... receive the Holy Spirit.” Three concrete gifts are given to the disciples in this scene: joy, peace and forgiveness. They are “filled with *joy*,” greeted twice with, “*Peace* be with you!” and finally, they are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation: binding and loosing.

Linking the 2nd Reading with the theme of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit

While the first reading is from the Lucan tradition and the gospel from the Johannine, the second reading from the Pauline tradition gives us another very evocative symbol for Church: Body! And, along with the ‘gifts’ we have just discussed – i.e., the gift of speech, as well as the gifts of joy, peace and forgiveness – Paul speaks of “varieties of gifts” with one Lord, Jesus, and one Holy Spirit animating Christ’s Body, the Church.

Three Current Concerns

The ‘Pentecostal’ Concern: Jessica Radcliff, former Catholic, now member of a Pentecostal church says: “The most important thing is the Spirit of God is in these churches. I grew up Catholic and did not experience anything close to what I have experienced in the Pentecostal church. It’s exuberant and lively, and people’s lives get changed.” What do you think?

The Linguistic Concern: The ‘New Education Policy’ (NEP) which was to be implemented by the HRD ministry of the Central Government proposed to make Hindi compulsory nationwide. Doesn’t that go against the ‘gift of tongues’ given to humankind by God’s Spirit? How do we negotiate diversity of language and culture, while maintaining unity and harmony?

The Personal Concern: The first disciples of Jesus were aflame with Pentecostal fire as individuals and as community. What about you and me? Does the fire of the Spirit still burn brightly within me/you or has it been extinguished by waves of pessimism, sadness, lethargy and mediocrity? Jesus said, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Lk 12:49) Fire destroys garbage, purifies metal, provides warmth, cooks food and sets engines in motion. Likewise, the fire of the Spirit destroys sin, purifies hearts, provides light, kindles love and energizes human beings for effective ministry. We would do well to pray: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love! Breathe on me, O Breath of God.”

Pope Francis: (Homily at Pentecost-Mass with members of church Movements, 19 May 2013): “The Spirit, the ‘Comforter’, grants us the courage to take to the streets of the world, bringing the Gospel! The Holy Spirit makes us look to the horizon and drive us to the very outskirts of existence in order to proclaim life in Jesus Christ. Let us ask ourselves: do we tend to stay closed in on ourselves, on our group, or do we let the Holy Spirit open us to mission?”

In Lighter Vein: A fire once broke out in the house of a hefty youth who was fast asleep. His friends tried to carry him out through the window but didn’t succeed. Then, they tried to carry him through the door, but failed. The youth was just too heavy and huge. In desperation, one of his friends shouted, “Wake him up, then he’ll save himself!” Engulfed by flames, one certainly doesn’t require assistance to save oneself and others. So is it when one’s heart is aflame with the fire and alive with the breath of the Holy Spirit – one will work wonders!
