

the Sunday Readings



Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. . . .Filled with the Holy Spirit they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

(Acts 2 : 3 – 4)

Pentecost Sunday (a)

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*disciples empowered*¹

introduction

We gather to celebrate the birth of the Church at Pentecost. As modern disciples of Jesus we are engaged in a battle for the mind, heart and imagination of people in the modern era. There are many competing proposals on offer to re-symbolize our human experience. The doctrines of the Trinity and the Eucharist are celebrated on the two Sundays following Pentecost.

These celebrations along with the celebration of the day of Pentecost itself, provide the church's communal alternative to other proposals for "*making*" our modern world. The formulation of these foundational doctrines has not been a simple matter of logical inference from select scriptural texts. The expression of these doctrines have occurred within a complex matrix of experience and reflection.

The process of reflection on the experience of gathering, worship and mission, continues when we modern disciples of Jesus gather. The beginning of this process, the initial gathering of Jesus' disciples on the first Christian Pentecost day, is our foundational communal experience of the alternative reality of GOD's reigning. Just as the early disciples began to reflect on their experience of GOD's transforming newness, we gather and turn to the reality of GOD's Spirit in our midst.

first reading: Acts 2: 1 – 11^{2,3}

[the coming of the Holy Spirit]

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (1) And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. (2) Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. (3) All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (4) Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. (5) And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. (6) Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? (7) And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (8) Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, (9) Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

1 Cover Image: [Pentecost](#) – El Greco, detail 1596

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 Ac.1:1-11 – Luke's pentecostal narrative consists of an introduction (vv.1-13) to a speech ascribed to Peter declaring the resurrection of Jesus and its messianic significance.

(10) Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about GOD's deeds of power.”(11)

The Christian community from its very beginning, claimed to have within it, the ability to reconcile the tensions between pluralism and equity. It claimed to be impressively empowered; to be unified-in-diversity! The reading shows just such a reconciliation of the claim of unity in diversity. Our modern world struggles to put pluralism together with equality. The Christian community from its very beginning claimed to have within it, the ability to reconcile the tension between unity and diversity!

The apostles waited for this promised power and newness. At Pentecost time the event is described as an invasion of power *'from heaven'*.⁴ The experience outruns the ability of the commentator to describe it. What is needed for retelling, is the language of vision, allusion and imagination. What happened is like *'wind'* and like *'fire'*. The *'tongues as of fire'* (v.3) came to rest on each member of the community-in-waiting.⁵ The word, *'tongue'* is used a second time (v.4) but not in an allusive way. Now it concretely refers to speech. The *'tongues of fire'* result in, *'tongues of speech'*. Both tongues of *'fire'* and of *'speech'*, are gifts of *'the wind of GOD'*. The promise of the departing Jesus has been kept!

The Pentecost event features two groups of people who already know pluralism. The believers in Jesus, who included the disciples or "brothers" of Jesus, the women, and the mother of Jesus (vv. 12-14) and also included, *"the devout from every nation under heaven"*(v.5). The wonder is that those closest to Jesus speak their own language and all the others hear and discern (v.11).

Among the hearers thirteen different countries of origin are mentioned – that is, the whole devout world, gathered at Jerusalem, hears and discerns! Believers speak and the devout hear! All barriers are broken down by their speech. There is genuine communication. In this speaking and hearing of GOD's word, a single community is created in that time and place.

The subject of the community's new speech is the witnessing of GOD's acts that have transformed the world and turned the world on it's head! The wonder of GOD's life, among the Hebrews and among the nations, begins new speech. The new speech is followed by a series of actions which make new life possible.⁶ The nations of the world are enabled by the power of GOD's Spirit, to hear, understand and participate in the story of GOD's marvelous actions, that have been recited in this event. The communication that happened on the day of

4 [v.2] *'From heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind'* – *'Wind'* and *'spirit'* are associated in *Jn.3:8*. The sound of a great rush of wind would herald a new action of GOD in the history of salvation.

5 [v.3] *'Tongues, as of fire'* – Cf *Ex.19:18*, where fire symbolises the presence of GOD to initiate the covenant on Sinai. Here the holy Spirit acts upon the apostles, preparing them to proclaim the new covenant with its unique gift of the Spirit (*Ac.2:38*).

6 [v.4] *'To speak in other languages'* - Ecstatic prayer in praise of GOD, interpreted in *Ac.2:6 & 11* as speaking in foreign languages, symbolising the worldwide mission of the church.

Pentecost in Jerusalem defies human explanation! What human beings judge impossible – is made possible – by the power of GOD!

response: Psalm 104 : 1, 24, 29 – 31, 34

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Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my GOD, You are very great.(1) . . .

You are clothed with honour and majesty,

O LORD, how manifold are Your works!(24) . . .

In wisdom You have made them all;

the Earth is full of Your creatures. (29)

When You hide Your face, they are dismayed;

when You take away their breath, they die

and return to their dust.(30)

When You send forth Your spirit, they are created,

and You renew the face of the ground.(31) . . .

May the glory of the LORD endure forever;

may the LORD rejoice in His works—

May my meditation be pleasing to Him,

for I rejoice in the LORD.(34)

The psalmist celebrates the power of GOD in endowing the heavens and the Earth with life through GOD's Spirit. We stand reminded that the gift of the Spirit has meant life – from the very beginning of GOD's creative activity. The psalm is a hymn of praise celebrating the goodness and awesomeness of creation. The speaker lists noteworthy features in creation and assigns them all to the LORD GOD. GOD's ordered world means that everything in it is dependent on GOD's sustenance; GOD's grace; GOD's presence; GOD's breath (vv.29-30).⁷

Although the world is impressive and to be celebrated, it has no independent existence. It is a creation which is reliable, but on it's own it has no possibility of survival, or well-being. This awareness leads the speaker to wonder, gratitude, and praise.⁸ Those capable of gratitude and spontaneous surrender, correctly identify the proper name of the Creator.

second reading: 1 Corinthians 12 : 3b – 7, 12 – 13

[spiritual gifts; one body with many members]

. . . No one can say "Jesus is LORD" except by the Holy Spirit.(3) Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit,(4) and there are varieties of services but the same LORD,(5) and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same GOD who activates all of them in everyone.(6) To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.(7) . . . For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.(12) For in the one Spirit we

⁷ On one level, *the spirit* (or wind) of GOD is the autumn and winter rains that provide food for all creatures. On another, it is *the breath* (or spirit) of GOD, that makes beings live.

⁸ [v.35] 'Praise the LORD' – combination of the plural imperative of *praise* (*hallelu*) with an abbreviated form of the divine name *YAH(WEH)*.

were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.(13)

Years after the original Pentecost when the Christian community was struggling to keep the fire of the Spirit alive, Paul spells out the principles by which the Spirit acts in a community (vv.3-7). Paul is addressing a community that is in deep tension.⁹

The Christian church in Corinth was beset both by factions and by competition among forms of ministry. The problem which concerns Paul is the link between the ONE Spirit who gives gifts, and the MANY gifts – that may even seem not related to each other. Skills and gifts in the Christian community are given for the service of GOD. For that reason the community has priority over the individual person in the use of gifts. The initiative for the use of gifts belongs not to the individual – but to the community to which the individual owes allegiance and is bound to respond.

The Spirit gathers the Christian community to be united and engaged in a mutual sharing of gifts (vv.12-13). Even early on, the church seems plagued by the same tiredness and divisions, and the same lack of communication, that sometimes prevails today! But there was a moment and a memory that inspired the first disciples and those who heard their message. Communication of the message of Jesus' love, transformed and enlivened the early church. It is the communication of that same moment and memory we celebrate this Pentecost when we cry out, "*Come, Holy Spirit.*"

gospel reading: John 20 : 19 – 23

[Jesus appears to the Disciples]

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."(19) After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the LORD.(20) Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."(21) When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.(22) If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."(23)

Peace and joy were the signs of the time when GOD would intervene to bring harmony into human life in the world. John sees this era has come, as Jesus returns to the disciples on the evening of the first day of the week (vv.18-20). The word '*shalom*' (*peace*) includes the notion of singing and dancing – the joy of people free from everything that would enslave them. The prophets had announced that the Messiah would bring such a peace, permanently. With the

⁹ Cf. 1 Co.10-17

Messiah harmony would be established throughout the world. People would be at harmony with GOD.

Jesus says it a second time: *"Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you"* (v.21). The disciples are 'sent' to become Jesus' Presence and WORD in the world. GOD was present and active in Jesus' WORD – so the disciples are to be GOD's presence and action in the world in the new era. Jesus gives his *spirit/Spirit* to them for this purpose. The *spirit/Spirit* of Jesus, transforms them to become the life-giving 'WORD' in the world.

Jesus breathed on his disciples and said: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained:"* (vv.22-23). For John the breathing of the Spirit on the disciples is the climax of the actions of the risen Jesus. The 'breathing' seems to echo Genesis.¹⁰ In the creation scene *"The LORD GOD shaped humanity (adam) from the soil of the ground (adamah) and blew the breath of life into what became living beings."* John says that just as in the first creation, GOD breathed a living spirit/Spirit into humanity, so now in the moment of the new creation, Jesus breathes his own holy spirit/Spirit into the disciples, giving them eternal life! John's gospel open with the theme of creation.¹¹ The theme of creation returns now at the end of the gospel of John.

The disciples can forgive and hold peoples' sins, because the risen Jesus has sent them (as the Father sent him). Jesus says that he came into the world for judgement; to enable some to see; to cause blindness for others.¹² Deliberate blindness also implied that any willingness to open one's eyes results in being delivered from sin. Working through the disciples, the Holy Spirit (like Jesus in his public ministry) divides people into those who believe and receive the Spirit, and 'the world' – which does not believe or recognise the Holy Spirit. The latter will be proved wrong. But the main emphasis of the giving of the Spirit in John's gospel concerns the new world, the new creation that wipes out the Evil One.

The Holy Spirit consecrates people and gives them the power to make others holy in turn. This power to isolate, repel, and negate evil and sin is given by God to Jesus. This same power is given in turn by Jesus through the Spirit to those whom he sends. John does not tell us how or who exercised this power in the community for whom he wrote. The fact that he mentions it show that it was exercised.

¹⁰ Gn.2:7

¹¹ Jn.1:1-5

¹² Jn.9:39ff

for sharing:¹³

- *The coming of the Holy Spirit. Comment on Acts 2 : 1 – 11*
- *Spiritual gifts / one body with many members. Comment on 1 Corinthians 12 : 3 – 7, 12 – 13*
- *Jesus appears to the Disciples. Comment on John 20 : 19 – 23*

prayer:¹⁴

*GOD of power,
let the splendour of Your glory come upon us,
and through the radiance of the Holy Spirit
let the brightness of Christ, who is light from light,
shine in the hearts of those born again by grace.
Grant this through Jesus Christ, Your Son,
who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
GOD now and always. Amen.*

review:¹⁵

Pentecost originated as celebrating the completion of the grain harvest, which had begun at Passover. Judaism transformed it into a feast of salvation history celebrating the giving of the Law at Sinai and the establishment of Israel as GOD's people. These associations were carried over into the Christian feast that marked the conclusion of the great fifty days. The grain harvest and the Law are replaced by the gift of the Spirit, and the constitution of the Israelites is replaced by the constitution of the new. The feast of the Law becomes the feast of the Spirit!

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- 13 *Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*
- 14 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.
- 15 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

Historically, this appearance marks the foundation of the Church as a wider community than the original Twelve and the beginning of the announcing of the 'Good News'. The later part of the story suggests (the crowd's suspicion that the apostles were full of new wine), the beginning of the proclamation was marked by an outburst of 'speaking in tongues', such as Paul describes as taking place at Corinth (see 1 Co.12-14). This earlier concept of 'speaking in tongues' has been given to new symbolism (whether by Luke or to his tradition) in which Pentecost reverses the effect of Babel!

Paul's Corinthians were very keen on 'speaking in tongues', but its effect led to divisiveness – those who spoke in tongues treated those who did not have this gift as second-class citizens. Paul insists that to have the Spirit means to confess that Jesus is LORD, meaning the earthly Jesus – i.e. Christ crucified. The Corinthians regarded the death of Christ as a mere episode of the past and put all their money on the purely spiritual, ethereal Christ.

Paul recalls them to the centrality of the cross, pricking the bubble of their enthusiasm. Paul also reminds them – the gifts of the Spirit take different forms, not just the one form of speaking in tongues. Each gift, however unspectacular, has to be used for the common good. And Paul insists that the gift of the Spirit must not lead to individualism but to the building up of the corporate body of the community. The Church is one body through a common baptism and a common "drinking of one Spirit." The latter is probably a reference to the baptismal Eucharist rather than to a rite analogous to the later rite of confirmation (see "supernatural drink" in 1 Cor 10:4). Here is a further suggestion that 1 Corinthians was written for the paschal feast.

John places the giving of the Spirit on Easter day. Here, as in Acts, the Spirit empowers the Church for its mission ("even so I send you"). The mission is defined here, not as 'good news' (kerygma) but as the forgiving and retaining of sins. In the New Testament, forgiveness of sins is baptismal language (see Lk 24:47) and this is John's version of the tradition, which includes in the appearance stories, the command to baptise.

Our text speaks of the giving or withholding of baptism following upon faith or unbelief at hearing the Gospel message. It's significant that both the second reading and the gospel speak of baptism, for in patristic times, Pentecost was the day when those who for some reason had missed their baptism at Easter were baptised. Baptism was not continually administered at any time of the year, because its community significance was foremost.

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