

Pentecost (C)
(Acts 2:1-11 / John 20:19-23)
09.06.2019

There is quite a contrast between the two accounts of the gift of the Spirit heard in today's Scripture readings. The images employed in the Acts of the Apostles are striking. There is a sound like a powerful wind, noise fills the entire house, something like tongues of fire appears and the apostles all begin to speak. In John's gospel the scene is very different. Everything is peaceful and restrained. The gift of the Spirit is imparted with great discretion, in a quiet intimacy. The Spirit is not compared to a strong wind, as was the case in Luke's account, but to a gentle breath. Whatever the differences between them, the Scripture passages we are considering this morning (Acts 2:1-11 & John 20:19-23), both speak to us of one and the same blessing: God's gift of the Spirit given to the nascent Church.

It is important for us to remember that the same Spirit which brought the Church to birth continues to sustain the life of God's People throughout the ages. With the celebration of Pentecost, we are invited to open our hearts anew today to receive a fresh outpouring of the Spirit in our lives.

In this morning's meditation I would like to reflect with you upon two signs of the Spirit's gift in the initial Pentecost event – fire and breath – both of which I read as speaking to us of one thing: the warmth of God's love for His People.

The Church was not only loved into being at the first post-resurrection Pentecost, it is sustained by God's love in every age and generation. St Paul reminds us of this in his Letter to the Romans when he states that God's love is continually poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us.

Let us consider for a moment how we are to live God's love in our lives.

Is it not true to say that a hallmark of love is a certain discretion? Since love is experienced at the level of the heart, it is usually given its strongest expression in a discreet – we could even say, a hidden – intimacy. Creative love – love that brings new life into being – is not something a couple live in view of others, but in secret.

St Bernard of Clairvaux reflects upon this in his writings.

The great Cistercian Doctor of the Church speaks of the intimacy of relationship with the Lord to which we are all called in terms of *a mystical kiss of love*. He expounds upon the fact that, through the gift of the Spirit, *the Lord draws us into an intimacy beyond our imagination*. This intimacy Bernard describes as *a hidden manna*, as *a sealed fountain...* and as *a secret garden to which no stranger has access*.

Bernard sees a person who has encountered the Lord at a deep level of relationship as someone who will aspire to an *ever greater hidden intimacy*. He speaks of the Holy Spirit *enticing us ever more deeply into a warm and tender embrace* – especially through the inspired words of Sacred Scripture.

For Bernard *the kiss of God is the Holy Spirit – the imperturbable peace of the Father and the Son, their unshakable bond, their undivided love, their indivisible unity*. For Bernard *the Holy Spirit is the supreme kiss, the kiss of the mouth*.

Bernard proclaims in his Sermon 8 *On the Song of Songs* that we hear of '*this kiss of the kiss*' in the episode of John's gospel wherein we are told *Christ breathed on His apostles and said:*

'Receive the Holy Spirit'. According to Bernard what we witness in the episode recorded in John 20 (the gospel passage we have read this morning) is nothing less than *the most intense participation in that infinitely sweet embrace that the Father and the Son share eternally and by nature*. Bernard sees what the apostles were given to live in the Upper Room as a blessing which is now shared in by us through an extraordinary gift of God's grace.

Another great mystical figure of the Catholic tradition – St Catherine of Siena – echoes Bernard's thought in a way. Catherine shares with us many insights which speak of the importance of allowing oneself to experience and enter into the intimacy of love of which Bernard of Clairvaux speaks so eloquently. Catherine reminds us that *we are called to, and will, become united with the One we love, by the Spirit*. She adds that *we will only ever discover who we truly are in the relationship of love with the Lord to which we are called*. She goes on to say that *once we are set on fire with the love of God ourselves, then, in our turn, we will set the whole world ablaze*.

I read Catherine's words about setting the world ablaze by the fire we have received as a reminder of the role played by those tongues of fire spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles' account of the Pentecost event. In Luke's version of Pentecost, we are told that *tongues of fire settled upon the apostles*. Catherine's words draw to our attention that the fire of the Spirit is not only meant to settle upon us, but actually to enter into us: the fire of the Spirit is meant, quite literally, to inflame (in-flame) us! The Spirit is given to us to warm us from within. The Spirit is given to us to enkindle our hearts, so as to lead us to radiate to others the warmth of God's love for them. It is for this reason that we are sent out to bear witness to the Gospel: to share with others the Good News that they are loved by God.

It is love that holds all things together. This is made manifest at Pentecost. The message of this great Solemnity is one of union in love; unity in diversity; communion in difference. The Holy Spirit is given to unite in love the Creator and creature, God and humanity; those who are at enmity with each other; the masculine and the feminine; races in their diversity; people of contrasting, and even opposing, mentalities; those who do not speak the same language... persons who are very different to each other, but who are nonetheless – and indeed, all the more – called to form *one body, one Spirit, in Christ*.

The gift of the Spirit is essentially an effusion of God's love in our hearts: God's love which unites all things – including the seemingly contradictory. The experience of Pentecost gives us a capacity to live the many differences which exist between us in peace and in concord – and even before that to be reconciled with the multiple contrasts and contradictions which are to be found deep down within each one of our hearts. Such is the power of God's love that it brings all things into harmony and makes all peoples one... with their differences! True love never denies difference and diversity. Indeed, it is founded upon and rooted in these.

Our first reading this morning draws to our attention to the unifying power of the Spirit, placing as it does, great emphasis upon the diversity of races, languages, cultures that were brought together on the first Christian Pentecost day. In the Acts' account, we are shown how *all were united as one* by God's grace of love poured into their hearts.

When the Spirit is alive and at work within us we have an aptitude to love others; we are filled with a desire to become one with them – as people in love become one with each other. The union which is born between Christians – God's own graced communion which they are given to share – augurs well for the life of our Churches, but also the life of the whole world.

This is because *communion begets communion*. What we are given to live in our Christian communities has an impact upon the world around us.

It seems to me that John's mention of Jesus breathing upon the apostles, imparting to them the gift of His Spirit of forgiveness, is to be linked with the transmission of life of which the Bible speaks to us in many places, starting with the creation of Adam in the Book of Genesis. You will remember how God breathed His own breath of life, the Spirit, into Adam whom He had fashioned from the clay of the earth. Breath and Spirit are practically synonyms in the Sacred Scriptures. Both are associated with the warmth of love. More precisely, brought together, both speak to us of the healing power of forgiveness: *The Risen Christ breathed on His disciples and said to them: Receive the Holy Spirit. Those whose sins you forgive are forgiven them.*

The Scriptures teach us clearly that we are forgiven so that we may forgive in our turn. Generous graciousness – a readiness to forgive, purely out of love – is meant to emanate from each one of us who has been forgiven. In the words of the late fr. Roger of Taizé: *If (only) we were to let ourselves be clothed in forgiveness as in a garment, we would glimpse a transfiguration of our being and the brightness of a communion.* He goes on to say: *If the love that forgives became a flame burning within us... If compassionate hearts were at the beginning of everything... around us would shine, whether we knew it or not, a Gospel radiance... and these words would be illuminated from within (us): 'Love, and say it by your life!'*

Essentially what Pentecost calls us to live is love. This Solemnity should have us hear God's call to love and to give expression to love by our lives.

May the warmth of God's love breathed upon us, the intimate breath of God's love breathed into us, the fire of God's love reposing upon us, emanate from each one of us! May it touch many others for their good and greater well-being! May all those around us – everyone with whom we are called to live in communion – be caught up with us in the eternal embrace of God's love: an embrace in which He wants to hold us close to Himself and united as one with each other! The Father's arms are wide enough to hold all His children together in one loving embrace.

Amen!