



Solemnity of Pentecost



Date: Sunday, June 4, 2017 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Acts 2:1–11

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 104:1, 24, 29–31, 34 | **Response:** Psalm 104:30

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:3b–7, 12–13

Gospel Reading: John 20:19–23

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

My brothers and sisters, on this the last day of Easter, on this our Feast of Pentecost, our readings tell us the story of the descent of the Holy Spirit.

We remember that in the Bible, God the Father and God the Son have featured very prominently – but God the Holy Spirit is often only hinted at. What we call the Holy Spirit, what perhaps some of the older people in the congregation remember calling the Holy Ghost, comes from the Hebrew *ruakh* and Greek *pneuma*, words denoting “wind,” “breath,” and, by extension, a life-giving element. We remember the many times that Jesus promised to send his Spirit, and this spirit is a gift of both the Father and the Son – indeed it is the love between the Father and the Son. It is a love that animates our life and propels us onward in our pilgrimage to God, that embraces and forgives us on the way.

Now there are many works of art depicting the flames descending on the disciples, and it’s fair to say that we all have that idea in our minds. The disciples, as we heard, speak in many tongues and there is a very ‘charismatic’ feeling to the whole scene. I must admit, I’m not much of a charismatic myself – though I have respect for charismatics. I know that it was the charismatic symbol of the Church, in the beloved John, who reached the tomb first but he waited for the institutional symbol of the Church, Peter, before going ahead. I know that the Charismatics who are in touch with the Holy Spirit have great gifts. And in our 2nd reading we hear how anyone who says ‘Jesus is Lord’ must have the Spirit supporting them in some way, and here I think of the other Christian Churches, and therefore I don’t think they are truly against what we believe. They might

not possess what we call the fullness of faith, but we are all called to expand our faith, deepen our love and enlarge our hope in God every day. But one thing I must admit I do struggle with is perhaps imagining the Spirit causing people to babel in a language that is incomprehensible and has no interpretation. And there are congregations that to this day still do this. I've always preferred thinking of this Feast by imagining a different sort of tongue of flame, a different sort of burning feeling if you will, a different sort of speech. For a minute, please recall the episode on the road to Emmaus, when the disciples were dejected and wanting to escape, and now consider how the disciples have gathered together again, and this time they are afraid. Like He went in search for the disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus now appears to them in the Upper Room and tells them 'Peace be with you'. He then sends them out into the world and gives them the Holy Spirit. And this is when we imagine the tongues of flame descending on them, that represent the Holy Spirit.

Almost every day during the week I say the words "God has sent the Holy Spirit into the world for the forgiveness of sins". It is part of the formula for absolution in the confessional and in today's Gospel we see the scriptural justification for these words as the disciples are sent out and they receive the Holy Spirit with the guarantee that those sins we forgive, will be forgiven.

Now I think the tongues of flame represent both the new language but also a burning fire. I think it is the sort of fire that burned within the disciples on the road to Emmaus. On Emmaus it was a realization of how the scriptures had been fulfilled – a deeper understanding if you will, and once that understanding had been understood, they received a greater confidence to be able to explain it. Here there is the confidence and the awareness of Jesus being the Son of God, the second person in the Trinity who comes from the Father and who with the Father sends the Holy Spirit, the love between the Father and the Son. It was, I think, an encounter with the triune God.

In the first reading we heard how the disciples can now speak in different tongues. Many interpret this as an ability to speak in different languages. But what is being referred to here is the reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel. I'm sure you all remember how in the beginning of the 11th chapter of Genesis we were told that "the whole earth had one language and few words" but after mankind tried to build a tower to reach the heavens in what is known today as an area south of Baghdad, God divided them and confused their lan-

guage. In the reading today the divisions between the peoples are removed and the ability to speak in Tongues is really, I believe – and this is only my belief – the ability to speak in a new language, a universal language in which everyone understands as their own because it is the language that is universally understood and embracing of all difference. A language of forgiveness. I think if we can forgive each other, that action crosses all cultures and invites whoever is Other to see us as Brother and Sister, as a member of the community, and thus this language creates unity rather than division, inclusive belonging rather than exclusive demarcation, it fosters understanding rather than resentment, love rather than hate. The many peoples from the many nations, divided and different are at Pentecost with the reception of the Holy Spirit, made into one people of the one God. What characterizes this people is the new language that binds them, a language of forgiveness and love. That is why their hearts burned within them, why they appeared to be on fire with the Holy Spirit, because it was with a new and greater understanding that the Disciples understood their mission to go out into the world, spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who had conquered Death and sent his Spirit into the world for the forgiveness of Sins.

I'd like to say a few words to the seven teenagers who are preparing themselves to be confirmed in this coming year. The sacrament of Confirmation follows on really from the Sacrament of Baptism. Your parents wanted the faith for you. They wanted to give you the gift of faith. Now in the Sacrament of Confirmation you will deepen your faith, and you will learn about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And in being Confirmed, you will become full members of the Church. I hope that you will continue to participate, and exercise your baptism, confirming what your parents and what the whole Church desires for you, that you might come into relationship with God, and that you might know, like the disciples in the Upper Room, a firm understanding of God's love for you all.

We often come to Mass together, but we are divided in the sense that we recognize each other, but we don't know each other really. Perhaps some of us do – but a lot of us, I would say, perhaps many of us who are new, might not. Now there is always an opportunity to talk after Mass outside, and get to know one another. But not knowing each other's names, very often it's very difficult to make that first introduction.

Since this is the Feast of Pentecost, a celebration of the Unity of the Church, today we've asked you to write your name on a sticker and put it on your chest. Please at the Sign of Peace which we shall celebrate just now, greet each other by name and let us pray for each other – that whatever Gifts the Spirit gives us, we will nurture and use them to God's greater glory.

Let us also pray for the victims of terror and despair in the world – that they might be converted by the power of the Holy Spirit who offers faith, love and hope, so sorely needed in our times today.

Let us pray for those in public office, that they might be inspired by the truth to never stray far from it, and to always work for our common Good. Amen.

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