

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” PENTECOST

Acts 2: 1-11 Psalm 104 I Cor 12: 3b--7, 12-13 John 20: 19-23

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The first reading and the Gospel present two different perspectives on the Pentecost event. They aren't meant to be reconciled, rather, the reader is to respect the theological insights of each. Luke, the author of Acts, and John have their own purposes and are addressing different communities as they present the gift of the Spirit to the early church. We will look at them separately, the preacher would be wise to choose just one to aid in focusing the preaching. (Or preach on the second reading, Paul's take on the creative presence of the Spirit in the church.)

Luke has previously recounted the promise of the Spirit (1: 4-5, 8). When the gift comes it is not reserved to a special few intimates. (Cf. today's "Quotable" below) The leaders aren't the only ones to get the gift, for the fiery tongues come to rest "on each of them"---all were gathered, we are told, and each receives the gift. That must have been surprising since, by worldly standards, only the highly qualified, influential or well-placed receive special benefits. But this is a new kind of community, showing new life and a new manner of ties to one another. This gift of the Spirit seems rather indiscriminate to those of us who like things orderly, "tried and tested." The crowd outside also gets special favors as "each one heard" the disciples speaking to them "in his/her own language."

For Luke, the Spirit's arrival is exuberant. While the tongues of fire and the sound of a strong driving wind are two images Luke uses to describe the Spirit's entrance on the scene, I think champagne would also do to catch the moment. The Spirit seem to be gushing out all over the place. This isn't champagne in a bottle, all corked up. This is champagne when the cork has been popped off. It's a drink of celebration, with hugs, kisses, pats on the back, lots of noise, singing and broad ear-to-ear smiles. Tears too. And throw in--- disbelief, wonder and relief. It's the noise of the locker room after winning the World Series. Everyone gets a bath--- the players still sweaty from the competition; coaches and managers; club owners in expensive suits with big cigars in hand; the reporters, the ink on their notepads smearing and their camera lens streaked with the champagne spray. Couldn't get

the champagne back into the bottle even if you wanted.

We drink champagne at weddings; Pentecost celebrates the special permanent union between God and the church. Champagne is used to toast the successful end of a project; Christ's work on earth is done. Champagne toasts are also for beginnings, a marriage or business partnerships, new born babies and store-openings. Pentecost champagne, the bubbly Spirit, is for the beginning of a new life for believers. The new work ahead will require the working and breathing together of the Spirit and disciples. (Champagne is also smashed over the bows of newly christened ships, but that may not be such a good image, many are military vessels and, in general, the whole ritual seems like a waste of good wine to me!) This Lucan account shows the Spirit is bubbly, intoxicating, barrier-breaking and wants to "bring 'em all in!" Let's have a party and let's not leave anyone out! If they don't understand the Galilean dialect, the Spirit seems to be saying, then I'll get through in their own language so that they'll all feel welcome!"

There are a lot of exclamation points in today's narrative, maybe not in the text as much as in the mood Luke evokes. Preachers would do well to use a few themselves today, especially if Luke is your focus. The preacher/reader just has to review the words and images Luke uses to get the sense of excitement he is trying to convey: "suddenly... noise... strong driving wind... filled the entire house...fire...enabled...proclaim...confused...astounded...amazement...mighty acts of God."

Things were certainly looking up for the once dispirited disciples. Some of us just need to know this champagne-aspect of the Holy Spirit---that things can change; a powerful God is behind us; what we can't do on our own needn't discourage us because God is in the mix and God is no wimp on our behalf. Addictions can be broken, barriers removed, new beginnings are possible, defeat isn't the end; a drooping spirit can be roused; risks can be taken and prayer can be refreshing again. Sometimes we just need to know that God's life is that full and rich; that creative and filled with potential for us and that nothing can defeat God. As Paul says, nothing can separate us from the love of this God. The champagne is out of the bottle, nothing can put it back in and the drink is there for all of us.

But the Spirit doesn't always work with such pyrotechnics. In fact, if my experience is any clue, we don't often, if ever, get such displays. Some never see

such signs that clearly indicate the creative force of God at work. Maybe that's why we have John's account of the giving of the Spirit. It's for us "pluggers"—day-by-day Christians who: try to live a good life (not a perfect one); work hard raising the kids; struggle to make a marriage work; don't cheat on their taxes or lie to get out of a predicament; volunteer to tutor troubled kids; throw a couple extra bucks in the collection basket, even when things are tight; let go of a grudge; help a new co-worker get adjusted; are friendly to strangers at church; take the kids out for pizza after the soccer match, etc. You know these people, they are most of the people in the pews on Sunday, giving thanks for their ordinary gifts and graces and begging for a little help in a current small or big crisis.

John's account seems more "everyday"---if you can call a visit through closed doors by the risen Christ an "everyday event!" But there definitely is a quieter atmosphere in the gathering of the disciples. They are afraid as they think about the hostile world outside their little group and the absence of their usual supportive Jesus. But he appears and reassures them with a double peace greeting. Since he is about to tell them they have to leave their protective covering, go out and be his instruments of peace and reconciliation, they are going to need a double reassurance of peace. In addition, no matter what their past dreadful failures as his disciples, Jesus' reassurance of peace toward them must have been consoling. If he could forgive and forget their transgressions and betrayals then this Spirit of his they are receiving will enable them to do the same for others---bring forgiveness and peace to those alienated from each other and God. Nice to know they will have Christ's Spirit to continue instructing them as they go out!

This Spirit, whether in Luke's interpretation or John's touches a common theme (Paul will have still more to say about the Spirit's work in his letters, especially in Romans.) The Spirit isn't up ahead of us, cleaning out and arranging our heavenly quarters for our arrival---someday. Rather, the Spirit is here and now, urging us out to work at community building, peace and justice, love and reconciliation; helping us overcome destructive addictions, opening our eyes to God, so present in the world around us--- in others, nature and in the wonders of our own beings. With all the troubles in our church these days, we are tempted to go to church on Sunday, seal the doors and be together commiserating for a while. But this Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Christ, for whom closed doors are not an impassable barrier; nor are they part of a fortress to keep us in.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*. (New York: Continuum, 1999).

If you are thinking about reading one serious theological book this summer, here it is. She helps make connections between the living and the dead, we humans and the rest of the created world. Reviews the thoughts of significant past and present theologians and then gives her own take on such traditional topics as heaven, hell, purgatory, saints, the Spirit, prayer, holiness, etc. This is a wonderful read by a creative and important theologian.

QUOTABLE

Responding to the amazement and criticism of devout Jews from every nation under heaven who had traveled to Jerusalem for the feast but could not make heads or tails out of the exuberant witness of the women and men, Peter explains the meaning of what was going on.... The gift of the Spirit to *all flesh*, and not just to chosen individuals, is a mark of the messianic age. Even the lowest of the low, slave women, will find their voice and speak in the name of God. And this prophecy now comes alive as “all of them,” the women and men of the crucified prophet’s circle, receive the Holy Spirit and, as “all of them,” a tongue of fire on each head and burning in each heart, begin to speak in their own voices in diverse tongues. They testify to the mighty and transformative ways of the living God who raises up the crucified, thereby making possible a new kind of hope in the teeth of human injustice and sinfulness. The whole community receives the gift of the Spirit for the sake of the world.

This same intuition surfaces, in a less dramatic, more didactic fashion, in the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the call of the whole church to holiness. Through baptism persons are justified in Christ and, receiving the Spirit, become sharers in the divine nature. “In this way they are really made holy.” [*Lumen Gentium*, no. 40] This same holiness, furthermore, is essentially the same for all insofar as it is a gift of participation in divine life. There are not different types of holiness, one for lay persons and another for those in religious life or ordained ministry. There is not one kind of indwelling of the Spirit for officeholders or public personages in the church and another for unnoticed, faithful members. Rather, “in the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God.” [*L.G.*, no. 41]. One and the same holiness: the church is not divided into saints and non-saints. Because of

Wisdom's generous work, all are called to be holy, to be saints; the vocation of being friends of God and prophets shapes the life of everyone in the community.
---Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*. p. 222.

We need to be on fire again,
for our hope is no longer an easy hope.
We live in a culture of despair
within which Pentecost can no longer be taken for granted.
Hence we must take upon ourselves the burden of the times and refuse to make the Holy Spirit a piece of private property
but a spirit that matters.

---Mary Jo Leddy (Quoted by Ronald Rolheiser in, *THE HOLY LONGING: THE SEARCH FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY*, page 43.)

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com