

First Impressions PENTECOST -C-

Acts 2: 1-11 Ps. 104; Romans 8: 8-17; John 14: 15-16, 23b-26; or John 20: 19-23

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

First a little background on this feast. Pentecost isn't a feast that began when the tongues of fire appeared, and the sound of strong driving wind filled the room where Jesus' disciples were gathered. Rather, Pentecost was first a feast of the Jewish people. It celebrated fifty days after the Passover, and was called the Feast of Unleavened bread, or the Feast of Weeks. At first it was an agricultural feast, a celebration of the wheat harvest. Pentecost's significance in the Jewish community expanded to include the remembrance of God's giving the law on Sinai. Thus, it was a celebration of the new covenanted community formed by God during the trials in the desert.

This all-too-quick review of the origins of Pentecost is not meant to be a history lesson. But as we reflect on its origins, we can see how "loaded" with meaning and imagery this feast is for Christians. The original feast was connected to Passover and so for us, Pentecost is linked to Jesus' suffering, death and exaltation at God's right hand. It is a harvest feast too because the disciples, gathered to receive the Spirit, were the "harvest" of Jesus' labors and we too are the fruits of his work. Notice the references to harvest and gathering in our Acts reading: "the time of Pentecost was fulfilled;" "the noise like a strong driving wind filled the entire house" and that the gathered community was "filled with the Holy Spirit." In addition, the large crowds drawn by the sound were from, "every nation under heaven." All this talk of fulfillment and people gathered together sounds like harvest time to me and suggests that Pentecost hasn't lost its harvest roots. The prophets had suggested that the dispersed would be gathered together on Mount Zion. Now on Pentecost, devout Jews from all the nations (Parthians, Medes, Elamites, etc.) are gathered in Jerusalem, God's city (Is. 2: 2-4).

This first community, recipients of the Holy Spirit, was open to all peoples, "...we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." Because of idolatry and pride Babel became the symbol of human hubris and was marked by the confusion of language among peoples (Gen. 11: 1-9). Babel was the sign of division and dispersion; Pentecost that of unity and community. The old order has passed away; people are united under God's Spirit.

This liturgical cycle we have been focusing on Luke's gospel and Luke is also the author of Acts. The Holy Spirit has a prominent role in Luke's writings. The infancy narratives tell us that the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and the Word became flesh. The Spirit also filled

Elizabeth, Zechariah, Anna and Simeon with thanks and joy. The Holy Spirit is a living and active presence in Jesus' ministry. Just as his baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry, now Pentecost, with its baptism in the Holy Spirit, marks the beginning of the church's ministry to the world. Acts begins with the coming of the Spirit on the early church. Soon those who received the Spirit will "act"—empowered by the Spirit, they will go to the ends of the earth, to all people and languages to proclaim the gospel. Acts has been called "the Gospel of the Holy Spirit." It is less an account of what the first Christians did, and more the narrative of what believers can do who have received the "tongues as of fire." The harvest time has begun, and the church will gather the wheat that Jesus planted with his life's blood. Pentecost truly is a feast of a new harvest.

While the bible is an account of God's activities on our behalf, it also tells a lot about the importance of waiting on the part of God's faithful people. During this Easter season we have been celebrating God's very good work in Jesus. Jesus was sent by God and throughout his life and in his dying stayed faithful to God and his mission on our behalf. Our Spirit-filled messiah did not turn away even though his path took him to the grave.

God was active throughout Jesus' life and did not abandon him but raised him up. Meanwhile, aware of all God has been doing, we have been hearing Jesus' instruction to "wait" for the coming of the Spirit. Faithful biblical people are used to waiting. For long generations Israel waited and longed for the coming of the messiah. The gospels show the fruits of that waiting in the arrival of Jesus and his Spirit-filled mission on our behalf. For example, Luke's gospel shows Anna and Simeon's waiting and praying in the temple for the fulfillment of God's promises. After the resurrection the disciples waited and hoped for the promised Spirit to come to fill the open space left in their spirits by Jesus' ascension. While the disciples were waiting, God again acted and sent the fiery Spirit to comfort and strengthen them.

No one is suggesting we put aside all our labors and concerns and sit around, do nothing and "wait on the Lord." We have already received the gift of the Spirit and have been sent on mission to proclaim the Risen Christ through our words and actions. But there still is a longing within us. Can you feel it, especially in the in-between times when we pause to catch our breath? Call it "waiting." We are one community with our Jewish ancestors and Jesus' first followers. We are waiting and groaning. A quick look over the maps of the world, the church and our personal lives brings to vivid reminder that, even though we may be busy about the Lord's work—we are still waiting. We wait and groan for an end to the world's miseries; our church's brokenness; our family's divisions and nature's devastation.

Pentecost was a reminder to the disciples that God had not forgotten them. Jesus was no longer

with them but, as he promised, they would not be left orphans. Our active God sent them the Spirit and on this day we celebrate the Spirit's coming and the birth of the church. Those gathered in the upper room became a community and began to breathe by means of a new breath—the breath of the Spirit—and to speak in a new way that would unite scattered people under the “tongues as of fire.” Was it such a big deal on Pentecost that people were speaking in strange tongues? Wasn't it more that so many God seekers (“devout Jews from every nation”) heard the welcoming message of the gospel in utterances they understood from the disciples? Wasn't that the real attraction?

Pentecost assures us that God wants to be one with us in helping communicate God's blessing upon all of creation. As permanent and grinding as the present age seems world dominance by a few powerful nations; poverty shrouding most of the planet's peoples; depletion of the earth's resources; unending violence and the quagmire of war; the displacement of millions—nevertheless, today we celebrate God's continual presence with us as we preach and heal, reach out to the needy and help forge a Spirit-inspired unity among all people.

Do you think Luke is suggesting by this spectacular Pentecost event that the Spirit came, manifested him/herself and left? Hardly, since throughout the rest of Acts the early church, especially Peter and Paul, formed by the Spirit, show a keen awareness of being Spirit led. Which means we modern Christians have to draw the conclusion that the Spirit is constantly with us now. We are a Pentecost people and today is Pentecost. So are tomorrow and each day after that! What can we do to show our faith in the Spirit's abiding presence in our church?

We can work at breaking down any obstacles newcomers encounter when they try to join us. We can make sure “many tongues” are celebrated at our gatherings, in ritual, song and hospitality. We preachers could speak more about the Spirit's presence with us now, just as it was in Jesus' ministry. We can start acting less like a private club and reach out to those on the edges of our society. With Pentecost, the under classes and gentile outsiders were given a privileged position in the community of believers.

Under the Pentecost Spirit, the believers were no longer a disjointed and dispirited group. They were empowered by the Spirit to live as Jesus did, for his power was now theirs. Is that possible for us too? Yes, because today and tomorrow and all the days afterward, we celebrate Pentecost.

QUOTABLE

"A Wedding Poem": by Thomas R. Smith, (from *Waking before Dawn*. Red Dragonfly Press)

Bright faces surround the woman in white,
the man in black, the sweetness of their attention
to each other a shine rising toward the high ceiling.
The men watch the groom, and the women
the bride, as they speak their candle-lit vows,
as if there were something in it for us personally.

Worn by the distances we the already-married
have traveled down the road on which these two
are setting out, we leave the dust of the journey
outside the door of this house where tonight no word
is casual, no posture undignified, and each
becomes again handsome in them, beautiful in them.

-----quoted in Garrison Keeler's , "Writers Almanac" for Sunday, May 6, 2007

You can read a poem, plus get literary historical notes each day, at
<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/>

JUSTICE NOTES

"Each one heard them speaking in his own language, and they were astounded."

Act 2:6-7

Every year we hear on Pentecost that the power of God's Spirit was experienced in the disciples' understanding each other despite speaking in different languages.

"Since the founding, the United States has received immigrants from around the world who have found opportunity and safe haven in a new land. The labor, values, and beliefs of immigrants from throughout the world have transformed the United States from a loose group of colonies into one of the leading democracies in the world today, still grounded in the firm belief that newcomers offer new energy, hope and cultural diversity.

Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving.” (Strangers No Longer, A Pastoral Letter From the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States)

Prayer is one of our common languages, understood by God in whatever language we speak and by each other in the signs of love which prayer inspires. Following is a Prayer written by Cardinal McCarrick of Washington DC. Please consider making it your own as we search for ways as church and as nation to welcome those who hope to make a better life among us, and who speak, in the words of today’s readings, “many languages”.

I pray for those who remain in the shadows of our society, for those who are unable to defend their rights or give their full talents to their communities without fear.

I pray for those who feel compelled to risk their lives in crossing the vast desert that soon their suffering may end.

I pray for our elected officials that they may have wisdom and courage - the wisdom that they may understand the need for change and the courage that they might accomplish it.

May the Lord bless our road ahead.. May we walk it always in a civil and peaceful way so that our voices may be heard by all Americans and that understanding and education about the rights of immigrants can bear fruit in our land.

Please refer to the wonderful website of the Catholic Bishops www.justiceforimmigrants.org. It is filled with current information on immigration, on legislation on Catholic Social teaching and the position of our US Catholic Bishops on the subject of immigration.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty – not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors,

catechists, educators and parishioners – to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

----- (“Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice,” U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith against the Death Penalty.” Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to...

- William Gregory #0156529 (On death row since 8/15/94)
- LeRoy Mc Neil #0275780 (11/15/96)
- Gary A. Trull #0412440 (11/19/96)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. CD Available: “FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C.” 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 PDF) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer.

To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year C–CD” button on the left 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. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)

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. "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, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you and “Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, O.P.,

Promoter of Preaching,

Southern Dominican Province, USA

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