

Pentecost 2018. Acts 2:1-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear friends, happy birthday of the Church to us all! Of course here I mean Catholic or Christian or universal Church and not any denominations specifically. Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian Church in general and all our confessions and denominations in particular, East and West.

You could say with Pentecost event the Church ceased being a club of believers and entered a new phase, a phase of expansion, of universality and all-validity. The church became catholic, καθ-ολόν, global and for everyone.

Great people quite often tend to be controversial people. Take for example Winston Churchill, hailed and loved as the "man of the hour" during the Second World War. He encouraged the Brits to defy the Nazi war machine, even at the cost of "blood, sweat, and tears." However, when the war was barely over, England turned its back on its war hero. Churchill, instead of being hailed and loved, was now hated and loathed.

When the greatest man who ever lived moved among people, similar reactions emerged. Apostle John remarks casually in the opening chapter of his Gospel, "*He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him*" (Jn 1:11).

As the gospel's story unfolds, we notice that Jesus was either worshiped or whipped, followed or flogged, crowned or crucified. The presence of Jesus elicits both responses. While hundreds of people thronged towards him in Galilee and Judea, his hometown people in Nazareth attempted to throw him off the cliff to kill him.

Paul was undoubtedly the greatest missionary of the early Christian Church. The Book of Acts tells us that the message he brought was either received with joy or ridiculed with jest. In fact, the messenger himself was either gratefully embraced or became gruesomely embattled.

Like the messenger, the gospel message acts like double-edged sword. It can function like a surgical knife or like a switchblade. The same message can bring deliverance as well as disaster.

It just so happens that the birthday of our Church is also very controversial, having given birth to countless more or less strange and out-of-proportion teachings and movements valuing the gift of tongues and/or healing through spirit above all else.

When the Holy Spirit demonstrates his divine presence through the signs of wind, fire, and speaking in different languages, Luke informs us about the two different reactions. "*Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?' Some,*

however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.'" There are seekers and there are scoffers.

It is at this point that Peter stands up to clarify this seemingly confusing situation. Says Peter, "*Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!*" *These men may well be intoxicated, but not with young wine, but with the new wine of the Holy Spirit. Listen, this is what is taking place here today. "No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.'*"

If you will, here the Holy Spirit introduces explicit signs of God's grace. In Numbers 11, we find the intriguing story of Eldad and Medad, listed among the elders of Israel, to whom the Lord gave the gift of prophecy. When this extraordinary phenomenon was reported to Joshua, he suggested to Moses that he stop them.

This is Moses' reply, "*Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!*"

Well, it has happened. Moses' wish becomes prophecy fulfilled. When God unleashes his Holy Spirit upon his people on the day of Pentecost, all prophetic tongues break loose and there is no stopping.

Apostle Peter makes that abundantly vivid when he sees in this Pentecost event the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel (2:28-32). In the process of this fulfilment, old and tough barriers are eliminated and erased. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon all flesh, all people. Joel mentions young men who see visions and old men who dream dreams. Gone is the age barrier.

The Holy Spirit gifts not only Eldad and Medad, elders in Israel, with prophetic powers, but now also their sons. Gone is also the gender barrier. Prophecy, visions, dreams and the gift of the Spirit are given to daughters as well as sons, to women as well as men. What was an exception in the era of the Old Covenant now becomes the accepted norm.

Gone are the age barriers. Gone are the gender barriers. We may add: gone are the social barriers, the educational barriers, and the racial barriers. The Holy Spirit includes and calls all God's people, the rich and the ragged, the scholars and the unschooled, to "*declaring the wonders of God*".

However, the Holy Spirit not only introduces explicit signs of God's grace. He also introduces explosive signals of God's judgment. Peter not only quotes Joel 2:28-29, he

also quotes Joel 2:30-32. *"I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord."* All of this smells more of judgment than of grace.

They remind us what Jesus himself spoke of when he responded to his disciples' question concerning his coming and the end of the age. Jesus talked about the fact that *"the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."* All of this will take place *"before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord."*

Peter wants to communicate on this Day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit comes both in judgment as well as in grace. The wind, the fire, and the tongues not only illustrate that the Holy Spirit has powerfully invaded our humanity with the Lord's word of grace; but they also offer a prelude of the Lord's coming in judgment. For the earnest seekers, Pentecost means: grace has broken in upon you!

We notice that Peter concludes his quotation from Joel's prophecy with a challenge, an invitation. *"And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* Here the Holy Spirit introduces an expressive signature of God's salvation. This is a word for seekers and scoffers alike. The divine invitation is thrown to all drowning victims, to you and me.

However, the condition for salvation is for *"everyone who calls on the name of the Lord!"* The phrase *"calling on the name of the Lord"* is the OT's equivalence of *"worshiping the Lord."* It is to bow before him, to offer *"your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God"* (Rom 12:1).

That's the Good News of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit continues the ministry of Jesus. It's a ministry of salvation, a ministry of hope, a ministry of renewal. Jesus is ascended, but his ministry continues through Peter, John, Thomas and Paul; it continues through organists and music teams, through teachers, and through Christian couples sharing their faith with their neighbours. Jesus' ministry continues through all of God's people.

It was expected, because our Lord had promised. But it was still a surprise—what it was, how it was. The resurrected Christ had promised the Holy Spirit, and had promised that the disciples would see him again. But the "how" was unclear, and when both promises were fulfilled at Pentecost, they stood awestruck and prayed in entirely new languages of the wonderful works of the Lord.

They had been baptised – soaked - with the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of God that had filled King Saul, and King David, the prophets, John the Baptist and even Jesus himself. They looked at each other and realised that they were indeed being transformed into

images of Christ. Christ had returned in a way that could transform the world, because Christ had manifested himself in their own hearts and minds and tongues.

Now let's be clear about something very important. It is true that Divine public revelation ended with the death of the last Apostle. In the Apostolic age, all that God revealed for the salvation of the human race was given to the Church. The Church passes that on in each generation through Scripture and Tradition.

But the action of the Divine Spirit did not end then. That action remains in the Church. How so? Through the gifts of the Holy Spirit given collectively and individually to the Body of Christ. Paul lists them in several places. They are given to us for the up-building of the Church.

We receive them in baptism and they are reaffirmed in confirmation, if we allow them to be. They are God's power alive in our hearts and minds and hands and lips. They are the mechanisms by which Jesus appears in our world today.

The secular world has called the age we live in "post-Christian." It seems people of this age strive to be free from Christian morals, the morals that made Western civilisation human and humane. For example, some people, probably feeling vaguely offended and trying to be active members of our ridiculous modern society of taking offence, want women to be allowed to visit Mount Athos peninsula in Greece.

Would this make the world a better place? I seriously doubt it. It would only serve some ignorant overpaid politician's deeply egotistical interests of getting even more overpaid.

This reminds me of the "Age of Enlightenment". Mankind rejoiced in their scientific revolution, God seemed redundant and sky seemed to be too low a limit. It all ended with the French Revolution in 1789. Then, not too much later, 1st World War happened. Then the 2nd. It became painfully obvious that we're not as smart as we'd like to think.

God wants us to live, not in a post-Christian world, but in a post-Pentecost world, open to the actions and promptings of the Spirit of God.

So let's exercise our spiritual gifts, whether they be prayer or prophecy or service or administration. Let's place ourselves in the service of God, just as God, in Christ, has placed himself in the service of humankind.

Pentecost means that the world is set ablaze. A new era has been ushered in. It's an era of grace and salvation, of mission and evangelism. Today is still the day of grace. *"And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!"*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.