



Pentecost 2006.

Acts 2: 1-11 Galatians 5: 16-23 John 15: 26-27, 16: 12-15

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Spirit. May this celebration call us to a renewed understanding of church in all its manifold expressions. Somehow over the years the concept of church has settled into a pattern where structure seems to dominate spirit.

Vatican II called us to re-visit our roots as church to come to a renewed understanding of our spiritual genealogy. As church we are born out of communion, a communion which makes things “be” as one theologian put it. The church is a sacrament of communion. That is, it is a visible sign of the action of God in our midst. The church is the gathering of **all** members. A question which we are called to face is how the universal nature of the church is made manifest in the local community. The symbols and the story of Pentecost have much to tell us about the early churches’ recognition of their mission to make visible the all-embracing love of God.

Let us reflect on the story. It was the commemoration of the giving of the Covenant on Sinai. They were all together in one place. Who was present? We can assume all those who now believed in resurrection and were part of the new community. It was not enough to have admired Jesus, or even to have walked alongside Jesus. Ascension pointed to a break between the followers of Jesus in his lifetime, and the group who proclaimed Christ risen. This group were beginning the journey from devotee to disciple by way of belief in and hope for, a new future for all.

Many groups have stayed together after the death of a significant charismatic leader but the Christian Testament recognises a shift in the community between the group who were witnesses to the words and deeds of Jesus and the group that came to be galled Ekklesia (church). Then community of Acts are those who are brought together by hearing the Good News, by Baptism and Eucharist. Luke, who is the author of the Narrative, uses the work Ekklesia sixteen times in Acts but not at all in his Gospel.

We could call the Pentecost community the basic cell of the church because it is an image of the nature of the new group. The gathered community experienced the presence of God with them. The God of Sinai, the God of the desert, the God that inhabits no-man’s-land, is the God who establishes this people.

The fire that led the people in the darkness of their wanderings now splits and becomes many fires. The leadership is not held by one person but resides in the group. All were filled with the Holy Spirit.

The began to proclaim in foreign tongues. Language is special, it identifies us, it can be inclusive and exclusive. The loss of the mother tongue is the loss of tribal memory. The language of the gospel proclamation is not the possession of one group but belongs to all. Without a multiplicity of languages the gospel becomes the possession of one group and God becomes an idol shaped in the image of the group.

The story evoked by the next scene is Babel. (Gen. 11: 1-9) Jews had assembled for a festival. They came from all around the Mediterranean. They belonged to different nations and had a variety of first languages. They heard the Gospel in their own native tongues. First hand! This is basic evangelisation.

Babel, the human project destroyed by confusion of spiritual direction, the attempt to abandon humanness for a false divinity, is re-visited by showing that true humanity is born of the unity created by embracing difference. Our godliness is not an escape from our situation but an opening up to the gift of the other in our situation. Don't stand looking up to heaven. God is in your midst.

Church is not a corporation with a CEO. It is a church of churches, a gathering of many bodies, each with their own character and flavour, not all will express their understanding of mission in exactly the same way, but all will base their mission on the same ideals spelt out for us in the Beatitudes.

When we have acknowledges our differences and accepted our differences then we will know the power of unity which gathers the peoples of the world into the one family; this is our testimony.

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