

Commentary to the 6th Sunday of Easter – Year A –

Without the Spirit, the Gospel is but a doctrine



Introduction

We usually imagine the Spirit as something invisible, intangible, quite the opposite of what is material. This way of understanding it is not biblical. The Spirit is very real, is a breath, a strong breath. God is Spirit inasmuch as there is in him an overwhelming and uncontrollable force, similar to the strong wind. The dream of man is to be made partaker of this Spirit.

The rabbis taught that in man there are two tendencies: a bad one born at the time of conception and a good one that is manifested only at the age of thirteen. The evil inclination exercises its power ever since man is in the embryo and can dominate him until the seventies and even eighties. How to resist them?

The rabbis gave these tips: “God created the evil inclination and the Torah, the Law, as an antidote to it. If you engaged yourself with the Torah you will not fall into its power.” “If a despicable temptation comes to you, drag it to the house where the Torah is studied.” “When you engage yourself with the Torah, your evil inclination is given to your power and not you in the power of evil.”

If you were wrong then the Torah is like a signposting: it indicates the right direction, but it does not move the car. This needs a driving force that leads it to the destination.

Jesus has not taught only “the way”. He communicated his Spirit, his force to reach the goal.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Create in us, O Lord, a new heart, infuse in us your Holy Spirit.”

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |

Gospel-----

First reading: Acts 8:5-8,14-17

For five or six years after the death of Jesus, the church did not spread outside of the city of Jerusalem. The apostles did not yet understand that the gospel was to be proclaimed throughout the whole world. This universal opening was triggered by a dramatic event: the persecution unleashed against the young community after the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1-4). The persecution did not indiscriminately hit all Christians, but only the group of the Hellenists we talked about last Sunday. The Jewish Christians and the apostles themselves, however, were left in peace. The Jews thought that they could still reason out with them. In fact, they showed themselves respectful and faithful to the law of Moses and the traditions, while the Hellenists were a danger to the Jewish religious structure.

Persecuted Christians fled from Jerusalem and dispersed to all cities of Palestine. Some seek refuge in the homes of relatives or friends living abroad, in Syria and in the other provinces of the Roman Empire.

Wherever they arrived, these fugitives announced to the brother Jews the good news of Christ's resurrection. In Antioch, someone had already begun to speak of Jesus also to the Gentiles. It was the beginning of a new era for the church which ceased to be linked solely to Israel and starts to open up to other people, to those who were not descendants of Abraham.

Today's reading tells what happened to Philip.

Last Sunday, we have already heard something about him. He was one of those chosen to serve the poor. He is, therefore, a Hellenist. In order not to end up like Stephen he went northbound. He arrived in Samaria and commenced to preach the gospel and to baptize those who adhered to the faith. The Spirit accompanied the work of this first missionary giving strength to his words and confirming his announcement with signs. The life of the people of that city changed radically and they were all filled with joy (vv. 5-8).

The second part of the reading (vv. 14-17) depicts the apostles Peter and John visiting the baptized in Samaria. This visit is born from the need to unite the new communities that were beginning to arise with the mother church of Jerusalem. Upon their arrival, the two apostles lay their hands on the new Christians to communicate to them the Spirit.

Then one asks: how is it possible that the Samaritans, baptized by Philip, had not received the Spirit? Is this gift not perhaps conferred through baptism?

Certainly. The Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit at the moment of baptism. However, this divine

presence in them had not caused the extraordinary outward manifestations that used to occur in the early days of the church. Let us recall: the baptized began to speak in other different tongues, to prophesy, to be rapt in ecstasy. Immediately after receiving the laying on of hands by Peter and John, these phenomena occurred even among the Samaritans.

Luke relates this episode to make us understand that where the gospel is announced, there new communities spontaneously arise. However, they do not need to grow, develop and live in a completely autonomous and independent way. It is necessary that they establish bonds of communion with the universal church. Only then the Spirit will fully manifest itself in them.

Second reading: 1 Peter 3:15-18

After having touched on the issue of slavery, the preacher feels that his listeners need an enlightening word on the painful situation the community is experiencing. The more or less violent persecution broke out like bursting fire and will continue for approximately two hundred and fifty years. The newly baptized must know that difficult time awaits them. They must not be surprised as if it is something unforeseen, unexpected and unusual (1 Pt 4:12). “All those who wish to live fully in Jesus Christ—even Paul assures—will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). How should the disciples behave with those who ridicule and make a mockery of their faith?

Above all, they are invited to be aware of the fact that Christ is near them, accompanies and is in their heart (v. 15). The unleashed hate is not against them, but against the Lord.

They must be always ready to respond to whoever asks for a reason for the hope that enlivens them. Hence there is the need to build on a solid foundation, on profound convictions of their faith. One who is ruled by passing emotions, devotional intimacies, miraculous enthusiasm, is fragile, precarious and uncertain. Only when one refers to the word of God that one is firm, solid, stable (Rom 10:17). The one who owns it has no difficulty in giving justification and to demonstrate that it leads to a serious, reliable and wise choice of life.

Peter also shows to non-believers how to give answers.

Whether they are asked by private citizens or are called to respond to public officials, the Christian believer must avoid every offensive, less respectful, irreverent word. Their language must always be inspired by sweetness, respect and right conscience (v. 16). Polemics, aggressiveness, verbal violence help the discussion to prevail but they do not let the persons capture the evangelical proposal, which is the only goal of which the disciple must aim at (vv. 16-17).

The passage concludes by recalling the example of Christ: he also suffered for practicing justice; his disciples certainly cannot expect a different fate (Mt 10:25).

Gospel: John 14:15-21

Even today's Gospel, like last Sunday's, is taken from the first of three farewell speeches given by Jesus at the Last Supper.

The disciples have understood that Jesus is leaving them. They are sad and they ask themselves how could they continue to be united and to love him if he is gone.

Jesus promised not to leave them alone, without protection and guidance. He said that he will pray to the Father, and he will "send the other Paraclete" who will always be with them (v. 16). It is the promise of the gift of that Spirit that Jesus possesses in fullness (Lk 4:1,14,18) and will be infused into the disciples.

Jesus clarifies (vv. 15,17) that the Spirit could be received only by those who are in accord with him, with his plans and his works of love. The world cannot receive it.

What is this world to which the Spirit is not destined? Are they the pagans, those far away who do not belong to the group of the disciples or the members of other religions?

The world as Jesus intends is not the persons, but those parts in the heart of the person—of each person—wherein darkness, sin, death reign. Where there is hatred, concupiscence, unregulated passion... there the world is present with its spirit, contrary to that of Christ's. Paul reminds the Corinthians of it as they allowed themselves to be guided by human wisdom.

The Spirit is called by two names. He is called the Comforter (Paracito) and the Spirit of truth. These are the two functions he exercises on believers.

Comforter is not a good translation of the greek Parakletos. Paraclete is a term taken from the forensic language and indicates the one who is called to be beside.

In ancient times, there was no establishment of lawyers; each defendant had to defend himself, trying to bring witnesses to exonerate the allegations. It happened sometimes that some, though not guilty, was unable to prove his innocence or that, despite having committed the crime, deserved forgiveness. For him, there remained one last hope: that in the midst of the assembly there would be a person honored by all for his moral integrity. That blameless person, without uttering any word, would get up and would go to place himself at his side. This gesture is equivalent to an acquittal. No one would have dared to ask for more condemnation. This "defender" is called the "Paraclete" that is, "one who is called to the side of another who finds himself in trouble."

The meaning of this first title is, therefore, protector, helper, defender.

Jesus promises his disciples another Paraclete, since they already have one, he himself as John explains in his first letter: "My little children, I write you these things so that you may not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have a Paraclete by the Father's side: the righteous Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 2:1).

And Jesus is the Paraclete inasmuch as our advocate with the Father not because he defends us from his wrath, provoked by our sins (the Father is always on our side, as Jesus). He protects us against our accuser, our opponent, sin. The enemy is sin and Jesus knows how to refute and reduce it to impotence.

The second Paraclete's task is not to replace the first, but to fulfill a mission. In fact, he is sent together with Jesus who "returns" in the midst of his own (v. 18). Jesus is not going away; he simply changed the type of presence, not anymore the physical one, but that of the Risen One. His staying with his disciples is a new way, infinitely more real—even in its invisibility—more durable, unlimited than before.

The Spirit is the Paraclete because he helps the disciples in their battle against the world that is against the forces of evil (Jn 16:7-11).

John reminds the Christians of his community this truth so that, in the midst of the difficulties of life, they won't be discouraged, despaired, not lose the serenity, peace of heart and joy. The disciple believes in the assistance of the Spirit. He is not afraid, not broken down even when he has to admit that there are still so many spiritual miseries, frailties, so many evil inclinations. He is convinced of the strength of the Paraclete and he is sure not to be defeated.

The second title—which sets out another function of the Paraclete—Is the Spirit of truth.

His work in the service of truth is expressed in various ways.

Let's start with the simplest. We all know what happens when a story goes from mouth to mouth. It is subject to deformations, is altered to such an extent as to become unrecognizable.

The message of Jesus is destined to all people. It must be preached until the ends of the world. Who assures us that it won't be corrupted, won't undergo deviant interpretations? Humanly speaking the venture seems desperate. However, we have the certainty that all will be able to attain from the pure source of the gospel. It is because in the church, charged to announce it, the force of the Spirit of truth promised by Jesus is working.

His service to the truth is not limited to this part that we could call negative. He does not impede only errors that are introduced in the transmission of the message of Christ. He performs another positive function: he introduces the disciples to the fullness of the truth.

There are truths that Jesus has not explicitly dealt with or that has developed in all its details because the disciples were not able to understand them (Jn 16:12-15). He knew that, along the centuries, there would arise new problems and questions. Where would authentic responses, conformed to his thoughts, be found?

Jesus promises the intervention of the Spirit also at this level: He is charged to introduce the disciples to the discovery of the whole truth. He will not say anything new or contrary to him. He will help to capture his message to the very end, until the very last consequences.

The duty of Christians is to remain open to the impulse of the Spirit who always reveals new things. He is, by his nature, the one who renews the face of the earth (Ps 104:30).

It is a sin against the Spirit (and very grave indeed cf. Mt 12:31) to oppose the renewal, to refuse the innovations that favor the life of the community, that bring people closer to Christ and to the brethren,

that increase the joy and peace, that help people to pray better and free the heart from useless fears.

Those who stubbornly remains attached to already obsolete and worn out religious traditions, who are not diligently given to the study of the word of God, who do not accept updating of rites, formulae, liturgical gestures, who give old answers to new problems, who do not accept with joy the discovery of biblical exegesis, they place themselves in opposition to the Spirit of truth.

For the evangelist John, the term truth has a more profound meaning. It indicates God who manifests himself in Jesus. He is the truth (Jn 14:6) because the total revelation of God is realized in him. To refuse him is a lie; it is a choice contrary to his. Satan, the enemy of the truth, the father of lies (Jn 8:44) is all that distance from Christ.

The Spirit acts in an opposing way: he introduces in the truth, acts in the intimacy of each person and does so, freely; he tends itself to choose Christ and adheres to his plans. He is like the wind that brings up towards upper grounds and brings in an irresistible way to salvation.

It is difficult to imagine that the impulse of the Holy Spirit fails to introduce everyone in truth. Why doubt, however tenuous that doubt is, that this divine impulse towards life is stronger than the world, still present in each of us?

See more at: <http://bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.3jOomK5x.dpuf>

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